

Uncivil Tongues: Populism, Norm Disruption and The Informalization Of Diplomatic Discourse in The Digital Era

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Received: 18 April 2026; **Accepted:** 04 May 2026; **Published:** 31 May 2026

Abstract: The past two decades have witnessed a striking transformation in the language of international diplomacy. Once governed by strict protocols, carefully calibrated formality, and a shared grammar of restraint, diplomatic discourse has increasingly been colonized by the rhetorical habits of populism — blunt, emotive, adversarial, and relentlessly oriented toward domestic audiences. This article examines how the rise of populist political movements, combined with the structural affordances of digital communication platforms, has disrupted long-standing norms of formal diplomatic exchange. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and theories of mediatization, the study analyzes specific instances of populist diplomatic communication from the United States, Brazil, Hungary, and the United Kingdom, arguing that what appears as mere stylistic informality carries profound consequences for the architecture of international norms, multilateral institutions, and global governance. The findings suggest that the informalization of diplomatic discourse is not a temporary aberration but a structural reconfiguration with lasting implications for how states communicate, negotiate, and signal intent on the world stage.

Keywords: Diplomatic discourse, populism, informalization, Critical Discourse Analysis, mediatization, digital diplomacy, norm disruption.

Introduction: There is a moment in Donald Trump's address to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2017 that encapsulates, with unusual clarity, the transformation this article seeks to explain. Standing before the world's foremost multilateral forum—a chamber historically associated with carefully scripted and legally measured language—Trump declared that the United States was prepared to “totally destroy” North Korea. The phrase was not accidental. It represented a deliberate performance of a new diplomatic register: raw, threatening, and directed not only at the diplomats in the hall, but also at television cameras and Twitter audiences beyond it (Brands, 2018).

This episode is symptomatic of a broader and more consequential shift. Across the globe, a new generation

of populist leaders has entered the diplomatic arena carrying rhetorical habits shaped in domestic political contexts—habits that value authenticity over precision, confrontation over cooperation, and spectacle over substance. The result has been a visible informalization of diplomatic discourse: a departure from the formal registers, institutional protocols, and normative commitments that have historically governed communication between states (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013).

The question this article addresses is not merely descriptive—what does this new language look like?—but also analytical and normative: what does it do? Language in diplomacy is never merely ornamental. Words carry particular weight in international relations. A diplomatic note, a joint communiqué, or a speech at the Security Council is not simply a form of

communication; it is also a performance of intent, statehood, and commitment to shared norms. When the language of diplomacy changes, diplomacy itself is also transformed.

To understand what is at stake in the informalization of diplomatic discourse, it is necessary to begin with what language does in diplomacy, rather than merely what it says. Speech Act Theory offers a foundational insight: utterances in institutional contexts are performative. When a head of state recognizes a government, withdraws from a treaty, or declares a red line, the act of saying becomes a form of doing. The implications for diplomatic language are profound. Precision, formality, and adherence to shared conventions are not aesthetic preferences but functional necessities. They make communication legible across cultures, legal systems, and power asymmetries.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) extends this insight by situating language within structures of power. Language does not merely reflect social reality; it actively constructs it. In the context of diplomacy, this means that the shift toward more informal and populist registers is not simply a change in tone, but a transformation in the social and political relations that diplomatic discourse helps constitute. When leaders choose Twitter over diplomatic cables, or rally-style speeches over formal addresses, they restructure the field of legitimate diplomatic action.

Alongside CDA, mediatization theory provides essential analytical tools. Mediatization describes the process by which social institutions, including politics and diplomacy, are increasingly shaped by the logic of media. As media logic has shifted from the structured norms of broadcast journalism to the attention-driven dynamics of social media, diplomatic communication has entered a fundamentally different communicative environment. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram reward brevity, emotional resonance, and conflict—the opposite of the deliberate, hedged, and consensus-seeking language of traditional diplomacy.

Populism, in this context, operates as both a cause and an accelerant. Scholars such as Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) define populism as a thin-centered ideology that pits a virtuous “people” against a corrupt “elite.” This Manichaeian worldview translates, in communicative terms, into a systematic preference for simplicity over

complexity, bluntness over nuance, and emotional directness over procedural restraint. When populist leaders bring these habits into the diplomatic arena, the results are not merely stylistically unusual; they actively disrupt the normative scaffolding on which international cooperation depends.

This article proceeds in four main sections. The first section outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis and mediatization theory. The second section explains the materials and methods used in the study. The third section examines empirical cases from four populist-led governments. The final section discusses the structural consequences of informalization for international norms, institutions, and diplomatic practice.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis and mediatization theory. These approaches are particularly suitable for examining diplomatic discourse because they allow language to be analyzed not only as a medium of communication, but also as a form of social and political action. The study focuses on how populist leaders and governments use informal, confrontational, and media-oriented language in diplomatic contexts.

The empirical material consists of selected instances of diplomatic communication from the United States, Brazil, Hungary, and the United Kingdom. These cases were chosen because each illustrates a different manifestation of populist informalization in international communication. Donald Trump’s use of Twitter and public speeches demonstrates the personalization and directness of digital diplomacy. Jair Bolsonaro’s rhetoric on the Amazon crisis illustrates the use of sovereignty-based populism in response to international criticism. Viktor Orbán’s speeches, letters, and national consultation campaigns reveal the insertion of populist identity politics into institutional European Union discourse. The Brexit negotiations show how simplified and domestically oriented political language can complicate formal diplomatic negotiation.

The analysis focuses on speeches, public statements, social media communication, and other forms of political-diplomatic discourse. Particular attention is

given to rhetorical strategies such as bluntness, emotional intensification, delegitimization of international actors, rejection of procedural norms, and the use of domestic political signalling in international contexts. The study examines how these strategies alter the traditional functions of diplomatic language, including ambiguity, restraint, face-saving, and consensus-building.

The methodological framework combines three levels of analysis. First, the linguistic level examines lexical choices, tone, metaphors, repetition, and evaluative language. Second, the discursive level considers how populist narratives construct oppositions between “the people” and “the elite,” or between national sovereignty and international institutions. Third, the institutional level evaluates the implications of these communicative practices for diplomatic norms, multilateral cooperation, and global governance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

No figure better illustrates the informalization of diplomatic discourse than Donald Trump, whose Twitter account—before his 2021 suspension—functioned as a parallel and often contradictory diplomatic channel to official State Department communication. Between 2017 and 2021, Trump published thousands of tweets related to foreign policy, ranging from nuclear threats against North Korea to unilateral announcements of policy shifts that surprised allies and adversaries alike (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018).

What is significant here is not simply the informal medium, but the discursive logic it enabled. Diplomatic communication traditionally operates on the principle of calculated ambiguity, preserving room for interpretation, face-saving, and negotiation. Trump’s tweets often did the opposite: they reduced ambiguity, announced maximalist positions, and performed strength for domestic audiences in ways that complicated subsequent diplomatic engagement. The rhetorical posture resembled that of an aggressive negotiator rather than a conventional statesman, relying on personal attacks, confrontational language, and skepticism toward multilateral processes (Brands, 2018; Kupchan, 2020).

Jair Bolsonaro’s foreign policy communication offers a different but equally instructive case. Facing

international pressure over Amazon deforestation—a matter treated by much of the global community as a shared environmental concern—Bolsonaro deployed a rhetoric of sovereign defiance. He repeatedly reframed international criticism as a form of neo-colonial interference. At the 2019 United Nations General Assembly, he dismissed concerns about the Amazon fires as “sensationalist” and accused non-governmental organizations of deliberately setting fires to embarrass Brazil (Viola & Basso, 2020).

This discursive move—reframing an environmental crisis as a sovereignty violation—exemplifies what may be called sovereignty populism in diplomatic discourse. It uses anti-elite and anti-globalist rhetoric to delegitimize international norms and institutions. The language was not merely informal; it was deliberately transgressive and designed to signal to domestic audiences that the speaker was resisting foreign pressure. The consequences were tangible: Brazil’s relations with the European Union and several key bilateral partners deteriorated, while negotiations over the EU-Mercosur trade agreement became significantly more complicated (Saraiva, 2020).

Viktor Orbán’s diplomatic communication presents a case of populist informalization within institutional settings, particularly the European Union. These institutions were designed to domesticate political conflict through multilateral procedure, consensus-building, and formal negotiation. However, Orbán’s speeches at EU summits, open letters to European Commission presidents, and government-led “national consultation” campaigns on migration and EU governance have repeatedly violated the norms of EU diplomatic discourse, including procedural deference, rhetorical restraint, and consensus-seeking.

Particularly striking is Orbán’s systematic use of repeated loaded terms such as “Christian civilization,” “Soros network,” and “Brussels bureaucrats” in contexts where procedural or technical language would normally prevail. This is not simply bluntness; it is a strategic colonization of formal institutional space with the language of populist identity politics. Such language reframes EU governance as a site of cultural struggle rather than technocratic administration (Krastev & Holmes, 2019).

The Brexit process provides a sustained and unusually

well-documented case for observing the effects of populist informalization on diplomatic negotiation. Senior British ministers made several statements during the 2017–2019 negotiation period that became notable precisely because they departed from the norms of diplomatic communication. Trade Secretary Liam Fox's assertion that a trade deal with the EU would be "the easiest in human history" and Boris Johnson's dismissive remarks regarding Irish border concerns are illustrative examples. Both statements prioritized domestic political signalling over the substantive demands of negotiation and complicated the United Kingdom's negotiating position (Shipman, 2017; Daddow, 2019).

The Brexit case reveals the functional cost of diplomatic informalization with particular clarity. The populist preference for simple and assertive language—language that performs strength and dismisses complexity—proved counterproductive in a negotiating environment where complexity was central to the issue itself. EU negotiators, operating within a more formal and institutionalized communicative framework, were able to exploit the contradictions and overstatements of their British counterparts with considerable effectiveness (Daddow, 2019).

The empirical cases discussed above point to several structural consequences that extend beyond the immediate communicative events they describe. First, the informalization of diplomatic discourse contributes to norm erosion through discursive delegitimization. International norms, including those related to human rights, climate cooperation, and multilateral trade, depend not only on legal instruments but also on a shared communicative commitment to their validity. When populist leaders routinely dismiss, mock, or ignore these norms in public communication, they participate in a broader process of delegitimization that weakens the normative architecture of international relations even without formal withdrawal from treaties or institutions (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

Second, informalization disrupts the function of strategic ambiguity that formal diplomatic language has traditionally served. Diplomatic formality is not merely ceremonial; it preserves interpretive space that is essential for conflict management and face-saving manoeuvres. These mechanisms allow parties to step back from confrontation without appearing to

capitulate. Populist rhetoric, with its preference for maximalist clarity and public commitment, often forecloses this space and makes diplomatic de-escalation more difficult.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, informal diplomatic communication erodes the common ground on which states have long relied to conduct their affairs. Shared language, norms, and institutional structures make international interaction legible and predictable. When diplomatic discourse fractures into parallel registers—some rooted in formal protocol and others driven by media logic and populist appeal—the effort required to achieve cooperation increases substantially. Effective diplomacy depends on the ability of states to interpret each other's signals accurately, and this capacity relies on a baseline of shared communicative conventions that informalization steadily weakens.

CONCLUSION

The informalization of diplomatic discourse is not simply a matter of leaders making impolite statements in public forums. It represents a structural shift in the communicative architecture of international relations. This shift is driven by the convergence of populist political movements with the attention-based dynamics of digital media and has measurable consequences for the norms, institutions, and practices through which states manage coexistence.

The cases examined in this article—Trump's Twitter diplomacy, Bolsonaro's sovereignty populism, Orbán's illiberal institutionalism, and the Brexit negotiations—each illuminate different aspects of this transformation. Together, they suggest that the shift from formal to populist diplomatic registers is not a temporary stylistic aberration, but a structural reconfiguration. Scholars of international relations, linguistics, and communication studies should therefore treat this phenomenon as an important object of sustained analytical attention.

The question of what can be done about this transformation is more difficult to answer. Formal diplomatic institutions, including the United Nations, the European Union, and the World Trade Organization, retain their normative frameworks and procedural resources. There is evidence that they have shown considerable resilience in the face of populist

pressure. However, resilience is not immunity, and the cumulative discursive weight of sustained norm transgression can have lasting effects.

The future of diplomatic communication will depend, in significant part, on whether formal and populist registers can find a mode of productive coexistence, or whether the uncivil tongues of the populist era will leave enduring marks on the grammar of international life.

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