

Transformation of political rhetoric: from prohibitions to warnings

In our research, we focus on identifying the patterns of expressing various types of prohibitive utterances used by V. Zelensky in his English-language speeches during the full-scale war. The course of the unfolding armed conflict makes it possible to trace the changes in the language used by the Ukrainian president. His determination and eagerness to bring the war to an end with the help of the allies were expressed through direct and indirect prohibitions aimed at calling for action, as in

"Terrorists have ↑no ↓right | to ↓hold ↓nuclear ↓weapons" or

"for human rights, for freedom, for the right to live decently and to die when your time comes, and not when it is wanted by someone else, by your neighbour" (meaning that one should not let others decide one's fate; killing or taking life unjustly is forbidden).

Another example is *"I →see ↑no ↓sense in →life | if it ↓cannot ↓stop the ↓death,"* implying that allowing unnecessary death is morally unacceptable.

The indirect prohibition against setting taboos while combating the enemy also illustrates the above-mentioned patterns: *"It is just a matter of time when they will strike against your other allies if we do not stop them now. We ↓must ↓do it. I be→lieve | there ↓should be ↑no ta↓boos | between ↓us in our a↓lliance."* The meaning is simple, while beating the enemy it is crucial that no taboos must be set. The language means here imply no means to express the prohibition openly, but rather subtly and suitable for the international summits.

Phonetically all these statements are expressed in moderate or slowed-down tempo having a regular rhythmic pattern and with the prominence given to key words (*no sense, no taboos, between us, our alliance*) by emphasising them either with a high-falling tone, special rise or pitch interval.

However, the course of action on the battlefield, as well as political transformations worldwide and the perception of the war by different nations, made the Ukrainian leader adjust his addresses, using fewer prohibitive statements and relying more on warnings. Aiming to draw attention to the possible threat of the war spreading to the EU, in 2025 Zelensky uses phrases that are cautious yet firm at the same time, due to the use of modal verbs and appropriate intonation. These are the following:

1. *"Europe ↓cannot a↓fford | to ↓lose Moldova ↓too."*
2. *"Now Mol→dova | must ↓not be ↓lost."*
3. *"We must ↓not for→get | about pro↓tecting the ↓rights of ↓people | – and the ↓rights of ↓nations | – in ↓regions | where these →rights are | ↓under ↓threat."*

And concluding the enumerated examples the President says that *'We need to restore international cooperation – real, working cooperation – for peace and for security.'* **A ↓few years from ↓now | might a↓ready be ↑too ↓late** stressing key words *a few, too, late* and using a slowed-down rhythm and tempo to emphasize these points.

The transition of meaning implied in the analysed statements demonstrates the change in the variety of language means used to appeal to European leaders, shifting the rhetoric toward a warning tone that carries the semantic load of negative consequences if action is not taken. Moderate or slowed-down tempo, emphasis on key points through high falling tones, frequent pauses, use of modals and short intonation groups with equal distribution of utterance stress on notional words within each intonation group give the appeals a cautionary character.

Resources:

1. President of Ukraine. (2022–2023). Official speeches in English. <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news>
2. Tatsenko, N., & Sukhovetska, L. (2017). Analysis of the semantic structure of prohibitive speech acts in English political discourse. *Scientific Notes. Series "Philology"*, (153), 330–335.