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From Diplomacy to Disrespect: Conversational Polarization in the Oval Office

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On February 28, 2025, the world witnessed a dramatic moment unfold live on television: a conversation about the Russia-Ukraine war between U.S. President Donald Trump, Vice President JD Vance, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Oval Office rapidly unraveled. What began as a diplomatic meeting soon turned into a confrontational one. Within hours, international headlines described the exchange as "explosive" (The Guardian, 2025) or "a shouting match" (CNN, 2025). This encounter proved historically significant, not only for its tone but also its geopolitical context: Zelenskyy was in Washington to finalize a minerals deal, offering Ukraine's profits from key mining projects in exchange for U.S. protection against Russian aggression (Baranowski et al., 2025).

This commentary argues that the Oval Office exchange is a prime example of what the authors of this article, Van Burgsteden and Van Eck (2025), have recently termed *conversational polarization*: real-life interactions in which individuals construct the meaning of issues, identities, and their relationships in ways that escalate conflict, often responding with defensiveness or verbal attacks. Rather than treating polarization as a matter of private beliefs, this approach demonstrates that it is more instructive to examine how it unfolds in public, through the interactional mechanisms that co-constructed hostility turn-by-turn (e.g., challenges to participation rights or authority). Unlike a simple disagreement or a quarrel, which may reflect a temporary clash of views or a brief emotional exchange, conversational polarization is a process in which participants progressively frame both the issue and each other in oppositional, morally charged, and identity-laden terms. This shift leads to entrenched positions, mutual stereotyping, and reduced openness to compromise, transforming the conversation from a temporary dispute into a sustained divide; one that can damage relationships, derail diplomacy, and deepen social tensions.

Building on this view, we argue that conversational polarization offers a crucial lens for understanding how political breakdowns, such as the Trump–Vance–Zelenskyy exchange, develop in real time, and why these interactional dynamics matter for the study of political

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communication. Our focus is less on the *what* (clash of views) and more on the *how:* the active and sustained escalation of hostility through specific interactional moves. Our argument proceeds in three parts, each illustrating how conversational polarization unfolded during the Trump–Vance-Zelenskyy exchange. First, we identify a *conversational turning point*: a moment when the invocation of "diplomacy" shifted the trajectory of the exchange, as alignment began to break down and oppositional stances became more pronounced. Second, we examine *the battle over entitlements*: how Trump, Vance, and Zelenskyy negotiated who was entitled to speak, assert claims, or dictate the terms of the conversation. Third, we show how Trump and Vance's discursive strategies *constructed superiority* and constrained Zelenskyy's contributions through dismissal, interruption, and moral rebuke.

Our aim is not to offer an exhaustive analysis but to illustrate how this high-profile encounter brings to life the value of analyzing polarization as an interactional process, offering insights that extend beyond the static attitudinal models often used in political communication research. These insights draw on a publicly available Jefferson (2004) transcript (Hepburn, 2025), using conversation analysis (Robinson et al., 2024) and interactional framing theory (Dewulf et al., 2009; Van Eck et al., 2020) to reveal the subtle ways polarization is enacted in interaction. Importantly, the stakes are not just rhetorical: in an era when diplomacy unfolds under the scrutiny of cameras, how politicians speak can derail deals, shift alliances, and publicly redraw the boundaries of legitimacy.

"Diplomacy" As a Conversational Turning Point

Van Burgsteden and Van Eck (2025, p. 5) defined conversational turning points as "the moments that trigger conversational escalation and potentially a conversational impasse, or conversely, depolarization and mutual understanding." The first such turning point in this exchange emerged when Vice President Vance invoked the need for "diplomacy." His intervention followed a journalist's question to Trump about his perceived alignment with Putin, citing public concern. Trump responded that he must align with both Zelenskyy and Putin to reach a deal. Vance supported this view, arguing that the previous U.S. administration's Ukraine-aligned policy had primarily led to losses and that "diplomacy" was now "the path to peace." This stance sharply contrasted with Zelenskyy's earlier account of repeated diplomatic breakdowns and violated agreements with Putin. In response, Zelenskyy, who had until then maintained a reserved and compliant tone, shifted to a more active stance by directly questioning what kind of diplomacy Vance was referring to:

Extract 1

```
1      ZEL:   Yes but after ↓that (0.5) he: (.) broken the ↓ceasefire.
2             He: killed our people, .h and he didn't exchange (0.2) p-
3             prisoners. .h We si:gned the exchange of prisoners.
4             .hh But he did↑n't do it.
5             (1.0)
6      ZEL:   What kind of diplo↓macy (0.4) ↓Jaydee you are speaking abou:t.↓
7             What- What do you ↑have- w-what do y- >↑What d'you< mean.
8             (0.2)
```

Generally, the act of questioning presupposes a lack of knowledge or certainty on the questioner's part, while simultaneously attributing knowledge or authority to the addressee.

In this sense, posing a question functions as a means of seeking information or becoming informed. However, questions can also serve other functions, such as expressing doubt or criticism or issuing a challenge, depending on their design and uptake (Heritage, 2002; Schegloff, 1984). Zelenskyy's question put the emphasis on "kind" of diplomacy, suggesting one that hadn't been tried yet, ceding some epistemic access to Vance. However, it culminated in a formulation that suggested difficulty with understanding: "What do you mean?" This positioned Vance as someone whose use of "diplomacy" lacked clarity or plausibility.

What follows marks the onset of conversational polarization. Rather than clarifying his use of "diplomacy," Vance treated Zelenskyy's turn not as a request for explanation but as an inappropriate challenge:

Extract 2

```
9     VAN:   I'm ↑talking about the kind of diplomacy that's gonna end
10           the destruction of your countr[y.
11    ZEL:                                [Ye:s.=But i:f you=
12           =[    are    not |strong,
13    VAN:   =[MISTER PRESIDEN|T.=MISTER president with re:spect. I
14           ↑think it's disrespectful for you to come to the Oval Office
15           'n try te litigate this in front of the American media, .h
16           Right now you guys are going arou:nd, (0.2) and for:cing
17           conscripts to the front li:nes, because you have ↑man↓power
18           ↓problems. .Hh You should be thanking the President
19           for trying to bring ] in to this [conflict,
```

Zelenskyy attempted to counter Vance's inexplicit response about his brand of diplomacy but was loudly interrupted by Vance (line 13), who accused him of "disrespect" and of attempting to "litigate this in front of the American media," shifting attention away from the substance of Zelenskyy's follow-up to its impropriety. Instead of elaborating on "what kind of diplomacy?" Vance redirected Zelenskyy's attention to Ukraine's "manpower problems" (lines 17–18), making it harder for Zelenskyy to continue pressing his question without appearing defensive.

While full-blown polarization had not yet materialized at this stage, this moment clearly functioned as a conversational turning point, marking the breakdown of initial alignment and opening the space for further adversarial dynamics in which Zelenskyy was positioned as disrespectful, ungrateful, and transgressive. The terms of participation were no longer neutral: they were being redrawn in real-time.

The Battle Over Entitlements

The ongoing polarization in this encounter was sustained not only through escalating tone or antagonistic framing, but also through a "battle over entitlements"—that is, participants' negotiations over who has the right to speak authoritatively or make moral judgments. Two central forms of entitlement were at stake here: epistemic rights, which are the right to speak credibly based on knowledge or experience, and deontic rights, which are the authority to guide or prescribe others' actions or attitudes. These battles surfaced repeatedly throughout the conversation and shaped the interaction's trajectory.

The first in relation to epistemic authority (Heritage, 2012). Immediately following Vance's accusations and redirection to Ukraine's "manpower problems," Zelenskyy asked whether Vance had been to Ukraine:

Extract 3

```
20     ZEL:  [Have you ever been- ]            [Have ↑you ever been to
21           Ukraine that you sa:y what problems we have.
22           (0.2)
```

Zelenskyy's negatively polarized (Heritage, 2002) question (using "ever") projected a "no" response, implying Vance lacked the experiential basis to make informed claims.

Vance's subsequent 0.2-second silence, followed by a hesitant and stretched word search "< I have been > to,": (line 23) failed to neutralize the challenge:

Extract 4

```
23     VAN:   <I have been> to:[:
24     ZEL:                    [Then ↑come ↓on[ce.
25     VAN:                                   [I'VE ACTually <WATCHed and seen:
26           the stor↓ies,> |and I know th'what happens [is you ↑bring people,=
27     ZEL:                |((shaking head))          [(°s:uka)
                                                      | (bitch)
28     VAN:   .hh you bring them on a propaganda tour Mister President, .h Are-
29           Do you disagree: that you've had problems,
```

Zelenskyy interrupted to extend an invitation (line 24), likely knowing that Vance had not visited Ukraine. This shows that his earlier question (lines 20–21) was intended to challenge Vance, with Zelenskyy engaging in "epistemic policing" by implying that claims about Ukraine require firsthand experience. Vance responded by reframing the exchange, accusing Zelenskyy of staging "propaganda tours" (line 28), a discursive strategy that undermined Zelenskyy's invitation and treated him as deliberately deceptive by suggesting that any visit would be staged.

Vance followed up with a series of polar questions, limiting Zelenskyy's response options (cf. Raymond, 2003) and reasserting control over what counts as valid knowledge:

Extract 5

```
29     VAN:   Do you disagree: that you've had problems,
30            [(.)
31     ZEL:   [((frowning)) What.
32     VAN:   Bringing people into your milit[ary?    |And do you] think that=
33     ZEL:                                  [We have |problems, ]
34     VAN:    =[it's reS:PECT|fu:l     to      ] COME to the O↑val=
35     ZEL:    =[  I    wil-  | I ↑will an:swer.]
36     VAN:    =O:ff[ice of the United] States of America an attack the
37     ZEL:         [I will answer.   ]
38     VAN:   administration that is trying to p- trying to prevent .hh
39           destruction of your [country.  ]
40     ZEL:                      [#A lot of#] (0.2) A lot of questions. Let's
41           start from the be↓ginning.=
```

Vance's first question, "Do you disagree that you've had problems?" (line 29), limited Zelenskyy's answering opportunities as it projected agreement. The second set a moral trap: "And do you think it's respectful to come to the Oval Office and attack the administration." This put Zelenskyy in a catch-22 situation: agreeing

would imply accepting the charge of disrespect, while disagreeing would risk escalating the conflict (Hepburn, 2025). In both cases, Vance used question design not to elicit information, but to assert control over what could be said and who was entitled to say it.

Consequently, both parties contested each other's epistemic entitlements to assess and define the realities of the war: Zelenskyy by undermining Vance's credibility to make claims about conditions in Ukraine without firsthand experience, and Vance by reframing Zelenskyy's account of Ukraine's situation as manipulative or staged.

Beyond knowledge claims, this interaction reveals a second, distinct struggle: over deontic entitlements—the right to prescribe actions, make moral judgments, or define how others should behave (Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012). This became visible when Zelenskyy shifted from responding to Vance's criticisms to reframing the war as a global concern:

Extract 6

```
40    ZEL:                          [#A lot of#] (0.2) A lot of questions. Let's
41          start from the be↓ginning.=
42    VAN:   =Sure.=
43    ZEL:   =First of all_ (.) during the war_ (0.5) everybody has ↓problems.
44          .hh even you:. But you have: nice ocean. And don't feel now.
45          But you will f:eel it, .hh in the future.=
46    TRU:   =E-
47    ZEL:   [Go:d ble:ss,  ]
48    TRU:   [You don't- You] don't know [↓that. You don't know
49    ZEL:                               [ Go:d ble:ss:,
50    TRU:   th[at.]
51    ZEL:     [God] ble:ss, [you will not have] war.
52    TRU:                   [You- you gotta s-]
53    TRU:   ↑Don't tell us what we're gonna feel.
54          (0.2)
55    TRU:   We're tryin to solve a problem. Don't tell us what
56          we're gonna feel.=
57    ZEL:   =I'm not telling you, [I'm  answering   honest   question.]
58    TRU:                        [Because you're in no position to   ]
59    TRU:   dictate that. Remember this.
60    ZEL:   I'm n:o:t dic[tate
61    TRU:                [You're in ↑no <position (0.3) to dicta:te> (0.3)
62          what we're gonna feel.
```

Zelenskyy's assertion that "you will feel it in the future" was not merely predictive. It implied a normative stance: the U.S. should act now to avoid future consequences. Trump treated this move as an overreach, first challenging Zelensky's epistemic basis ("You don't know that," line 48), then escalating into a direct rebuke: "Don't tell us what we're gonna feel" (line 53). This shift transformed a discussion about consequences into a contest over authority, specifically, who is entitled to make prescriptive claims about American interests and experience. Trump's repeated assertions ("you're in no position to dictate," lines 58–59, 61) function to reestablish national boundaries around decision-making and deny Zelenskyy the moral right to influence U.S. political discourse.

Notably, Zelenskyy appeared to soften this prescriptive stance almost immediately (line 47). Following his warning that "you will feel it," he attempted to add a conciliatory "God bless you will not have war" (lines 47, 49, 51), a move that could be read as diplomatically affiliative. However, this effort at mitigation was repeatedly spoken over by Trump, who treated it not as affiliative, but as further offense. He continued to assert, "Don't tell us what we're going to feel," eventually elevating this to "You're in no position to dictate." The

interruption and repetition work not just as a rejection of Zelenskyy's forecast, but as a refusal of diplomatic footing altogether, disqualifying the Ukrainian president's right to offer any perspective on American experience. In what was nominally a diplomatic encounter, Zelenskyy's attempt at alliance-building was overridden by repeated moral and epistemic prohibitions.

While Van Burgsteden and Van Eck (2025) described conversational polarization as a mutual escalation where each party treats the other's contributions as offensive, what we observed here is notably asymmetrical. Zelenskyy's turns were largely engaged in asserting epistemic authority regarding his country, defending participation, and offering reframings, often amid interruption or reproach. Trump and Vance, by contrast, initiated and sustained polarization by repeatedly disciplining Zelenskyy's conduct, denying him the right to speak, question, or forecast, and reframing his contributions as breaches of decorum. This suggests that conversational polarization can also be unilaterally imposed and maintained, especially where interactional power is asymmetrically distributed.

Constructing Superiority: Identity Framing, Metacommunicative Control, and Interactional Control

As the encounter progressed, the interaction shifted decisively away from negotiation and toward dominance. In this section, we demonstrate how Trump and Vance used a range of interrelated conversational strategies to marginalize Zelenskyy, thereby escalating polarization. These included: 1) identity framing (Dewulf et al., 2009), which constructed Trump and Vance as rational authorities and Zelenskyy as reckless or deficient; 2) metacommunicative control (talk about the talk), where they defined Zelenskyy's contributions as inappropriate or ungrateful; and 3) interactional control, particularly through interruption and refusal of uptake. We explain how each of these strategies unfolded in the conversation and how, together, they contributed to the escalation of conversational polarization. We show that while polarization is often co-constructed, it can also be enforced unilaterally through repeated refusals to acknowledge the legitimacy of the other's position or right to speak.

First, Trump constructed his own superior identity while casting Zelenskyy as a reckless and ineffective leader responsible for his own predicament. For example, Trump asserted, "You've allowed yourself to be in a very bad position." By claiming that Zelenskyy "allowed" this to happen, Trump attributed Ukraine's vulnerability not to Russia's aggression, but to Zelenskyy's lack of foresight, control, or strategic judgment. While Zelenskyy's responses to this framing were largely ignored or dismissed, Trump reinforced the portrayal by stating, "You're gambling with the lives of millions of people. You're gambling with World War Three." This rhetoric cast Zelenskyy as irresponsible, trivializing grave risks and endangering global stability. Later, Trump intensified this in regard to a ceasefire by declaring, "I tell you you'd take it, so the bullets stop flying and your men stop getting killed," positioning himself as the rational problem-solver and Zelenskyy as an obstacle to peace. The subsequent back-and-forth about whether Zelenskyy actually wanted a ceasefire allowed Trump to further depict him as unwilling to prevent bloodshed. Through these interactional moves, Trump constructed an image of Zelenskyy as a reckless and morally negligent leader, ultimately at fault for the conflict's continuation.

Second, through metacommunicative moves, Trump and Vance repeatedly positioned Zelenskyy as ungrateful and inappropriate. Trump echoed Vance in framing Zelenskyy as disrespectful to the United States, laying the groundwork for Vance to escalate this framing by repeatedly questioning whether Zelenskyy had expressed gratitude (e.g., "In this entire meeting, have you said thank you?"). By framing Zelenskyy's communicative behavior as a violation of expected norms, Vance not only positioned him as an inappropriate and uncooperative participant in the conversation but also explicitly sought to control the terms of engagement and how Zelenskyy should behave within the interaction. As the interaction progressed, Vance's questions turned into direct imperatives (e.g., "Just say thank you"), further asserting moral authority and control over the conversation. Through this sustained use of metacommunication, first as questions, then as demands, Zelenskyy was accused of lacking respect and gratitude.

Third, interruptions in this conversation significantly contributed to the escalation of polarization, serving as demonstrations of interactional control. Trump and Vance repeatedly interrupted Zelenskyy not merely to speak over him, but to limit his participation and undermine his ability to articulate his perspective. These interruptions function as markers of interactional control and dominance, indicating that Zelenskyy's contributions are less legitimate or authoritative. For example, in Extract 2 above, Vance interrupted with a rebuke, reframing Zelenskyy's argument as an improper attack rather than a legitimate point of discussion. Moreover, as was shown in Extract 6, Trump repeatedly interrupted Zelenskyy by casting his statements as illegitimate, effectively denying him the authority to speak on what Americans (will) experience.

Taken together, these strategies form an architecture of superiority: moral high ground, communicative policing, and dominance over the interactional flow. While Zelenskyy actively responded—at times resisting their framings, at other times seeking to de-escalate through accommodation—his efforts were persistently overwritten, recharacterized, or blocked. The result was a form of conversational polarization in which the conditions of participation themselves were unevenly distributed: one party was allowed to define the terms of the exchange, while the other was framed as out of line for even attempting to do so.

Conclusion

This encounter collapsed due to the way the participants spoke. By highlighting key episodes and conversational strategies in the televised Trump–Vance–Zelenskyy exchange, we have shown how polarization can unfold not as a clash of views but as a breakdown in participation rights, enforced through moral framing, strategic interruption, and interactional disciplining. This interactional approach to polarization offers critical insight into why the conversation was widely perceived as explosive. We have shown how conversational practices themselves can derail diplomacy, reshape alliances, and fracture communicative legitimacy. What began as a diplomatic meeting quickly unraveled into an asymmetrical performance in which Zelenskyy was positioned not as a negotiating partner, but as a subordinate to be corrected, contained, or silenced.

Political communication scholars often focus on what leaders say or believe. We argue that how they say it—and how they manage (or deny) uptake—is just as politically consequential. We encourage further exploration of how polarization unfolds in political interactions, building on the extensive research conducted by conversation analysts (see Van Burgsteden & Van Eck, 2025, for theoretical frameworks and practical tools supporting such analyses). If polarization can be done through talk, it can also be undone. But only if we have the tools to analyze it. For us, the Oval Office exchange wasn't just unfortunate—it was instructive. We saw not just disagreement, but also the public disciplining of an ally. And we saw it unfold, not as a media narrative, but as a sequence of turns and rhetorical moves. In a time of war, diplomacy is not just policy; it's performance. And performance, as this case shows, can collapse in the space of a sentence.

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Prof. Alexa Hepburn is a Research Professor Emerita of Communication at Rutgers University and Honorary Professor in Conversation Analysis in the Department of Communication and Media at Loughborough University. She has published widely regarding methodological, practical, theoretical, and meta-theoretical frameworks in the social sciences, and on the use and development of conversation analytic methods, particularly regarding emotional expressions such as upset, anger, and laughter, parents' strategies for managing children's behaviour, techniques for giving advice, and practitioners' empathic responses in clinical encounters. A major focus is to develop new insights into profound issues related to emotion, socialization, and influence, and to develop innovative and effective applied research techniques for interaction research.

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