THE LANGUAGE OF DIPLOMATIC RECOGNITION: SPEECH ACTS, SOVEREIGNTY, AND THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF STATEHOOD

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Abstract

Introduction

The recognition of states constitutes one of the most consequential practices within the international system. Recognition determines access to diplomatic relations, participation in international organizations, treaty-making capacity, and broader claims to international legitimacy. Despite its importance, recognition remains among the most contested concepts in international law and international relations. Scholars continue to debate whether recognition merely acknowledges an existing political reality or actively contributes to the creation of statehood itself. Although these debates have generated extensive legal and political literature, the linguistic dimension of recognition has received comparatively limited attention.

This omission is surprising given that recognition is fundamentally communicated through language. States do not recognize one another through abstract intentions alone; rather, recognition is expressed through official statements, diplomatic notes, governmental declarations, parliamentary resolutions, and public speeches. These communicative acts constitute the observable manifestations of recognition in international practice. Consequently, understanding recognition requires examining not only its legal consequences and political motivations but also the linguistic mechanisms through which it is performed.

The present study argues that diplomatic recognition should be understood as a

speech act in the sense developed by Austin (1962) and later refined by Searle (1969). From this perspective, recognition statements are not merely descriptive utterances reporting an objective political condition. Instead, they function as performative acts that contribute to the constitution of international reality. When a government declares that it recognizes another entity as a sovereign state, the statement itself alters the diplomatic relationship between the two entities and contributes to the social construction of legitimacy and statehood.

The significance of language in international politics has increasingly attracted scholarly attention over recent decades. Constructivist scholars have challenged materialist explanations of international relations by emphasizing the role of ideas, norms, identities, and discourse in shaping political outcomes. Within this intellectual tradition, sovereignty and statehood are understood not simply as objective conditions but as social statuses maintained through collective recognition and communicative practices. Diplomatic recognition therefore represents a particularly important site for examining the relationship between language and international order.

Recognition statements offer a unique empirical context in which to explore the performative dimensions of political language. Unlike many forms of political discourse that primarily seek to persuade, justify, or explain, recognition statements frequently produce immediate institutional consequences. Diplomatic relations may be established, embassies opened, treaties negotiated, and international obligations assumed as a direct result of recognition. The language employed in recognition thus possesses a distinctive capacity to transform political relationships.

Moreover, contemporary recognition practices reveal considerable variation in linguistic form. Some states employ direct and explicit recognition formulas, declaring unequivocally that they recognize another entity as an independent and sovereign state. Others adopt more ambiguous formulations that acknowledge political realities without extending formal recognition. Still others condition

recognition upon compliance with specific legal, political, or normative requirements. These variations raise important questions concerning the relationship between linguistic form and diplomatic function.

This article seeks to address these questions by examining the language of diplomatic recognition through the framework of Speech Act Theory. Specifically, it investigates how recognition statements perform political and legal functions, how institutional authority shapes their effectiveness, and how linguistic strategies influence the construction of statehood and legitimacy.

The study is guided by the following research question:

How do diplomatic recognition statements function as speech acts in the construction and legitimization of statehood within international society?

To answer this question, three subsidiary questions are explored:

1. What linguistic patterns characterize contemporary diplomatic recognition statements?

2. How do recognition statements perform legal and political functions through language?

3. What role does strategic ambiguity play in contemporary recognition discourse?

The argument advanced in this article rests upon three central propositions. First, diplomatic recognition statements constitute performative speech acts that do not merely describe reality but actively participate in its construction. Second, the effectiveness of recognition depends not only upon linguistic content but also upon the institutional authority of the actors issuing recognition statements. Third, contemporary recognition discourse increasingly relies upon strategic ambiguity as states navigate competing legal principles, normative commitments, and geopolitical interests.

The article contributes to three distinct bodies of scholarship. First, it enriches

international law literature by highlighting the linguistic dimensions of recognition practices. Existing legal analyses often treat recognition as a formal decision while overlooking the communicative processes through which that decision is articulated and implemented. Second, the study contributes to international relations theory by demonstrating how language functions as a mechanism of institutional construction within international society. Third, it extends Speech Act Theory into the domain of diplomatic practice, illustrating how performative language operates within highly institutionalized political contexts.

Methodologically, the study employs qualitative discourse analysis of official recognition statements issued by states in relation to selected cases of contested and newly established statehood. The cases include Kosovo, Palestine, South Sudan, Montenegro, and Timor-Leste, each representing distinct patterns of recognition and legitimacy. By examining official declarations, governmental statements, foreign ministry communications, and diplomatic documents, the study identifies recurring linguistic structures and evaluates their performative functions.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews existing literature on state recognition, Speech Act Theory, and discourse in international relations. The subsequent section develops the theoretical framework, integrating insights from linguistic philosophy and constructivist theory. The methodology section outlines the research design and analytical approach. The empirical analysis then examines recognition statements across selected cases, identifying major patterns and interpretive themes. The discussion section considers the broader implications of the findings for theories of sovereignty, legitimacy, and international order. The article concludes by reflecting upon the significance of language in the constitution of political reality and suggesting avenues for future research.

Ultimately, this study contends that diplomatic recognition cannot be fully understood without attention to its linguistic dimensions. Recognition is not simply an administrative or legal procedure but a communicative practice through which

states participate in the ongoing construction of international society. By recognizing another entity, states do more than express an opinion about political reality; they contribute to the creation of that reality itself. The language of recognition therefore represents a powerful instrument through which sovereignty, legitimacy, and membership in the international community are negotiated, contested, and institutionalized.

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