GERMANA D’ACQUISTO

The language of the UN Resolutions on the Question of Palestine

This research work aims to analyse the language of the United Nations Resolutions on the Question of Palestine. The corpus includes sixty-six Security Council Resolutions (2965 words) and forty General Assembly Resolutions (2529 words) from 1948 to 2006 related to the most relevant events of the conflict starting from the Plan of Partition of Palestine territory established in the General Assembly Resolution 181 (1947), until nowadays. In particular, the study aims to investigate the role of the English verbal system in relation to modality in the institutional language of the United Nations and the different pragmatic purposes of its normative text types, taking into account the communicative interaction between the legal authority, the United Nations, and the addressees, Member States and the International Community. The study refers to the use of prescriptive and performative verbs used to express different degrees of obligation in the United Nations documents. In particular, the starting point is the definition of prescriptive legal texts constituted by international organizations and in particular by the United Nations and the linguistic and pragmatic functions of these texts types. The UN Resolutions are analysed taking into account their hybrid genre: prescriptive aspects of the normative legal language and characteristics typical of the diplomatic language. International treaties, such as the United Nation Charter, contain not only material rules and thus they can be considered “binding” documents. According to previous studies (Conforti, 1989; Ballarino, 1989), an ambiguity of interpretation of the binding value of international treaties moves from the consideration that, the Security Council can only give “recommendations” but, on the other hand, it has the power to intervene also with the use of military Force and thus imposing and binding decisions for all the Members as it is established in the UN Charter.

This study develops two main aspects:

✓ The analysis of the context, including an overview of the origins and causes of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the evolution of the “concept” of peacekeeping operations and the role of the United Nations in the conflict in the light of the relationship between language and diplomacy;
The other features investigated include a macro analysis concerning: the structure of the sentences with regard to the length and the patterns of coordination and subordination, the style and the structure of the prescriptive legal text, distribution of modal forms and semi-modal forms including English expressions of modality, finite verbal constructions, mood including passive vs. active forms, positive vs. negative forms, non finite verbal constructions (non finite -ing forms, non finite -ed form, infinitives) lexical choices including archaic or rarely used words, foreign words and expressions.

The quantitative and qualitative analysis is based on Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar, a Corpus linguistics approach supported by wordsmithTools, Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis.

Various processes and procedures have evolved over time in diplomatic negotiations. Nations sometimes resort to international arbitration when faced with a specific question or point of contention in need of Resolution. For most of history, there were no official or formal procedures for such proceedings. They were generally accepted to abide by general principles and protocols related to international law and justice, as the form of formal arbitrations and mediations. In the modern era, much of this work is often carried out by the International Court of Justice, or other formal commissions, agencies and tribunals, working under the United Nations.

One of the most relevant problem during a diplomatic negotiation is represented by the language used to communicate or to write documents. In the past there were periods when one language had the dominant role resulting from the political, strategic, economic, cultural domination in international relations. Nowadays, most international negotiations are carried out in English, the modern global language. Treaties and other important documents are very often drafted in English and international organizations conduct most of their operations in English. The use of an International language such as English is important for the efficient handling of international affairs but, at the same time, it can generate problems of cross-cultural misunderstandings.

Through the linguistic analysis it is possible to investigate the role of English in diplomacy and in particular the role of this language in the development of Arab-Israeli negotiations.
Despite the existence of a universal model of the basic procedures in negotiations, the difficulty lies in the different meanings attached to some words which are strongly influenced by cultural factors. According to R. Cohen (2001:67-91):

The language of diplomacy is yet a further refinement of language as medium of communication [...] Language is often a cause for misunderstanding and conflict [...] The case for the importance of language and culture lies on the view that semantic distinctions reflect different interpretations of reality and normative modes of behaviour [...] Ambiguity in diplomatic text may help to give up a state of warfare, or hostility and at the same time it could be wise and convenient [...] 

Formally, both the Resolutions of the Security Council and of the General Assembly are similar since they present the same genre, style, structure of the sentences. The difference can be noticed in the contents, in the length, and in the use and frequency of some English auxiliary modals. In the General Assembly prevails SHOULD which conveys a hypothetical meaning. In the Security Council the most frequent modal is SHALL but its value is very ambiguous since it may be interpreted in different ways: an obligation or a future intention. In conclusion, reforms of the Organization are necessary as discussed in international debates mainly during the past decades of the century starting from the consideration that structural changes may reinforce the role of the UN.

Kofi Annan in his *Larger freedom* report underlined the need to reform United Nations, the importance of the *Charter* but also the need of a revision of it taking into account that it was signed in 1945 and that the United Nations now operates in a radically different world. One example should be, as the Secretary General suggested, the elimination of the term ‘enemy’ in article 53 and to review the main Organs’ duties:

United Nations peacekeeping missions today are much better designed than they used to be, and have a more integrated understanding of the many different tasks involved in preventing a recurrence of fighting and laying the foundations of lasting peace. And we have built strategic partnerships with a wide range of non-State actors who have an important contribution to make to global security, prosperity and freedom. But many more changes are needed. The Security Council has increasingly asserted its authority and, especially since the end of the cold war, has enjoyed greater unity of purpose among its permanent members but has seen that authority questioned on the grounds that its composition is anachronistic or insufficiently representative.
REFERENCES


On line sources:
http://www.un.org/english