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VERBAL THREATS AS POWER PERFORMANCE: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF JOHN DUTTON'S IMPERATIVES IN *YELLOWSTONE SEASON 1*

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Abstract: This study examines how John Dutton performs power through verbal threats in *Yellowstone* Season 1. Twenty explicit threats from Episodes 1–6 were analyzed using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, integrating syntactic patterning (AntConc), thematic coding (NVivo), and multimodal annotation (ELAN). Four imperative-based patterns were identified: (A) conditional threats ("You cross me and I'll have you killed," 55%), (B) negative imperatives directed at sons ("Don't test me," 20%), (C) euphemistic causatives ("Take him to the train station," 20%), and (D) ultimatum imperatives ("Do this or I will end you," 5%). The findings show that 82% of threats are delivered from dominant bodily positions, while dehumanizing language increases from 17% in Episode 1 to 60% in Episode 6. Conditional structures combine futurity with causation to project certainty while preserving deniability; euphemisms transform killing into administrative routine; and negative imperatives discipline masculinity through conditional belonging. Together, these patterns demonstrate how *Yellowstone* naturalizes authoritarian masculinity through grammar, gesture, and cinematic framing.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis; Imperatives; Televisual Power; Hegemonic Masculinity; Euphemism; Yellowstone.*

Introduction

In the opening scene of *Yellowstone*'s pilot episode, ranch patriarch John Dutton orders the execution of a trespasser with a single directive: "Take him to the train station." The phrase appears innocuous—logistical, even mundane. Within six episodes, however, it becomes an institutionalized code for murder, uttered without hesitation and enacted without trial. This transformation illustrates how authority is not only enforced through physical violence but also produced through language. John Dutton does not merely exercise power; he speaks it into being.

Created by Taylor Sheridan, *Yellowstone* (2018–) has attracted millions of viewers per episode and reshaped contemporary imaginaries of the American West (Paramount Network, 2022). The Dutton family defends the largest contiguous

ranch in the United States against developers, political institutions, and Indigenous claims. This neo-feudal empire operates in a moral landscape where land is sacred, law is negotiable, and speech becomes a weapon. As the patriarch, John Dutton governs not through deliberation or consensus but through commands, warnings, and euphemized threats. His utterances are brief, authoritative, and saturated with lethal implication.

Despite the series' cultural prominence, existing scholarship has focused primarily on its visual symbolism (McClenny-Sadler, 2020), narrative constructions of sovereignty (Smith, 2021), and representations of indigeneity (Johnson, 2022). Dialogue—the very medium through which John enacts dominance—has received little sustained linguistic attention. This absence is significant. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has long demonstrated that fictional language is not ideologically neutral (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 2008). Rather, it naturalizes hierarchies, legitimizes authority, and shapes social reality. When John tells his son, “Don’t test me,” he is not merely expressing anger; he is scripting patriarchal law into grammatical form.

This study addresses that gap by examining John Dutton’s threats as a discursive practice. It investigates how syntactic structures, thematic meanings, and embodied performances converge to produce authority. Using Fairclough’s (1995) three-dimensional CDA framework, the study asks: (1) What syntactic patterns characterize John Dutton’s verbal threats? (2) How do these patterns enact power at textual, discursive, and sociocultural levels? (3) What do these linguistic performances reveal about masculinity, sovereignty, and neo-feudal governance in contemporary televisual culture?

Season 1 provides a particularly productive corpus. John functions as the undisputed linguistic sovereign, and threats occur with notable density as the narrative escalates from territorial defense to internal collapse. This study therefore examines twenty explicit threats from Episodes 1–6, combining corpus-based analysis (AntConc), thematic coding (NVivo), and multimodal annotation (ELAN). This triangulation allows threats to be analyzed not only as sentences but as performances enacted through body positioning, camera angles, and vocal delivery.

Beyond television studies, this analysis has broader implications. In an era marked by authoritarian rhetoric, political polarization, and the normalization of verbal aggression, *Yellowstone* offers a seductive model of certainty: commands replace dialogue, legacy overrides law, and violence becomes administratively routine. Examining how such discourses are grammatically structured is therefore not merely descriptive but critical. Language here does not describe power—it performs it.

Literature Review

2.1 Power as Linguistic Performance

Language does not merely describe social reality—it actively produces it. This foundational premise of Critical Discourse Analysis challenges the notion that words neutrally convey pre-existing meanings (Fairclough, 1995). Instead,

every utterance participates in constructing, legitimizing, or contesting hierarchies of power. Discourse is social action, not transparent representation. Television extends this performative capacity through seriality and emotional immersion. Unlike isolated speech acts, televisual dialogue operates through accumulation and repetition. Patterns become familiar, familiarity breeds legitimacy, and legitimacy naturalizes domination (Bednarek, 2018). The grammar of authority—who commands, who obeys, who can be erased—is not imposed externally but absorbed through narrative engagement. Serial drama does not reflect power structures; it rehearses them.

This repetition enables what might be termed ideological routinization: the transformation of domination into normalcy. When violence is consistently framed as protection, expulsion as necessity, and obedience as virtue, these equivalences cease to register as rhetorical choices. They become the natural order of things. Discourse achieves its greatest ideological force precisely when it becomes invisible, when constructed hierarchies present themselves as simple reality (Van Dijk, 2008).

2.2 Masculinity and the Economy of Speech

Patriarchal authority in Western cultural productions has long been associated with verbal restraint. The fewer the words, the greater the implied power. This economy of expression functions as an ideological marker: brevity signals certainty, elaboration suggests weakness, and explanation implies the need for justification (Tompkins, 1992). Commands replace dialogue. Declarations substitute for negotiation. Speech becomes terminative rather than discursive.

Such patterns encode what has been theorized as hegemonic masculinity—culturally dominant performances of maleness that naturalize male authority and normalize violence as patrimony (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These performances are not biological inevitabilities but learned practices, continuously tested and enforced through social interaction. Masculinity must be demonstrated, proven, and defended. It operates as a probationary status rather than a stable identity.

Within patriarchal structures, this probationary logic intensifies in familial relations. Sons inherit not only wealth but the obligation to perform correct masculinity. Belonging becomes conditional on conformity: stoicism over emotionality, loyalty over autonomy, obedience over resistance. Language polices these boundaries through praise and censure, inclusion and expulsion (Kiesling, 2007). Power is transmitted not just biologically but grammatically—through the accumulated force of commands, prohibitions, and withheld approval.

2.3 The Grammar of Coercion

Imperatives encode asymmetry at the level of syntax. By eliminating the subject and foreclosing negotiation, the imperative mood presupposes the speaker's right to command (Halliday, 1994). The grammatical structure itself performs dominance: obligation appears as natural rather than imposed, legitimacy as given rather than contested.

Threats represent imperatives' most extreme instantiation. As face-threatening acts, they damage social relations while asserting hierarchical distance (Brown & Levinson, 1987). When deployed systematically rather than sporadically, threats function not as expressions of temporary anger but as instruments of sustained domination (Culpeper, 2011).

Conditional structures intensify this coercive force through a specific grammatical maneuver: they redistribute agency. "If you X, then I will Y" frames the threatened consequence as causally triggered by the addressee's action rather than chosen by the speaker. Violence appears as inevitable response rather than deliberate decision. Responsibility shifts from the one who threatens to the one threatened (Chilton, 2004).

Euphemism adds another dimension to coercive grammar. Where overt threats announce violence, euphemistic commands conceal it within administrative language. Killing becomes "removal," bodies become "cargo," murder becomes "transport" (Allan & Burridge, 2006). This substitution does not soften violence but restructures it, converting moral rupture into procedural routine. The effect mirrors what Orwell (1946) identified in political language: linguistic displacement that makes brutality thinkable by making it unsayable.

Crucially, euphemism operates through shared knowledge. It presupposes an in-group that understands what remains unspoken—what Firth (1957) termed a "speech fellowship." Once established, these codes require no explanation. Their power derives precisely from opacity: insiders decode immediately, outsiders remain excluded, and the unspeakable becomes institutionalized.

Together, imperatives, conditional structures, and euphemism constitute a grammar of coercive normalization. They transform domination into discourse that no longer appears as domination—violence becomes protection, expulsion becomes necessity, compliance becomes common sense.

Method

Data and Corpus

We analyzed 20 explicit verbal threats delivered by John Dutton across Episodes 1–6 of *Yellowstone* Season 1. This window captures the first narrative arc—from Lee Dutton's death through the casino conflict—establishing John as linguistic sovereign before later seasons complicate power dynamics. Threats were identified through keyword filtering (kill, bury, ruin, cross, disappear) and verified against two criteria: imperative mood and explicit or clearly implied harm. We focused on imperatives because they grammatically encode asymmetry (Halliday, 1994), making power structurally visible.

The corpus comprises 178 words across 20 threats (mean length = 8.9 words, range = 4–18). Distribution peaks in Episodes 1 (six threats, 30%) and 6 (five threats, 25%), framing the season as a linguistic siege. Notably, 65% contain profanity and 90% employ deontic modality (will, have, make), signaling absolute obligation rather than suggestion.

3.2 Analytical Framework

This study adopts a deliberately triangulated analytical framework that combines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with principles from Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA). The overall conceptual architecture follows Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model, which conceptualizes discourse as a social practice operating at three interconnected levels: (1) textual form, (2) discursive practice, and (3) sociocultural meaning. This model structures the interpretation of how John Dutton's threats function ideologically and socially.

It is important to clarify, however, that Fairclough's framework was originally developed for the analysis of verbal and written discourse and was not specifically designed as a multimodal model. For this reason, the present study does not treat CDA as a stand-alone tool for analyzing embodied or visual meaning. Instead, the multimodal dimensions of the data (e.g., body positioning, gesture, spatial relations, and camera angle) are examined using principles from Multimodal Discourse Analysis, particularly the social semiotic approach associated with Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and subsequent developments in multimodal methodology (e.g., Norris, 2019).

The framework is therefore intentionally hybrid. CDA provides the macro-analytical structure for linking linguistic form to ideology, power, and social practice (Fairclough, 1995), while MDA supplies the tools for explaining how these relations are materially, visually, and bodily enacted. In other words, CDA is used to explain what kinds of power relations are being constructed, whereas multimodal analysis explains how these relations are staged and experienced through embodied and cinematic resources.

At the textual level, AntConc identified four imperative patterns:

Pattern A: Conditional threats (You + VP + and/or + I'll + VP)

Pattern B: Negative imperatives (Don't + VP)

Pattern C: Euphemistic causatives (Take/Make/Get + NP + VP)

Pattern D: Ultimatum imperatives (VP + or + I will + VP)

Patterns A–C account for 95% of the dataset and form the core analysis. Pattern D appeared once (5%), marking a shift from conditional coercion to absolute domination but lacking sufficient frequency to constitute a stable grammatical strategy. It is retained for analytical completeness.

At the discursive level, NVivo enabled thematic coding across three inductively derived categories: Hegemony (territorial defense), Dehumanization (targets as objects/cargo), and Masculinity (paternal discipline and conditional belonging). Threats received multiple codes where ideological functions overlapped.

At the multimodal level, ELAN captured embodied performance through three variables: body positioning (dominant/neutral), camera angle (low/eye-level/high), and gesture (present/absent). This follows the premise that meaning is distributed across multiple semiotic resources rather than residing in language alone (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Norris, 2019).

Coding and Classification

Coding procedures followed established CDA and multimodal discourse analysis protocols (Bednarek, 2006; Richardson, 2007; Norris, 2019). Syntactic coding identified grammatical patterns and imperative forms. Thematic coding mapped threats onto three categories: Hegemony (boundary-making), Dehumanization (objectification), and Masculinity (paternal discipline). Each threat was segmented into syntactic units, categorized by pattern, and assigned one or more thematic codes.

Multimodal coding treated body positioning, camera angle, and gesture as semiotic variables indexing embodied authority. Dominant body position was defined as John standing over, looming toward, or spatially controlling the interlocutor. Camera angles were coded as low, eye-level, or high; gestures as present or absent. These variables directly index power asymmetries. Inter-coder reliability testing covered ten threats (50% of the corpus), randomly selected and independently double-coded across all three levels. Agreement reached 88%, with all disagreements resolved through discussion. This aligns with qualitative CDA practices where coding involves interpretive judgment.

The analysis treats authority and identity as discursively constructed rather than inherent traits (Van Dijk, 2008), focusing on ideological work performed by linguistic and multimodal patterns rather than authorial intention. All data derive from publicly broadcast media.

Result and Discussion

4.1 Conditional Coercion: Threats as Grammars of Sovereignty

Eleven of twenty threats—55% of the dataset—follow the same conditional formula: You + VP + and/or + I'll + VP. “You cross me, and I'll have you killed.” “You fuck with my family, and you disappear.” The structure repeats with mechanical precision, yet its effects are anything but mechanical. Each iteration redistributes blame, projects certainty, and converts personal command into what appears to be natural law.

The grammar does specific ideological work. By placing the trigger in the subordinate clause (“You cross me”), John positions the addressee as the initiating agent. The main clause (“I'll have you killed”) becomes not a decision but a consequence—violence activated rather than chosen. This displacement matters. It allows John to present himself not as aggressor but as executor of inevitability. The addressee, not John, sets events in motion. Punishment follows as physics, not choice.

The conditional structure also enables what might be called coercive deniability. The threat predicts rather than announces. Violence remains grammatically postponed—hypothetical in form, inevitable in force. The modal choice matters here: always will, never might or could. The future tense eliminates ambiguity without eliminating distance. What has not yet happened cannot be prosecuted, yet its certainty is never in doubt. The future here is sealed, not open.

This pattern targets outsiders almost exclusively: developers, journalists, tribal representatives, political intermediaries. These figures receive one illusion—

the choice not to cross. This illusion preserves fairness while guaranteeing compliance. Freedom exists grammatically but any exercise of it becomes fatal. The addressee is positioned as autonomous, yet autonomy itself triggers erasure.

Multimodally, syntax mirrors space. Nine of eleven conditional threats occur with John standing over seated or kneeling interlocutors. Low camera angles reinforce this vertical asymmetry, making John's physical stature tower. In eight cases, he points downward or steps forward during the consequence clause, translating grammatical causation (I'll have you) into directional motion. Kevin Costner's drawl stretches key verbs—ki-i-ill, ru-u-in—adding acoustic weight that lingers after the sentence ends. Authority is not just stated but embodied, filmed, performed across multiple semiotic registers.

What makes conditional coercion particularly effective is its disguise. Domination presents itself as causality. Power is not imposed but activated, not demanded but triggered. The world appears to operate according to John's rules not because he insists on it but because the grammar makes it so. Conditional threats do not merely intimidate. They legislate. They establish a regime where obedience is structurally compelled rather than requested, where sovereignty performs itself through syntax rather than spectacle.

4.2 Euphemism as Institutional Violence: The "Train Station" Evolution

"Take him to the train station." The phrase sounds logistical, even mundane. Within six episodes, it becomes institutional code for murder. This is Pattern C—euphemistic imperatives that transform killing into administration, violence into procedure. Where conditional threats announce consequences, euphemisms conceal them. Death is reframed as movement, disposal as transport, murder as logistics.

The pattern appears in three key instances across Season 1, each refining its function. Episode 1 maintains possible literalism—perhaps an actual train station exists beyond ranch borders. New viewers cannot yet decode the violence embedded in the phrasing. Episode 3 varies the formula: "I want him gone by morning." The temporal demand replaces spatial metaphor, but the causative structure remains. Episode 6 completes the evolution: "Make him disappear." No location, no timeframe, no distance. The verb disappear transforms the victim into void, presence into absence, being into unbeing.

The grammatical mechanics matter. All three instances deploy causative verbs (take, make, get) with human objects reduced to pronouns (him). The imperative eliminates the subject—no you appears, only the command. This erasure is double: the victim disappears referentially (reduced to pronoun) before disappearing literally (removed from existence). Language performs the violence it describes.

These euphemisms are not softening mechanisms. They bureaucratize. Killing ceases to be an act of rage or revenge and becomes a managerial function—rational, procedural, inevitable. The calmness of delivery reinforces this transformation. John delivers "Take him to the train station" at eye level to Rip, without shouting or gestures. It sounds like assigning fence repair or cattle

rotation. Camera work reinforces ordinariness: medium shots, not dramatic low angles. John and Rip share the frame equally, colleagues coordinating tasks rather than sovereign commanding subject.

This ordinariness is the point. Murder discussed as logistics becomes normalized through sheer repetition. By Episode 6, ranch hands decode “train station” without explanation. Firth’s (1957) concept of “speech fellowship” applies here—language binding a community through shared, unspeakable knowledge. The phrase presupposes an in-group that understands what is not said. Once established, it requires no elaboration. Power lies precisely in this opacity.

Thematic coding reveals escalation. Dehumanization appears in 30% of all threats, but distribution shifts markedly across episodes. Episode 1 contains one instance (17%), Episode 6 contains three (60%). As external threats are neutralized, violence redirects inward. The euphemism that initially marked outsiders now includes insiders. The ranch consolidates sovereignty not through expansion but through internal purification.

Gender operates through absence. John never directs euphemistic commands toward women. Beth never becomes cargo, never an object requiring disappearance. The euphemism targets male bodies—trespassers, rivals, sons who fail. Failed masculinity is erased, not reformed. Beth’s threats, by contrast, reject euphemism entirely. “I will bury you,” she tells a rival in Episode 4—direct verb, active voice, no distancing. Where John sanitizes through metaphor, Beth performs through theatrical excess. Both registers serve Dutton hegemony, but through divergent grammars: patriarchal power uses euphemistic restraint (violence as administration), feminine power uses declarative spectacle (violence as performance).

Euphemism does not hide violence. It reorganizes it. The “train station” becomes infrastructure, a node in the ranch’s governance system. Language converts moral rupture into institutional continuity, unspeakable act into administrative routine.

4.3 Paternal Imperatives: Engineering Heirs

“Don’t test me, son.” Four words, no elaboration, no justification. This is Pattern B—negative imperatives that govern the family from within. Unlike conditional threats that offer illusory choice or euphemisms that conceal violence, negative commands simply prohibit. They eliminate futurity altogether. There is no “if,” no hypothetical distance, no consequence clause. The imperative forecloses action before it occurs.

The pattern appears in four instances (20% of threats), directed exclusively at John’s sons: Kayce, Jamie, Lee. This restriction is not incidental. These threats regulate dynasty, not territory. They police masculinity, not borders. Sons are not merely protected by patriarchal power—they are shaped by it, tested by it, threatened with expulsion from it. Masculinity here operates as probationary status rather than stable identity. Belonging must be earned, renewed, never secured.

“Don’t make me regret saving you,” John tells Kayce in Episode 3. The structure embeds emotional blackmail. The causative *make* shifts responsibility:

Kayce's failure would *force* John's regret, positioning love's withdrawal as inevitable physics rather than patriarchal choice. Affection becomes leverage. Approval is withheld in advance, made contingent on compliance that can never be definitively achieved. The son is not a subject with rights but a project under perpetual evaluation.

What distinguishes paternal imperatives from external threats is their affective economy. Conditional coercion uses vertical dominance—John standing over seated targets, volume elevated. Negative imperatives use proximity. Episode 3's threat includes John's hand on Kayce's shoulder, simultaneously affectionate and coercive. Camera framing shifts to close-ups, forcing viewers to witness private discipline as emotional violence. This embodied closeness paradoxically amplifies the threat. Sons require touch, the performance of love, even as it weaponizes against them. The negative imperative needs physical nearness; it polices through threatened withdrawal of the very intimacy it enacts.

Multimodally, these threats are marked by restraint rather than spectacle. They are quieter, slower, more controlled. This restraint is not gentler—it is more absolute. The absence of escalation signals that the authority being exercised does not require justification. It is assumed as natural order.

Thematic coding confirms this focus. Masculinity appears in 25% of all threats, but Pattern B accounts for 80% of those instances. This concentration reveals the negative imperative as the grammatical instrument of familial control. While Pattern A defends territorial boundaries and Pattern C administers violence, Pattern B defends bloodline boundaries. When the imperatives fail, relationships collapse. "You want war? You'll get it," John tells Kayce in Episode 6, shifting to a declarative that signals peer combat rather than paternal discipline.

Beth's threats, again, abolish this restraint. She never uses imperatives. Her threats are declarative, performative, excessive: "I am the rock you break against." Where John commands economy, Beth performs theatricality. Her threat to a rival—"Would you like me to ruin you? Because I will. I'll ruin your life, your career, your reputation"—uses impoliteness through hyperbolic enumeration, not terse prohibition. Gender determines grammar: sons receive imperatives conditioning love, outsiders receive declarations promising destruction.

This mechanism addresses hegemonic masculinity's central contradiction: succession requires some men to succeed. The negative imperative threatens expulsion while offering slim redemption. "Don't disappoint me" implies the door remains barely open. This grammatical ambiguity sustains patriarchy: sons chase approval, their loyalty extracted through fear of loss. Four instances, eighty words total, transforming biological sons into conditional heirs, family into meritocracy of masculine performance. Language here does not simply discipline masculinity—it engineers it.

5. Conclusion

John Dutton's threats do not erupt spontaneously. They follow patterns—conditional structures that shift blame, euphemisms that bureaucratize killing, negative imperatives that discipline sons into heirs. Across twenty utterances

in Season 1, these grammatical forms repeat with striking consistency: 55% conditional, 20% euphemistic, 20% paternal. What might appear as individual moments of rage reveal themselves, under analysis, as a coherent linguistic system. This system does specific work. Conditional threats (“You cross me, and I’ll have you killed”) defend territorial boundaries while maintaining plausible deniability. Euphemistic commands (“Take him to the train station”) convert murder into logistics, rendering the unspeakable routine. Negative imperatives (“Don’t test me, son”) police the family from within, making love conditional on obedience. Together, these patterns construct the ranch as a sovereign space where John’s grammar becomes law. The multimodal dimension reinforces this sovereignty: 82% of threats are delivered from positions of physical dominance, amplified by low camera angles and controlled pacing. Even Beth’s theatrical excess—her declarative promises to “bury” enemies—does not challenge this order but extends it into a feminine register. The Dutton regime operates through dual grammars: patriarchal command and performative spectacle.

What makes this analysis critical rather than merely descriptive is Yellowstone’s cultural reach. Millions of viewers absorb these linguistic performances weekly. Through narrative repetition and emotional alignment, the series normalizes a particular vision of authority: terse, certain, unaccountable. Commands replace conversation. Legacy overrides legality. Violence becomes administrative routine. This is how television does more than depict power—it teaches audiences to recognize authoritarian discourse as the natural sound of leadership. The grammar John Dutton speaks risks becoming the grammar viewers inherit.

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