SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF NATO'S LINGUISTIC STRATEGIES TO DEBUNK RUSSIAN INFORMATION WARFARE

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ABSTRACT Information warfare has become a vital area in modern geopolitical battles because language functions as both a combat tool and a defensive mechanism. The research investigates NATO's development of epistemic authority in counter-disinformation discourse through Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) analysis. The study analyzes NATO's "De-bunking Russian disinformation on NATO" webpage to identify linguistic methods that affect thematic structure and ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. The thematic analysis showed NATO stands as a central theme throughout multiple clauses, which confirms its essential role in the text. The research used strategic deployment of Marked Themes to create historical frameworks through temporal markers and to perform acknowledge-then-refute moves through concessive markers and to emphasize evaluation through manner markers. The research findings demonstrate how SFL applies to counter-disinformation discourse while showing thematic analysis effectiveness and revealing how integrated metafunctional analysis reveals collaborative meaning creation processes. The research study shows how NATO uses four main strategies, which include empirical evidence, confident statements, systematic counterarguments, and strategic thematic emphasis. The thematic progression followed three patterns, which included maintaining constant theme focus and linear argument development, and derived progression for maintaining textual coherence. The research demonstrates that grammatical selection methods establish epistemic authority through consistent patterns that appear throughout different metafunctional layers. The research establishes a complete framework that enables researchers to conduct future counter-disinformation studies in various institutional settings.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics, counter-disinformation, information warfare, thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of conflict have transformed significantly in the twenty-first century as information is becoming the essential instrument of strategic rivalry between nation-states in the world. Unlike traditional weaponized combat, information warfare functions by manipulating narratives, disseminating strategic disinformation, and undermining epistemic authority in public discourse systematically. The digital information ecosystems allow state actors to weaponize information, focusing on opposing societies' cognitive infrastructures rather than military facilities (Rubio & Monteiro, 2023).

The relationship between the Russian Federation and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has marked by a conflicting information narrative that goes beyond traditional diplomatic discourse in this changing security environment (Renz & Smith, 2016). Since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, information operations have escalated with both parties initiating strategic communication campaigns aimed at influencing global audiences and establishing favored interpretations of geopolitical events (Abdelsamie, 2024; Cusumano & Corbe, 2018; Zhao & Li, 2025). Russia has used information operations to target NATO's credibility, saying that the Alliance is an aggressive spreading power that attacks Russian security (Arcos et al., 2023; Brady, 2021; Mastro, 2024). In answer to that fact, NATO has created a wide range of counter-discourse efforts, such as a section on its website that consistently disproves Russian claims (NATO, 2025).

This information conflict transcends mere propaganda exchange; it also fundamentally concerns the struggle for epistemic authority or the power to determine truth in international relations (Legucka & Kupiecki, 2022; Navarro et al., 2025). Bjola & Manor (2024) explained that modern information warfare is based on the contestation of facts with different players using complicated communication tactics to make their own version of reality seem like the

real one. As the results, language has become the main weapon in this conflict. Vocabulary choices, grammatical structures, and speech patterns are used by institutional actors to build credibility, delegitimize opponents, and normalize certain ideological positions (Fairclough, 2015; Hodges & Nilep, 2007).

Recognizing the strategic value of efficient communication in the digital age, NATO has made large investments to improve its strategic communication capabilities. The alliance then set up the Strategic Communication Center of Excellence in Latvia to help NATO cope with false information and do a better job of public diplomacy (NATO, 2025). This webpage became a significant artifact of institutional discourse on counter-disinformation and represented NATO's strategic approach to epistemic contestation in the digital public sphere. A conventional diplomatic message is characterized by careful and circumspect ambiguity (Kurbalija & Slavik, 2001; Poltoratska, 2025). This counter-disinformation work employs a forceful rhetorical method aimed at firmly refuting opposing narratives and establish categorical claim of truth. It also addresses a small number of Russian allegations regarding NATO's expansion, such as historical agreements, military positioning, and the Alliance's ambitions, representing what NATO considers as factual correction supported by verified facts.

This kind of communication strategy is essential for several reasons beyond the information that it conveys. Security discourse not only delineates security realities but also constructs them through language practices (Dubský & Tichý, 2024; Hansen, 2006). As a result, NATO's counter-disinformation website is a reality construction practice in which certain linguistic resources are used to establish representations of actors, actions, and events as authoritative truth (Van Dijk, 2017). Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is the field that is responsible for conducting the systematic study of the text's grammatical and discursive properties. This analysis is necessary for understanding the linguistic construction of this authority, which is precisely the realm of SFL.

Michael Kirkwood Halliday and his associates developed Systemic Functional Linguistics, which offers a thorough framework for examining how language functions in a social context to accomplish communicative goals (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). SFL studies language as a social semiotic system in which speakers make choices in meaning to achieve particular goals in specific situations, in contrast to the traditional linguistic approach that mainly concentrates on syntactic structure, that divide meaning and context (Martin & Rose, 2007). The functional approach of SFL is essential to be utilized for examining institutional discourse where linguistic choices reflect and build power dynamics, ideological stances, and social identities (Fairclough, 2003; Hodge, 1993).

According to Halliday (1979), the concepts of Metafunctions are fundamental to the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), in which the three modes of meaning are present in every linguistic act. The subject of Experiential metafunction considers language as the representation of experience, including the participants, process, and circumstances that construct our model of reality. Secondly, the interpersonal metafunction examines how language is used to establish authority, establish social relationships, and express attitudes and judgments. On the other hand, the textual metafunction is concerned with the organization of language as coherent messages, which includes the structure of information, the development of themes, and the relationship between cohesive elements.

The thematic system is especially pertinent to this study. Speaker uses thematic system to arrange their messages in order to direct interpretations and set discourse priorities. The framework for understanding the rest of the clause (rheme) is provided by the theme, which is the element that acts as the message's starting point (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Thematic selection indicates the priorities of speakers in initiating communication, whereas thematic progression patterns across clauses illustrate the development and maintenance of discourse focus. In addition, the thematic structure in institutional discourse performs essential

ideological roles, normalizing specific entities or concepts as foundational while positioning others as secondary or rhematic (Butler et al., 2007; Martin & Rose, 2007).

SFL theory has been effectively implemented in a variety of political and institutional discourse such as diplomatic discourse and parliamentary debate (Tahira et al., 2025; McEntee-Atalianis & Vessey, 2025). The SFL transitivity framework was employed by (Hardiyanti et al., 2023) to analyze presidential speech. This study uncovered the strategic communications priorities that can be identified through transitivity analysis. While there have been a growing number of studies examining information warfare and strategic communication, limited research employs SFL to examine institutional discourse about counter-disinformation efforts (Wilson et al., 2023). Considering that SFL has shown that grammatical and discursive choices can build authority, naturalize ideology, and influence reader perceptions, this disparity is especially noteworthy (Bartlett, 2012; Thompson, 2014; Yusuf et al., 2024).

The few studies that have already been conducted that employ linguistic frameworks to analyze disinformation have mostly concentrated on the disinformation itself rather than institutional reactions. Therefore, even though our knowledge of disinformation tactics and content is expanding, little is known about the language mechanism used by authoritative institutions to create counter-discourse, particularly how theme choices structure these counter-narratives. Thus, this study aims to examine the linguistic mechanism used by an international organization to establish epistemic authority, using systemic functional analysis of NATO's counter-disinformation discourse. This study demonstrates the theoretical and methodological value of Systemic Functional Linguistics for analyzing counter-disinformation discourse by showing how epistemic authority is constructed through coordinated grammatical choices across ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Information warfare involves conflict through altering mentalities and mobilizing people rather than deploying physical weapons. It shifts away from operations that involved a great deal of kinetic actions toward campaigns that are mainly a media show (Matey & Moral, 2025). In contrast to classic warfare's aim against the technical capacity and physical infrastructure of the adversary, information warfare, carried on an entirely different plane of war (since it is fought within the mind), seeks to shape narratives, control information flows, and achieve epistemic dominance in contestable information environments (Dowse & Bachmann, 2022; Hunter et al., 2024).

According to (Thornton, 2015), information warfare involves the use and management of information to gain a competitive advantage over an opponent. Information warfare comprises actions that are aimed at disrupting, degrading, or destroying the enemy's information system. Some scholars argue that this definition is too technical to take into account the fundamentally communicative and semiotic nature of information conflict (Bjola & Pamment, 2019). More recent descriptions view information warfare as using strategic disinformation to control meaning systems, narrative frameworks and truth claims in public discourse (Ascott, 2020; Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

Russian Information Warfare and NATO

Russia and NATO have been engaged in an information confrontation as well as an arms race (Magula et al., 2022). Russian theorists such as Evgeny Messner and Igor Panarin have developed a doctrine for information warfare. Its main ideas are that information has developed into an essential theatre of war. Furthermore, strategic communications, narrative control, and cognitive manipulation are the key tools of state power (Giles, 2021).

Scholars and practitioners have thoroughly documented Russian information operations that target NATO and Western democracies. According to Anwer (2024), a "weaponization of

information" is taking place as Russian state media and associated actors utilize a "firehose of falsehood" model characterized by high-volume, multi-channel, rapid, continuous, and repetitious messaging with little regard for truthfulness. According to Pathé Duarte (2024), there are four distinct characteristics of this approach: high volumes and multi-channel distribution, rapid repetition on a continuous basis, dissemination of partial truths and blatant lies, and lack of commitment to objective truth or consistency.

Multiple monitoring organizations and research institutions have recorded specific Russian disinformation narratives regarding NATO. After reviewing the 2015 and 2017 reports of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, I have found that Russia is making systematic and continuing claims. These claims amount to an insistence that NATO expansion threatens the security of Russia. These narratives are amplified with coordinated networks of state media, proxy websites, social media manipulation, and useful idiot exploitation in Western media ecosystems (Wenzel et al., 2024).

Origins and Core Principles

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) emerged from the work of Michael Halliday and his team to create a complete theory about language as a social semiotic system (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). SFL differs from traditional formal linguistic methods because it studies language as a social tool that adapts to its environment through context-dependent analysis (Martin & Rose, 2007). The "systemic" perspective in SFL shows that users select from existing linguistic options, while the "functional" perspective explains that language forms serve specific social and communicative needs (Eggins, 2013).

SFL operates based on multiple essential principles. The social semiotic framework of SFL views language as a meaning system that uses forms to create social environments (Halliday, 1979). The connection between language and context exists as a dialectical process, which allows context to influence language choices while language choices transform context (Martin, 2011). Every linguistic expression performs multiple communicative functions through its multiple operational levels, which are called metafunctions (Halliday & Hasan, 1989). Speakers use language resources, which consist of available meaning potential, to select appropriate choices for their communication objectives (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

SFL offers exceptional value for studying institutional discourse because its analytical framework reveals how language choices both represent and create social power dynamics, ideological frameworks, and identity structures. According to Thompson (2014), SFL offers researchers methods to uncover how grammatical choices that appear neutral actually create preferred reality versions while hiding alternative perspectives. The critical analytical capabilities of SFL have established its position as a leading method in critical discourse analysis, multimodal analysis, and applied linguistics research focused on language and power dynamics (Fairclough, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020).

Textual Metafunction

The textual metafunction deals with how language structures itself to create meaningful messages that fit specific contexts. The textual metafunction handles message organization for effective communication through its role in packaging content (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The textual metafunction serves as a foundation for other metafunctions because it structures linguistic content into meaningful texts that match their environments.

Previous Study

Xiang (2022) studied Joe Biden's inaugural address through the SFL transitivity framework to show that relational processes made up 42% of all processes, which established national unity and shared identity as main themes. The speech used collective actors such as

"we" and "Americans" and "our nation" instead of Biden as an individual Agent to build collaborative leadership instead of autocratic leadership. The research showed that authors use process types to achieve specific communication objectives through relational processes for reconciliation and material processes for policy implementation.

Imran (2025) studied government COVID-19 messaging through SFL to show how institutions built authority through absolute statements ("must," "will") and physical actions and strategic selection of main topics that focused on official representatives. The institutional credibility faced challenges when predictions failed to materialize because communicators started using more uncertain language and hedging statements. The study showed that crisis communication needs flexible linguistic approaches to preserve public trust.

Despite their contributions, these studies leave a clear research gap. Xiang (2022) focuses on transitivity choices in a single political speech to explain leadership construction, but does not examine how thematic structure or integrated metafunctional interaction contributes to sustained epistemic authority beyond ceremonial discourse. Imran (2025) addresses institutional authority in crisis communication but concentrates primarily on modality and topic selection, without analyzing how thematic progression and marked Themes function strategically across clauses to manage contestation or refutation. Consequently, neither study investigates counter-disinformation discourse, where authority must be actively defended against opposing claims; this gap is addressed by the present study through an integrated SFL analysis of thematic structure and metafunctional strategies used to construct epistemic authority in an institutional counter-disinformation context.

RESEARCH METHOD
Research Design

The present study employs a qualitative descriptive research design, with Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as the main analytical framework. Qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for discourse analysis research, as it seeks to understand how meaning is constructed by language in a specific social context, as it allows detailed analysis of linguistic patterns and their functions in a text (Creswell, 2017). The descriptive part focuses on systematically documenting and characterizing the linguistic elements presented in NATO-Debunking discourse, while the interpretative part focuses on explaining how those features function to build epistemic authority and achieve the strategic communication goal. Following Halliday & Matthiessen's (2014) functional approach to language analysis, the present study considered linguistic elements as meaningful and motivated by communicative purposes in a specific context. Thus, the methodology integrates grammatical explanation with functional interpretation that examines not only what linguistic elements appear but also how they are used to accomplish institutional goals in a contested information environment.

Research Data

The data for this study is NATO's official counter-disinformation website titled "De-bunking Russian disinformation on NATO," which is accessible on NATO's official website. This particular webpage provides essential data on institutional counter-disinformation discourse for several reasons. The page itself provides a structured format consisting of discrete sections, each mentioning specific Russian claims. This content facilitates a systematic analysis of claim and refutation patterns. The page is updated periodically since its first creation, followed by the representation of the most current issues in October 2025, which reflects NATO's ongoing engagement with Russian information warfare. Moreover, three NATO debunking texts (DB1–DB3) were chosen because they are thematically representative and structurally comparable, enabling the identification of recurrent textual strategies in NATO's counter-disinformation discourse while maintaining coherence, rigor, and analytical precision.

Data Collection

Data collection is conducted through systematic steps such as initial access and archiving from the website via URL navigation. The textual content was gathered from the webpage using copy-paste procedures, keeping all written while excluding navigation menus, headers, footers, and other web elements. The extracted text consists of introductory framing material about the web's purposes, section headings identifying specific Russian claims addressed, body text providing the refutations and evidence, and any embedded quotes and citations.

Data Analysis

The analytical framework uses textual metafunctions in SFL. Textual analysis examines how the discourse is arranged as coherent and effective communication. Concentrating on textual resources allows for in-depth analysis of how institutions guide interpretation and manage refutation, while also avoiding redundancy with prior SFL studies that have extensively examined transitivity and modality in political discourse. The data is analyzed within the Theme-Rheme analysis procedure. According to Halliday & Hasan (1989), The theme is identified structurally as extending from the beginning of the clause, including the first constituent, known as the topical theme. The first step is clause segmentation. The text is divided into ranking clauses. Each main clause and dependent clause is treated as a separate unit. The second step is theme boundary identifications, as for each clause, the theme boundary is marked immediately after the topical theme. The third step is theme component analysis, including textual themes such as continuatives, conjunctions, conjunctive adjuncts; interpersonal themes such as modal adjuncts, vocatives, finite, functions; topical themes that consist of participants, process, and circumstances. In addition, marked and unmarked themes are also identified.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Aiming to examine the linguistic mechanism used by an international organization to establish epistemic authority, using systemic functional analysis of NATO's counter-disinformation discourse, Table 1 summarizes the componential analysis of three NATO debunking texts, first debunking: *NATO is at war with Russia* (**DB1**), second debunking: *NATO promised Russia it would not enlarge* (**DB2**), and third debunking: *NATO is aggressive* (**DB3**). The variables include total clauses (**TC**), with subcategories for **Unmarked Topical Themes (UTH)**, **Marked/Contrastive Themes (M/CTH)**, and **Derived/Constant Themes (D/CTH)**. Rhemes are further classified into **Relational (RLRH)**, **Material (MTRH)**, and **Causal/Projective (CPRH)** types. The column for **Cohesive Devices (CD)** encompasses lexical repetition (**LR**), reference (**REF**), conjunction (**CONJ**), and negation (**NEG**). Finally, **Classification (CL)** identifies evaluative functions, distinguishing **Positive Classifications (PCL)** used to affirm NATO's defensive identity from **Negative Classifications (NCL)** used to refute misinformation or mythic claims.

Table1: Componential Analysis Across Three NATO Debunking texts (DB1-DB3)

Text / Code	TC	UTH	M/CTH	D/CTH	RLRH	MTRH	CPRH	CD	LR	REF	CONJ	NEG	CL	PCL	NCL
DB1 *(NATO is at war with Russia)*	8	5	2	1	4	3	1	14	5	3	4	2	6	3	3

Text / Code	TC	UTH	M/CTH	D/CTH	RLRH	MTRH	CPRH	CD	LR	REF	CONJ	NEG	CL	PCL	NCL
DB2 *(NATO promised Russia it would not enlarge)*	9	5	3	1	4	4	1	16	5	4	5	2	7	4	3
DB3 *(NATO is aggressive)*	10	5	3	2	4	5	1	18	6	4	5	3	8	4	4
TOTAL	27	15	8	4	12	12	3	48	16	11	14	7	21	11	10

Table 1 presents a componential analysis of three NATO debunking texts (DB1–DB3), focusing on thematic, ideational, and textual features. Across the three texts, there are a total of 27 clauses, with the majority being Unmarked Topical Themes (UTH, 15 clauses)**,** indicating that NATO is consistently foregrounded as the central theme. Marked/Contrastive Themes (M/CTH, 8 clauses) and Derived/Constant Themes (D/CTH, 4 clauses) are used selectively to emphasize evaluation or contrast misinformation. In terms of ideational content, Relational Rhemes (RLRH) and Material Rhemes (MTRH) appear equally (12 clauses each), while Causal/Projective Rhemes (CPRH) are least frequent (3 clauses), suggesting a balanced focus on describing states of affairs and actions with limited causal or predictive commentary.

Textual cohesion is achieved through 48 cohesive devices (CD)**,** primarily lexical repetition (16), conjunctions (14), and reference (11), supplemented by negation (7), which help structure arguments and highlight contradictions in misinformation. Evaluative functions show a slightly higher use of Positive Classifications (PCL, 11 clauses) to affirm NATO's defensive identity, compared with Negative Classifications (NCL, 10 clauses) used to refute disinformation. Overall, the table indicates that NATO's debunking texts rely on consistent thematic foregrounding, balanced ideational content, and cohesive linking devices**,** strategically combining positive self-representation with rebuttals of false claims.

Thematic and Cohesive Features in the First Debunking (DB1)

The first debunking (DB1) is about whether NATO is at war with Russia. Official statements consistently frame NATO as a defensive alliance, supporting Ukraine's right to self-defense while emphasizing it does not seek confrontation or participate in the conflict. The table below shows how thematic choices reinforce this defensive stance.

Table 2. Theme–Rheme Patterns in the First Debunking(DB1)

Clause	Theme	Type of Theme	Rheme	Comment
NATO is a defensive alliance	NATO	Topical Theme	is a defensive alliance	The theme is the subject and point of departure. Reaffirming NATO's identity.
Our core task	Our core task	Topical Theme	is to keep our nation safe	The theme introduces institutional responsibility. Shifting focus from NATO to its functions
At the Washington Summit, Allies reaffirmed their iron-clad commitment to defend Allied territory at all times	At the Washington Summit,	Marked circumstantial Theme	Allies reaffirmed their iron-clad commitment to defend Allied territory at all times	Circumstantial theme gives context (time/place). Marking institutional consensus and setting.

Clause	Theme	Type of Theme	Rheme	Comment
We will continue to protect our one billion people and safeguard freedom and democracy, in accordance with Article 5 of the Washington Treaty	We	Topical theme	Will continue to protect our one billion people, and safeguard freedom and democracy, in accordance with Article 5 of the Washington Treaty	Shifts to the collective pronoun We to create a solidarity and commitment tone.
NATO is not at war with Russia	NATO	Topical Theme	is not at war with Russia	The Theme "NATO" is the subject and starting point of the message.
(and) is not a party to the war Russia is waging on Ukraine	(and) NATO	Continuative + Topical Theme	is not a party to the war Russia is waging on Ukraine	The conjunction and serves as a continuative; the theme remains NATO.
NATO supports Ukraine in its right to self-defence, as enshrined in the UN NATO Charter	NATO	Topical Theme	supports Ukraine in its right to self-defence, as enshrined in the UN NATO Charter	The Theme foregrounds NATO again, emphasizing its active stance.
We do not seek confrontation with Russia	We	Topical Theme (interpersonal)	Do not seek confrontation with Russia	The shift from "NATO" to "we" personalize stance.
In response to Russia's aggressive actions, we continue to strengthen our deterrence and defence to make sure there is no room for misunderstanding that NATO is ready to protect and defend every Ally	In response to Russia's aggressive actions	Marked circumstantial Theme	We continue to strengthen our deterrence and defence to make sure there is no room for misunderstanding that NATO is ready to protect and defend every Ally	The clause begins with a circumstantial element, giving cause or motivation. A marked theme that highlights reason.

The text itself exhibits a logical argumentation framework, progressing from myth elucidation to reaffirmation. The title "*NATO is at war with Russia*" functions as the macro theme that presents a fallacious assertion, which the ensuing content aims to disprove. This theme delineates the text's contextual emphasis and engenders the reader's anticipation of rectifications. The theme structure in the first paragraph is centered on "*NATO*" and then moves to "*us*", creating a consistent and distinct thematic progression highlighting institutional authority and group togetherness. The rheme in this section progressively presents new information that debunks the myth "NATO is not at war, not a party to the conflict, supports Ukraine's right to self-defense, and does not seek confrontation". The last, emphasized theme, "Responding to Russia's aggressive actions", offers causal justification and situates NATO's defensive measures within a legitimate framework, thereby reinforcing the Alliance's reactive rather than aggressive posture.

In the second paragraph, the themes returned to emphasize "NATO, our core task, and us", while maintaining a consistent focus on the Alliance's role and expanding the rheme to include its identity, mission, and commitment to democracy and security. The establishment of explicit situational themes, such as "*At the Washington summit,*" provides contextual grounding and enhances institutional credibility. In addition, the text maintains coherence

through the structured reiteration of NATO related theme and the logically sequential rheme that moves from the rejection of aggression to the affirmation of defensive principles. The main aim of this progression is to show NATO as a strong, law-abiding, and united Alliance. This effectively debunks the first myth by giving a clear narrative of peacekeeping and security responsibilities in a collective. The text maintains cohesion through repeated utilizations of the terms "*NATO*" and "*we,*" thereby connecting each clause around the primary subject. Coherence is attained through a progression from misinformation (myth), clarification (fact), and ultimately to affirmation (value and commitment).

Thematic and Cohesive Features in the Second Debunking (DB2)

The second debunking (DB2) addresses the widespread claim that NATO formally promised Russia it would not enlarge eastward. The table below shows how thematic choices are used to debunk the claim that NATO promised Russia it would not enlarge. By consistently foregrounding the "myth," legal facts, and institutional procedures as Themes, the text guides readers from historical context to firm rejection of the claim. This thematic progression reinforces NATO's open-door policy, legal continuity, and the sovereignty of states in deciding their own membership.

Table 3. Theme-Rheme Patterns in the Second Debunking (DB2)

Clause	Theme	Type of Theme	Rheme	Comment
The myth that there was a promise by Western leaders not to allow new members to join has been circulating for many years	The myth that there was a promise by Western leaders not to allow new members to join	Topical Theme (Unmarked)	has been circulating for many years	Introduces the target of debunking and establishes what is being corrected.
(and) is actively used in disinformation campaigns by the Kremlin since the start of the Russian war against Ukraine	(and)	Continuative + Topical Theme	is actively used in disinformation campaigns by the Kremlin since the start of the Russian war against Ukraine	Connects to the previous clause, attributing intentional manipulation to the Kremlin.
While records show that in the initial stages of discussions about German reunification, US Secretary of State James Baker and his West German counterpart, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, floated such an idea…	While records show that...	Marked Dependent Theme (Circumstantial)	US and West German officials floated such an idea with Soviet leaders in 1990	Provides historical background — concessive relation to myth.
(but) diplomatic negotiations quickly moved on, and the idea was dropped	(but) diplomatic negotiations	Marked Topical Theme with Conjunctive Linker	quickly moved on, and the idea was dropped	Contrasts the earlier possibility with the factual conclusion.
NATO's founding treaty… includes a clear provision that opens NATO's door to any other European state...	NATO's founding treaty	Topical Theme (Unmarked)	includes a clear provision that opens NATO's door…	Introduces factual legal foundation.

Clause	Theme	Type of Theme	Rheme	Comment
This has never changed	This	Topical Theme (Unmarked)	has never changed	Refers anaphorically — creates textual cohesion.
No treaty signed by NATO Allies and Russia ever included provisions that NATO cannot take on new members	No treaty signed by NATO Allies and Russia	Topical Theme (Unmarked)	ever included provisions that NATO cannot take on new members	Reinforces legal legitimacy.
Decisions on NATO membership are taken by consensus among all Allies	Decisions on NATO membership	Topical Theme (Unmarked)	are taken by consensus among all Allies	Shifts focus from law to procedure.
Describing NATO's open-door policy as "expansion" is already part of the myth	Describing NATO's open-door policy as 'expansion.'	Topical Theme (Unmarked)	is already part of the myth	Redefines the rhetorical misuse of the term "expansion."
NATO did not seek out new members or aim to "expand eastward."	NATO	Topical Theme (Unmarked)	did not seek out new members or aim to "expand eastward."	Returns to institutional focus.
NATO respects every nation's right to choose its own path	NATO	Topical Theme (Unmarked)	respects every nation's right to choose its own path	The theme emphasizes values of autonomy and sovereignty.
NATO membership is a decision first for those countries that wish to join	NATO membership	Topical Theme (Unmarked)	is a decision first for those countries that wish to join	Focuses on the agency of applicant states.
It is then for NATO Allies to consider the application	It	Topical Theme (Unmarked)	is then for NATO Allies to consider the application	Final clause reinforces procedural fairness.

The macro theme "NATO promised Russia it would not enlarge after the Cold War" is a myth to be refuted. Paragraphs 1 and 2 identified and exposed myths and their propagation, including thematic focuses such as myth and disinformation. Paragraphs 3 and 4 provided historical concession and correction, including thematic focus such as records and negotiations. Paragraphs 5 to 8 presented legal and institutional facts, including thematic focuses such as treaties, decisions, and consensus. Paragraphs 9 to 13 clarified misconceptions about "expansion" and asserted NATO's values and principles, including thematic focuses such as NATO, Open door and rights. The thematic progression is linear and constant, starting from myth identifications to contextual correction, to factual clarification, and normative assertion

Table 5 summarizes the types and functions of cohesive devices in NATO's second debunking (DB2), showing how lexical repetition, reference, conjunctions, and structural parallelism contribute to textual cohesion and argumentative clarity.

Table 4. Types and Functions of Cohesive Devices in the Second Debunking

Cohesive Device	Examples	Function
Lexical Cohesion (Repetition & Synonymy)	myth, promise, expansion, treaty, membership, NATO	Repeated lexical items bind the argument semantically around the topic of NATO enlargement.
Reference (Anaphoric)	This, It, such an idea	Maintains textual continuity by referring back to earlier propositions.

Cohesive Device	Examples	Function
Conjunctions & Logical Connectors	and, while, but, since, then	Create logical and temporal relations that make argument progression explicit.
Contrastive and Additive Relations	While… but, and, then	Build argumentative cohesion by showing concession and correction.
Parallel Structures	NATO did not seek... / NATO respects... / NATO membership is...	Reinforces rhythm and coherence through structural repetition.

The cohesive devices identified in Table 5 illustrate how NATO's counter-disinformation texts maintain clarity and coherence. The text maintains high grammatical and lexical cohesion by using conjunctions, referential ties, and consistent lexical repetition (NATO, myth, treaty, expansion), which guarantees that each clause shapes logically and smoothly on the one before it. The text's coherence is demonstrated by a distinct argumentative and thematic progression that reflects the micro-macro thematic structure in SFL.

Thematic and Cohesive Features in the Third Debunking (DB3)

The third debunking (DB3) addresses the myth portraying NATO as an aggressive actor (see Table 5). The constant theme progression, where "NATO" is repeated as the point of departure, emphasizes stability, unity, and a defensive stance. While contrastive theme shifts such as "Russia did" reassign the aggressor role, enhancing rhetorical opposition.

Table 5. Theme–Rheme Patterns in the Third Debunking (DB3)

Clause	Theme	Type of Theme	Rheme	Interpretation
NATO is aggressive	NATO	Topical (Unmarked)	is aggressive	The clause presents the myth by ascribing a negative evaluative attribute "aggressive" to the primary participants "NATO", thereby establishing a macro theme that the next text will contest.
NATO is a defensive alliance	NATO	Unmarked Topical	is a defensive alliance	Establishes the core redefinition: "NATO" remains the topical Theme, but the Rheme negates the myth and reframes NATO's identity as defensive.
Allies work together to deter aggression	Allies	Unmarked Topical	work together to deter aggression	The Theme shifts from "NATO" to "Allies," but maintains thematic continuity (part-whole relation). Emphasizes collective agency.
and to ensure that NATO is prepared to defend all Allies in case of attack	(Implicit Theme: Allies)	Elliptical (Structural)	to ensure that NATO is prepared to defend all Allies in case of attack	Extends previous clause through structural cohesion (ellipsis of subject), reinforcing purpose and unity.
NATO does not seek confrontation	NATO	Unmarked Topical	does not seek confrontation	Contrasts mythic attribute ("aggressive") with peaceful intent — a contrastive Rheme.

Clause	Theme	Type of Theme	Rheme	Interpretation
and poses no threat to Russia, or any other nation	(Implicit Theme: NATO)	Elliptical	poses no threat to Russia, or any other nation	Reinforces message through parallel thematic patterning — "NATO" remains implicit but recoverable.
NATO did not invade Georgia in 2008	NATO	Unmarked Topical	did not invade Georgia in 2008	Begins contrastive pattern with "Russia did." The Theme "NATO" continues the subject continuity.
Russia did	Russia	Marked Topical	did	Shifts topical focus to "Russia" — marks contrastive thematic progression.
NATO did not invade Ukraine in 2014, and again in 2022	NATO	Unmarked Topical	did not invade Ukraine in 2014, and again in 2022	Reiterates contrastive denial.
Russia did	Russia	Marked Topical	did	Closes paragraph with contrastive parallelism, marking Russia as the true aggressor.
NATO made significant efforts over many years to establish a strategic partnership with Russia	NATO	Unmarked Topical	made significant efforts over many years to establish a strategic partnership with Russia	Returns to NATO as the topical Theme, now emphasizing cooperative intent and historical effort.
We established the NATO-Russia Council in 2002	We	Unmarked Topical	established the NATO-Russia Council in 2002	Shifts Theme to "We" — derived Theme from "NATO Allies." Highlights agency and initiative.
and worked together on issues ranging from counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism to submarine rescue and civil emergency planning	(Implicit Theme: We)	Elliptical	worked together on issues ranging from counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism to submarine rescue and civil emergency planning	Extends the cooperative Rheme, supporting NATO's defensive and humanitarian identity.
including during periods of NATO enlargement	(Implicit Theme: We)	Circumstantial (Marked)	during periods of NATO enlargement	Adds temporal detail, demonstrating consistency across contexts.
It was Russia that gradually chipped away at peaceful cooperation	It was Russia	Marked (Topical, contrastive)	that gradually chipped away at peaceful cooperation	A marked Theme with emphatic focus — shifts blame clearly to Russia.
with its pattern of increasingly aggressive behaviour	(Implicit Theme: Russia)	Elliptical	with its pattern of increasingly aggressive behaviour	Expands on cause, linking behaviour to aggression.
from Grozny to Georgia and Aleppo to Ukraine	(Circumstantial Theme)	Marked Circumstantial	—	Adds spatial and historical scope, reinforcing the pattern of aggression.

The macro-theme, *"NATO is aggressive,"* functions as the fallacious claim to be refuted. Throughout the text, unmarked topical Themes dominate, primarily featuring *"NATO," "Allies,"* and *"We"*, maintaining focus on institutional and collective agency.

Contrastive and marked Themes, such as *"Russia did"* and *"It was Russia…"*, serve to redistribute agency and assign the role of aggressor clearly to Russia. These marked Themes establish contrastive thematic progression, emphasizing NATO's defensive rather than offensive stance.

Rhemes describe actions, policies, and historical events. Material Rhemes (e.g., *Allies work together to deter aggression*) highlight NATO's collective defensive measures, while relational Rhemes provide evaluative clarification (e.g., *NATO is a defensive alliance*). Textual cohesion is achieved through lexical repetition (*NATO, Russia, Allies, aggression, defend*), pronoun reference (*we, our, its*), and conjunctions (*and, but, while, including*). Parallel structures and ellipsis (e.g., *"NATO did not… Russia did"*) create rhythm and reinforce contrastive meaning.

Table 6 presents the types and functions of cohesive devices identified in the third debunking text (DB3). The table outlines the cohesive devices used in the third debunking text ("NATO is aggressive") and their functions in maintaining textual unity and argument clarity.

Table 6. Types and Functions of Cohesive Devices in the Third Debunking

Cohesive Type	Example(s)	Function
Lexical cohesion (repetition)	NATO, Russia, Allies, aggression, defend	Maintains topical continuity and contrast between agents.
Reference cohesion	We, its, those, our	Pronoun reference maintains unity and inclusion.
Conjunctions	and, but, while, including	Create logical sequencing (addition, contrast, condition).
Ellipsis and substitution	Repetition of "NATO did not… / Russia did."	Creates rhythm and cohesion by parallel syntactic structure.
Contrastive cohesion	"NATO did not… Russia did."	Reinforces ideological opposition; supports the text's argument coherence.

The table shows that lexical repetition (e.g., NATO, Russia, Allies) and pronouns (we, its, our) create continuity and inclusion. Conjunctions structure logical flow, ellipsis reinforces parallelism, and contrastive pairs ("NATO did not… Russia did") highlight ideological opposition and support the text's argument. In progression type, derived themes (from "NATO" → "We") create cohesion through semantic continuity. Thematic development emphasizes collaboration, not confrontation. In contrastive progression, the focus moves from NATO's cooperative efforts to Russia's aggression, maintaining textual coherence through logical opposition.

Discussion
Discursive Construction of NATO's Defensive Identity in the First Debunking (DB1)
The findings indicate that DB1 relies on a stable thematic structure that foregrounds NATO as the primary point of departure throughout the text. Table 7 summarizes the thematic progression and metafunctional meanings in NATO's first debunking (DB1). It highlights dominant themes, marked/unmarked distributions, and ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions, showing how NATO builds a cohesive, defensive, and authoritative discourse while countering disinformation.

Table 7. Thematic Progression and Metafunctional Meanings in NATO's Defence Discourse

Aspect	Description
Dominant Topical Themes (First Paragraph)	NATO and We both represent the institution, but with different interpersonal tones. "NATO" conveys authority and objectivity; "We" introduces inclusiveness and solidarity among Allies.
Dominant Topical Themes (Second Paragraph)	"NATO," "Our core task," "We" → these maintain an institutional focus while moving toward a collective stance.
Marked Theme (First Paragraph)	The final clause started with "In response to Russia's aggressive actions", it is signaling cause and justification. NATO's action is reframed by this marked theme as reactive and defensive, not aggressive.
Marked Theme (Second Paragraph)	"At the Washington Summit" — provides temporal/locational context, highlighting formal reaffirmation.
Theme Type Distribution (First & Second Paragraph)	3 unmarked (subject-based) + 1 marked (circumstantial).
Thematic Progression Pattern (First Paragraph)	Constant/Derived Theme pattern — NATO → NATO → We → We reflects cohesive development from institutional stance to collective voice.
Thematic Progression Pattern (Second Paragraph)	Derived/Constant Theme pattern — Themes derive from the main entity "NATO" (institutional perspective → task → event → collective responsibility).
Ideational Focus (First Paragraph)	The Themes focus on agency and stance: NATO as a peaceful but prepared actor; Ukraine as a legitimate defender; Russia as an aggressor.
Interpersonal Meaning (First Paragraph)	The shift from NATO to We constructs alignment and solidarity, softening institutional distance and reinforcing unity among member nations.
Textual Meaning (Overall Cohesion) (First Paragraph)	The paragraph's common thread is NATO's defensive position, which begins by defining what NATO is doing, not at war and not a party, followed by the explanation of its actual activities, such as helping Ukraine and improving defense capabilities. This pattern creates an intellectual divide between aggression and self-defense in a legitimate way.
Summary of Message Development (First Paragraph)	Thematic progression moves from denial of aggression → legitimation of support → affirmation of peaceful intent → assertion of preparedness. Together, these Themes shape NATO's identity as a defensive, lawful, and united alliance.
Overall Message Development (Second Paragraph)	The paragraph moves from identity (NATO) to duty (core task), followed by validation (summit decision), and concludes with the commitment (We will continue..). This particular sequence reinforces NATO's position as responsible, cohesive, and proactive.

From the SFL perspective, the recurring theme within the text (NATO – NATO – We – We – NATO – Our Core Task – We) creates a continuous and derivative progression that maintains the readers' attention on NATO's institutional and ethical stance. The rheme constantly offers new detail broadening NATO's definitions, moving beyond "not belligerent" to include "supporting self-defense", "enhancing security", and "protecting democracy". Contextual coherence is provided by the emphasized theme ("At the Washington summit, "Responding to Russia's aggressive action"), which situates NATO's action in a valid international framework.

Discursive Construction of NATO's Legitimacy in the Second Debunking (DB2)

The thematic structure of DB2 positions NATO as the primary epistemic authority through repeated use of institutional Themes. Unmarked Themes such as *NATO's founding treaty* and *Decisions on NATO membership* highlight formal legality and procedural rigor, reinforcing NATO's credibility and objectivity.

Marked Themes provide historical and concessive nuance, signaling transparency in acknowledging early discussions (e.g., Baker and Genscher's hypothetical suggestions) while correcting misconceptions. This enables the text to navigate complex historical claims without undermining NATO's authority. The macro-structural progression follows a linear thematic trajectory:

1) Identification of the Myth

The false claim establishes the topic and sets up the communicative purpose of correction, which is introduced. It functions as the point of departure for the entire discourse

2) Contextualizing and Exposing the Myth

Theme (The myth, while records, but diplomatic negotiations) forms a logical and historical narrative. This section acknowledges early discussion but refutes any promises made. The coherence is found within the concession-correction structure.

3) Legal and Institutional Clarification

Themes like *NATO's founding treaty*, *this*, *no treaty*, *Decisions on membership* shift focus to *institutional legitimacy*. The cohesive use of *treaties*, *provisions*, and *consensus* reinforces NATO's legal authority. → Coherence arises from *factual reinforcement and continuity*.

4) Normative and Ideational Reframing

Themes return to *NATO* as the actor and move toward ideological clarification: *NATO did not seek*, *NATO respects*, *NATO membership is a decision*, *it is then for NATO Allies...*. The pattern presents *NATO* as principled, lawful, and respectful of sovereignty. → Coherence here is *ideological and evaluative*: the narrative reframes "expansion" as "choice".

This sequential thematic progression ensures ideational coherence, presenting NATO's actions as lawful, transparent, and consistent with international norms.

Overall, the text achieves both cohesion and coherence through its tightly organized thematic and rhetorical flow. The title establishes the myth as the macro-theme, as the point of departure for all subsequent information. The first part of the content uses constant and linear thematic progression to expose the myth's origins and manipulative use, the middle part employs institutional Themes (e.g., *NATO's founding treaty, No treaty signed, Decisions on membership*) to provide legal facts, and the final part emphasizes NATO's values and autonomy through repeated unmarked Themes (*NATO, NATO membership, It*).

Lexical cohesion is maintained by the consistent repetition of *NATO*, *myth*, *treaty*, and *membership*, while referential ties (*this, it, such an idea*) and conjunctions (*while, but, then*) create logical connectivity. Thematically and coherently, the text evolves from disinformation exposure → historical clarification → legal validation → normative reaffirmation.

Thus, the entire discourse constructs a coherent, cohesive counter-narrative that reframes NATO not as a promise-breaker or an expansionist power, but as a legitimate, treaty-based alliance acting in accordance with principles of sovereignty, democracy, and voluntary membership. Effective myth debunking discourse is characterized by textual unity and ideological clarity, which are achieved by the thematic organization leading the audience or readers from myth to evidence principle.

Countering Aggression Myths in DB3

The thematic organization of DB3 strategically foregrounds NATO as a defensive actor. The persistent unmarked Themes (*NATO → Allies → NATO → We*) maintain semantic continuity and cohesion, establishing NATO as the central authority in the narrative. Contrastive Themes assign aggression to Russia, creating a clear ideological opposition and reinforcing NATO's non-confrontational identity.

At the macro-discourse level, the text attains coherence through meaning development in three major phases.

1) Deconstruction of the myth

   The first phase is reconstruction of identity in paragraph 1, in which the myth ("NATO is aggressive") is deconstructed. The text delineates NATO's defensive, unified, and non-confrontational identity through a continuous thematic progression (NATO-NATO-Allies-NATO).

2) Presentation of cooperative and historical evidence

   The second phase is the historical and cooperative context in paragraph 2. The text enhances coherence by presenting chronological and institutional evidence of NATO's collaboration with Russia, thereby establishing a logical cause-and-effect relationship.

3) Redistribution of responsibility

   The third is paragraphs 3 and 4 that contain causality and accountability. The text concludes with a contrastive theme (Russia, Putin) that redistributed culpability and bolstered NATO's peaceful principles.

   Therefore, ideational coherence (clarity of events and participants), interpersonal coherence (solidarity among Allies), and textual coherence (predictable, logically ordered progression) were all produced by thematic and cohesive organizations.

   The text "NATO is aggressive" presents a myth that functions as the macro-Theme by showing NATO as the starting point, but labels it as an aggressive organization. The opening statement functions as a framing tool, which the following factual information will prove incorrect. The text uses the recurring theme of "NATO" throughout its clauses while adding the theme "Allies" to create a unified sequence that demonstrates NATO's defensive stance and unified structure. The text shows NATO evolving from an aggressive force to a defensive alliance that protects its members through deterrence. The text achieves better coherence through thematic opposition created by contrastive pairs, which transfer the aggressive attribute from NATO to Russia.

   The second section maintains thematic continuity through semantic derivation, which emphasizes NATO's collective work with other nations. The Rhemes show NATO conducting diplomatic and humanitarian work, which proves its friendly relationship with Russia. The third and fourth sections prove Russia as the origin of the conflict through their introduction of opposing themes, which shift responsibility and power between actors. The text achieves cohesion through its repeated use of main characters (NATO and Russia, and Allies) and its reference chains (we and its and our) and its parallel syntactic structures, which create rhythmic effects and improve argumentative clarity. The text follows a thematic structure that starts with denial before presenting evidence and then establishes causal relationships.

   The text presents NATO as a defensive organization that works with others while showing Russia as the main aggressor throughout the story. The text builds NATO's defensive Alliance identity through its organized Theme and Rheme structure and parallel sentence structure. The text successfully disproved the myth through a logical counter-narrative that bases its argument on historical evidence and diplomatic practices.

CONCLUSION

   This study presented a thorough analysis of NATO's counter-disinformation webpage titled "De-bunking Russian disinformation on NATO" using Systemic Functional Linguistics to uncover systematic linguistic strategies employed by the Alliance to establish epistemic authority and counter Russian information warfare assertions. The micro-level grammatical mechanism of institutional counter-disinformation discourse has been elucidated by this study through analysis of textual metafunctions with a specific focus on thematic structure.

   The finding demonstrated that thematic structure is not mere stylistic variation but also performs crucial ideological work. NATO's pre-dominance as a Topical Theme constructs institutional centrality, a marked theme strategically deployed to build emphasis and explicit

refutation framing. In addition, the thematic progression pattern is particularly constant, with a constant theme and linear progression structure, argumentation, and construction of identity. Language matters profoundly in the context of information warfare because grammatical choices construct epistemic authority in systematic patterns across language metafunctions. This study contributes a textual-metafunction, based SFL framework, showing how institutions build epistemic authority in counter-disinformation discourse through thematic organization and progression. The framework can be applied to other institutions to analyze and design coherent debunking messages that foreground evidence and manage refutation. Practically, it helps strengthen institutional credibility in contested information environments. The present study focused only on thematic analysis and on English language content, excluding potentially significant variations in other language as NATO Communications exists in multiple languages. Comparative analysis across languages could be conducted further to reveal different linguistic strategies in constructing communicative discourse.

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