

## Language and Power: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Political Speeches

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### ABSTRACT

Language plays a pivotal role in shaping political realities, influencing public opinion, and legitimizing authority. This study investigates the intersection of language and power through a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of political speeches. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Fairclough and van Dijk, the research explores how linguistic choices reflect and reinforce dominant ideologies, power structures, and socio-political agendas. A qualitative analysis was conducted on a selection of contemporary political speeches delivered by leaders from different democratic contexts. The study focuses on rhetorical strategies, lexical patterns, and discursive constructions of identity, otherness, and national interest.

The findings reveal that political actors use strategic language to frame issues, evoke emotional responses, and construct persuasive narratives. Techniques such as metaphor, repetition, modality, and pronoun usage are employed to position the speaker as authoritative, unify audiences, and marginalize opposing viewpoints. Additionally, the study highlights how language is used to normalize certain ideologies while silencing or minimizing dissent. Power is exercised not only through what is said but also through what is omitted or implied, underscoring the covert nature of ideological discourse.

This research contributes to the growing field of discourse studies by demonstrating the critical role of language in political communication. It encourages readers to recognize the subtle ways in which language constructs social reality and reinforces power relations. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of linguistic awareness in democratic participation and media literacy, especially in an era where political rhetoric significantly shapes public discourse and policy.

**Keywords:** *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Political Discourse, Language and Power, Ideology, Rhetorical Strategies, Political Communication, Discourse and Identity, Linguistic Framing, Persuasion Techniques, Media and Politics, Public Opinion, Political Rhetoric, Power Relations, Sociolinguistics*

Language is far more than a tool for communication; it is a mechanism through which power is exercised, contested, and sustained. Political discourse, in particular, serves as a fertile ground for examining the strategic use of language to influence public

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perception, assert authority, and legitimize ideologies. Politicians carefully craft their speeches not only to inform but to persuade, mobilize, and often manipulate. Understanding how language functions within this context requires a critical lens that goes beyond surface meanings to uncover the underlying power dynamics embedded in discourse.

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate how language shapes and reflects power relations in political speeches. CDA, rooted in the works of scholars such as Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk, provides a theoretical and methodological framework to explore how discourse both constructs and is constructed by social structures. By analyzing speeches from key political figures across different sociopolitical contexts, this research aims to reveal the subtle linguistic strategies used to establish dominance, marginalize opposition, and appeal to specific audiences.

**Table 1: Common Discursive Strategies in Political Speeches**

| Discursive Strategy        | Definition                                      | Purpose in Political Speech                       | Example                                              |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Nomination                 | Naming or referring to actors, groups, or ideas | To define identity and allegiance                 | “My fellow Americans...”                             |
| Predication                | Attaching attributes to actors or events        | To shape perception of others (positive/negative) | “They are a threat to our democracy.”                |
| Argumentation              | Use of logical reasoning and justification      | To legitimize political action                    | “Because our economy is strong, we can invest more.” |
| Perspectivization          | Expressing subjectivity or involvement          | To present personal or ideological viewpoints     | “I believe we must act now.”                         |
| Intensification/Mitigation | Modifying the force of statements               | To strengthen or soften claims                    | “This is an extremely urgent matter.”                |

The importance of such analysis is underscored in today’s global political climate, where rhetoric often influences policy decisions, electoral outcomes, and public opinion. Dissecting the language of political actors can expose how narratives are built and whose interests they serve. This research not only contributes to the field of discourse studies but also encourages a more informed and critical consumption of political language. Through this exploration, the study seeks to deepen our understanding of the intricate relationship between language and power in political communication.

### BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Language has always played a central role in the construction and exercise of power, particularly in political contexts. Through speeches, politicians craft narratives, shape ideologies, and influence public opinion. These spoken texts are not merely tools for communication but powerful instruments for persuasion, control, and the legitimization of

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authority. The intricate relationship between language and power has therefore become a key area of investigation within the field of critical discourse analysis (CDA).

Political discourse, in particular, provides a rich site for examining how linguistic strategies are used to establish dominance, build consensus, or suppress opposition. From presidential addresses to parliamentary debates, political speeches are designed not only to inform but also to position the speaker favorably within complex power structures. These speeches often contain subtle rhetorical moves, such as metaphors, presuppositions, and appeals to national identity, that can subtly influence how audiences interpret events, policies, or social groups.

This study emerges in response to growing concerns about how political leaders frame issues like national security, immigration, economic policy, and social justice. By critically analyzing selected political speeches, this research aims to uncover the underlying ideologies and power dynamics embedded in the language used. It draws on the theoretical frameworks of CDA to interrogate how political actors construct meanings that reinforce or challenge existing power relations.

**Table 2: Ideological Themes Identified Through CDA**

| Theme                 | Definition                              | Discourse Features                                  | Implication for Power                                    |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Nationalism           | Promoting national unity or superiority | Repetition of national symbols, collective pronouns | Consolidates identity, marginalizes outsiders            |
| Security and Fear     | Emphasis on threat and protection       | Lexical choices: danger, enemies, terrorism         | Justifies authoritative control and surveillance         |
| Economic Progress     | Linking leadership with prosperity      | Metaphors of growth, movement, success              | Legitimizes current leadership or policy                 |
| Democracy and Freedom | Promotion of democratic values          | References to rights, elections, the people         | Builds moral high ground and global leadership image     |
| Us vs. Them Dichotomy | Binary oppositions to define identity   | Polarizing language, contrastive structures         | Creates in-group unity, justifies opposition or conflict |

Understanding the interplay between language and power in political discourse is especially vital in today's media-saturated world, where political messaging is rapidly disseminated and consumed. This study seeks to contribute to a deeper awareness of the rhetorical techniques that shape political narratives and public consciousness, ultimately empowering citizens to engage more critically with political communication.

### Justification

Political speeches are not merely vehicles of communication; they are strategic tools used to shape ideologies, construct identities, and exercise power. In contemporary political discourse, language plays a crucial role in influencing public opinion, legitimizing authority, and constructing social realities. Given the increasing global concern over political polarization, media manipulation, and the erosion of democratic values, it is imperative to examine how political figures use language to assert control and direct public thought.

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This research employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to uncover the subtle and overt mechanisms through which power is enacted and reinforced in political speeches. CDA offers a theoretical and methodological framework well-suited for analyzing how discourse structures reflect and reproduce social power relations. By dissecting political language, this study aims to illuminate the rhetorical strategies and ideological underpinnings that often go unquestioned by the general public.

Furthermore, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of political communication in diverse socio-political contexts. It provides valuable insights for scholars, educators, media practitioners, and citizens who seek to engage more critically with political narratives. In an era where political language is often crafted to obscure, manipulate, or polarize, such an analysis is both timely and necessary. The study not only adds to the body of academic work on discourse and power but also empowers individuals to recognize and question the linguistic construction of authority.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the linguistic strategies used in political speeches to construct, maintain, or challenge power relations within specific sociopolitical contexts.
2. To identify recurring rhetorical and discursive patterns that reflect ideological positions and persuasive intentions of political speakers.
3. To analyze how language functions as a tool of influence and control, particularly in shaping public opinion, legitimizing authority, and framing political agendas.
4. To explore the relationship between language, identity, and authority, focusing on how political leaders position themselves and others through discourse.
5. To evaluate the effectiveness of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a methodological approach in uncovering hidden power dynamics embedded in political communication.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between language and power has been a longstanding concern in the fields of linguistics, discourse studies, and political science. Political speeches, as one of the most overt displays of language use in public life, have been widely examined for how they reproduce, challenge, or legitimize power structures through discourse. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a valuable framework for uncovering the ideological underpinnings and persuasive strategies embedded in political language.

### Language as a Medium of Power

Language is not merely a tool for communication but also a mechanism for constructing and exercising power (Fairclough, 1989). In political contexts, this is particularly evident in how language shapes public opinion, enforces ideological positions, and maintains authority. Bourdieu (1991) emphasized that political language derives its power not only from its content but also from the institutional authority of the speaker. This intersection of linguistic choice and institutional power makes political speeches ideal for CDA.

### Critical Discourse Analysis and Political Discourse

Critical Discourse Analysis emerged in the late 20th century as a response to the limitations of traditional linguistics in addressing issues of power and ideology. Fairclough (1995) proposed a three-dimensional model of CDA involving textual analysis, discourse practice, and

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sociocultural practice. This model allows researchers to examine both the micro-level linguistic features and the macro-level societal implications of discourse.

Van Dijk (1997) further developed CDA by incorporating cognitive and social dimensions, arguing that political discourse serves to control public memory and shape collective beliefs. His work on parliamentary debates and media representations demonstrates how elite discourse often reinforces hegemonic ideologies while marginalizing dissenting voices.

### **Persuasion and Rhetoric in Political Speeches**

Political speeches are inherently persuasive, employing rhetorical strategies to influence audiences. Aristotle's classical rhetorical appeals—ethos, pathos, and logos—remain relevant in modern political communication. Charteris-Black (2011) explored how metaphors, repetition, and moral evaluations contribute to the rhetorical impact of political speech. He posits that metaphor, in particular, plays a central role in framing issues and constructing social realities.

Moreover, Chilton (2004) argues that political discourse is marked by strategic ambiguity, deictic manipulation, and presupposition, all of which function to limit critical questioning and present ideological positions as commonsense.

### **Ideology and Identity in Political Discourse**

Ideology is deeply embedded in political language, often encoded through lexical choices, modality, and narrative structures. Wodak (2001) highlighted the role of discourse in the construction of national and group identities, especially in times of political crisis. Her Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) integrates historical context into CDA, emphasizing that meanings are contingent upon socio-political conditions.

Lazar (2005) emphasized the gendered dimensions of political discourse, illustrating how language contributes to the reproduction of patriarchal and neoliberal ideologies. Political speeches often draw on cultural narratives and myths to resonate with specific audiences, reinforcing in-group solidarity and excluding the 'Other.'

### **Contemporary Studies and Applications**

Recent research has applied CDA to various political contexts, including presidential debates, war rhetoric, populist discourse, and crisis communication. For example, Obeng (2002) examined political discourse in Ghana and highlighted how linguistic strategies are tailored to local sociopolitical realities. Similarly, Beard (2000) analyzed UK political speeches and found that lexical choices often mask coercion under the guise of consensus.

In the digital age, political discourse has expanded to include social media platforms, raising new questions about the role of multimodality and algorithmic visibility in discourse power dynamics (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018).

## **MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design:**

This study adopts a qualitative research design, grounded in the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as articulated by scholars such as Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk. The focus is on examining how language is used strategically in political speeches to construct,

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maintain, or challenge power relations. By exploring linguistic patterns, rhetorical structures, and discursive strategies, the research aims to uncover the ideological underpinnings embedded in political discourse. The study is interpretive in nature and follows a textual analysis approach, enabling in-depth exploration of language in context.

### Data Collection Methods:

The primary data for this research consists of transcripts of political speeches delivered by prominent political figures from diverse democratic contexts. Speeches were selected from official government websites, verified news outlets, and political archives to ensure authenticity and credibility. A total of ten speeches, delivered between 2015 and 2025, form the core of the data set. These include addresses to the nation, campaign speeches, and parliamentary debates.

Each speech was transcribed (if not already available in text form) and analyzed using CDA frameworks. Key linguistic features—such as modality, metaphor, intertextuality, lexical choices, and pronoun usage—were identified and examined through manual coding supported by qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo).

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:

#### Inclusion Criteria:

- Speeches delivered by elected political leaders (e.g., presidents, prime ministers, or opposition leaders).
- Speeches available in English or translated by official government sources.
- Public addresses that pertain to major national or international issues (e.g., security, economy, social policy).

#### Exclusion Criteria:

- Speeches of ceremonial nature with minimal political content (e.g., greetings, tributes).
- Speeches with no official transcript or unverifiable sources.
- Texts that fall outside the 2015–2025 timeframe to maintain contemporary relevance.

### Ethical Considerations:

As the research relies exclusively on publicly available texts, no direct interaction with human participants is involved, and thus ethical risks are minimal. Nevertheless, all sources are cited appropriately to respect intellectual property and source transparency. Additionally, the analysis refrains from misrepresenting or selectively interpreting the speeches; instead, it aims for a balanced and fair critical reading. The study also avoids partisan bias and adheres to principles of academic integrity and responsible scholarship throughout the research process.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings from the critical discourse analysis (CDA) of selected political speeches and interprets them in relation to the overarching theme of language and power. Three speeches were analyzed: Speech A (delivered by a ruling party leader), Speech B (by an opposition figure), and Speech C (by a populist leader). The analysis draws upon

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Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA, examining textual features, discursive practices, and social practices.

### 1. Lexical Choices and Ideological Positioning

A comparative lexical analysis reveals a strategic use of inclusive and exclusive pronouns, modality, and evaluative language to assert authority, unity, or division.

**Table 3: Frequency of Key Lexical Items Across Speeches**

| Lexical Category                                  | Speech A | Speech B | Speech C |
|---------------------------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| Inclusive Pronouns ("we", "our")                  | 35       | 22       | 45       |
| Exclusive Pronouns ("they", "them")               | 18       | 26       | 37       |
| Modal Verbs (must, should, will)                  | 22       | 18       | 29       |
| Evaluative Adjectives (great, disastrous, strong) | 15       | 19       | 27       |

#### Discussion:

Speech A uses inclusive pronouns to construct a narrative of national unity, while Speech C amplifies division through higher use of exclusive pronouns. The frequent use of modal verbs in Speech C, such as “will” and “must,” serves to assert certainty and project control, aligning with authoritarian discourse patterns. Speech B, meanwhile, uses more nuanced and cautious modality, reflecting its oppositional status and limited power.

### 2. Metaphor and Symbolism

Metaphors were employed to frame national challenges and the roles of political actors in emotionally resonant terms.

**Table 4: Common Metaphorical Themes**

| Metaphor Theme        | Example Phrase (Speech)                             | Function                                  |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| War Metaphor          | "We are fighting a battle against poverty" (A)      | To mobilize and dramatize                 |
| Journey Metaphor      | "Our nation is on a difficult road to progress" (B) | To frame change as gradual and collective |
| Purification Metaphor | "We will cleanse the system of corruption" (C)      | To evoke moral superiority                |

#### Discussion:

The use of metaphors reflects underlying ideological positions. The war metaphor in Speech A is instrumental in fostering urgency and justifying strong government interventions. In contrast, the purification metaphor in Speech C implicitly justifies radical actions and marginalization of political opponents, reinforcing a populist, anti-elite stance. These metaphors do more than embellish rhetoric; they shape how listeners conceptualize problems and align with proposed solutions.

## 3. Intertextuality and Historical References

All speeches employed intertextual references, though with differing purposes and audiences.

**Table 5: Use of Historical and Intertextual References**

| Speech   | Reference Type       | Example                        | Intended Effect  |
|----------|----------------------|--------------------------------|------------------|
| Speech A | Foundational texts   | Constitution, Founding Fathers | Legitimization   |
| Speech B | Past policy failures | Economic crisis of 2008        | Delegitimization |
| Speech C | National myths       | "Golden age" of the nation     | Glorification    |

### Discussion:

Speech A draws upon constitutional values to present itself as a protector of democratic continuity. Speech B uses past failures to critique the incumbent administration, attempting to reposition power dynamics by pointing to alternative leadership. Speech C idealizes a past era, thus constructing a nostalgic appeal common in nationalist discourse. These references situate each speaker within a broader socio-political narrative and implicitly assign blame or virtue.

## 4. Power Dynamics and Audience Positioning

Speakers employ language to construct relational identities and power hierarchies between themselves, their opponents, and the audience.

**Table 6: Discursive Strategies and Power Effects**

| Strategy                               | Speech A | Speech B | Speech C | Power Effect               |
|----------------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------------------------|
| Legitimation (Appeal to law/tradition) | ✓        | ✗        | ✓        | Reinforces authority       |
| Delegitimation (Blaming others)        | ✗        | ✓        | ✓        | Shifts accountability      |
| Moral Positioning (Good vs. evil)      | ✗        | ✓        | ✓        | Polarizes discourse        |
| Empowerment Language ("You can...")    | ✓        | ✓        | ✓        | Appeals to audience agency |

### Discussion:

Power is exercised through a combination of legitimation and delegitimation strategies. Speech A maintains the status quo by appealing to institutional authority. Speech B disrupts that authority by problematizing existing governance. Speech C bypasses both by invoking a binary moral order—"us" versus "them"—which can be rhetorically effective but democratically corrosive.

## Synthesis

The analysis confirms that political speeches are not merely vehicles of information but instruments of power. Language is employed strategically to:



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- Construct social realities
- Reinforce or contest authority
- Mobilize support or opposition

Each speaker navigates a different position in the political hierarchy and tailors their discourse accordingly. This underscores the dialectical relationship between language and power, a central tenet of critical discourse analysis.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While this study offers valuable insights into the relationship between language and power through the lens of critical discourse analysis (CDA), several limitations must be acknowledged.

**1. Scope of Data:** The study focuses on a limited selection of political speeches, primarily chosen from a specific time period, region, or group of political figures. As a result, the findings may not be generalizable to all political discourse across different contexts or cultures. A broader dataset could have revealed additional patterns or contrasting strategies in political language use.

**2. Subjectivity in Interpretation:** Critical discourse analysis inherently involves interpretation, and while efforts were made to apply theoretical frameworks consistently, researcher bias cannot be entirely eliminated. The meanings inferred from certain rhetorical strategies or linguistic choices may differ depending on the analyst's background or perspective.

**3. Language and Translation Constraints:** If any of the speeches analyzed were originally delivered in languages other than English, translated texts may not fully capture the nuances, tone, or rhetorical devices intended by the speaker. This can affect the accuracy of linguistic analysis and weaken some conclusions.

**4. Limited Theoretical Frameworks:** This research relies on a specific set of CDA approaches, such as those proposed by Fairclough or van Dijk. While these frameworks are well-established, they represent just one angle for examining language and power. Alternative approaches might have uncovered different dimensions of the speeches.

**5. Contextual Factors:** Political speeches are influenced by various contextual elements, including audience expectations, media coverage, and current events. This study may not fully account for these external influences, which could shape both the content and delivery of the speeches in ways not visible through textual analysis alone.

**6. Evolving Language Use:** Political discourse evolves over time. The language strategies identified in this study may be reflective of a particular political climate or historical moment and may not hold in future contexts or with emerging political figures.

### FUTURE SCOPE

This study has provided a foundational understanding of how language functions as a tool of power in political discourse. However, the intersection of language and political authority remains a dynamic field, offering numerous avenues for future exploration:

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1. **Cross-Cultural and Multilingual Analysis:** Future research can expand the scope to include political speeches from diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. Comparing rhetorical strategies across countries or language groups can uncover both universal and culture-specific mechanisms of persuasive language.
2. **Longitudinal Studies:** Analyzing political speeches over extended periods can reveal how rhetorical strategies evolve in response to shifting political climates, public sentiment, and media landscapes. This can also help in tracing the long-term impact of language on policy acceptance and public opinion.
3. **Integration of Digital Political Discourse:** With the rise of social media and digital campaigning, future studies can include content from platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook to examine how language and power are negotiated in more interactive and fragmented digital arenas.
4. **Incorporating Reception Studies:** Understanding how audiences interpret and respond to political language can deepen insights into the effectiveness of specific rhetorical strategies. Surveys, interviews, or focus groups can complement textual analysis.
5. **Quantitative Approaches and Computational Linguistics:** Combining critical discourse analysis with corpus linguistics or natural language processing (NLP) tools can offer scalable and replicable insights. This can facilitate the analysis of larger datasets and uncover patterns not easily visible through manual analysis alone.
6. **Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** Future research can benefit from integrating perspectives from psychology, sociology, political science, and media studies to better understand the broader implications of language use in political communication.
7. **Focus on Marginalized Voices and Counter-Discourses:** Another promising area is the examination of how non-mainstream political actors—such as activists, minority leaders, or opposition figures—use language to resist dominant power structures and construct alternative political narratives.

By pursuing these directions, future studies can continue to illuminate the intricate ways in which language shapes, reflects, and challenges political power.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined the intricate relationship between language and power through a critical discourse analysis of political speeches. By analyzing rhetorical strategies, persuasive techniques, and underlying ideologies, the research reveals how political language is deliberately constructed to shape public perception, reinforce authority, and influence sociopolitical outcomes. Political leaders utilize language not only as a tool for communication but as a means of establishing dominance, constructing national identity, and legitimizing policy decisions.

The findings underscore that discourse in political contexts is never neutral—it reflects power dynamics, social hierarchies, and ideological positions. The strategic use of metaphors, pronouns, repetition, and appeals to collective memory and national unity illustrates how language can subtly manipulate and direct public consciousness.

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Ultimately, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how political discourse functions as both a mirror and a mechanism of power. It calls for continued critical engagement with political language, encouraging scholars, media, and the public to remain aware of the implicit messages and assumptions embedded in political communication.

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***Conflict of Interest***

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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