

***Analysis of Political Discourse in English:
A Linguistics Case Study Focusing on the
Use of English in Political Speech and Its
Impact on the Audience***

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Abstract

This study delves into the complex interaction of language and politics using tools from Political Discourse Analysis (PDA). Oratory is a potent weapon for creating and delivering rhetoric, appealing to the emotional sensibilities of constituencies, and providing content staked on meaning. Informed by theoretical approaches rooted in critical discourse analysis (CDA) and political linguistics, this work investigates how political actors use speech to construct meaning, lay claim to authority, and negotiate power. Case studies of all-time great speeches Winston Churchill's, Martin Luther King's, John F. Kennedy's, Nelson Mandela's, Ronald Reagan's and Barack Obama's demonstrate how effective rhetorical devices like repetition, inclusive pronouns, metaphors and narratives can be employed. Drawing on examples of these linguistic strategies, the article explores the functions of discourse in reframing political ideologies, constructing a sense of collective identity, and providing solutions to society's problems. The results show that political language does not simply serve as a line of communication but rather describes a dynamic lever of power used to shape reality, justify authority, and inspire action.

Keywords: *Political Discourse Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, Political Speeches, Rhetorical Strategies, Persuasion, Inclusive Pronouns, Metaphors, Storytelling, Power and Language.*

ملخص

تتعمق هذه الدراسة في التفاعل المعقد بين اللغة والسياسة باستخدام أدوات من تحليل الخطاب السياسي (PDA). الخطابة هي سلاح قوي لخلق الخطاب وإيصاله، وجذب الحساسيات العاطفية للدوائر الانتخابية، وتقديم محتوى راسخ على المعنى. مستنيرة من المقاربات النظرية المتجذرة في تحليل الخطاب النقدي (CDA) واللغويات السياسية، يبحث هذا العمل في كيفية استخدام الجهات الفاعلة السياسية للكلام لبناء المعنى، والمطالبة بالسلطة، والتفاوض على السلطة. توضح دراسات الحالة لخطابات ونستون تشرشل العظيمة على الإطلاق، وخطابات ومارتن لوثر كينغ، وجون إف كينيدي، ونيلسون مانديلا، ورونالد ريغان، وباراك أوباما كيف يمكن استخدام الأدوات الخطابية الفعالة مثل التكرار والضمائر الشاملة والاستعارات والروايات. بالاعتماد على أمثلة على هذه الاستراتيجيات اللغوية، يستكشف المقال وظائف الخطاب في إعادة صياغة الأيديولوجيات السياسية، وبناء الشعور بالهوية الجماعية، وتقديم حلول لمشاكل المجتمع. تظهر النتائج أن اللغة السياسية لا تعمل فقط كخط للتواصل، بل تصف رافعة ديناميكية للسلطة تستخدم لتشكيل الواقع وتبرير السلطة وإلهام العمل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تحليل الخطاب السياسي، تحليل الخطاب النقدي، الخطب السياسية، الاستراتيجيات البلاغية، الإقناع، الضمائر الشاملة، الاستعارات، رواية القصص، القوة واللغة.

1. Introduction

Speech and the power of persuasion are among the most essential tools in politics. Through political speeches, ideas and viewpoints are conveyed to the audience. Politics extends beyond governance; it involves a strategic interplay of persuasion, power, and influence, which makes political speeches and rhetorical techniques vital.

Political discourse analysis belongs to the field of critical discourse analysis (CDA) which is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing from both social sciences and linguistics. CDA is not one single or uniform approach; it has a multidisciplinary basis and includes linguistics, semiotics and, discourse analysis [van Dijk, 1993]. From this standpoint, CDA studies the abuse of power, law, wealth and other forms of power, revealing how they distort beliefs and behavior in order to protect the interests of power groups [van Dijk, 1993]. In this sense, language is the instrument that makes political power more available and interpretable for the people [Wodak and Meyer, 2005].

Persuasion and manipulation mix with processes of legitimation especially when people(s) want to impose their will or control others [van Dijk, 1998]. It is important to note that language itself is not inherently powerful; it gains its strength when employed by individuals or groups in positions of authority [Wodak and Meyer, 2005].

Norman Fairclough introduced a three-dimensional framework for analyzing discourse, which includes micro, meso, and macro levels. At the micro-level, the focus is on textual analysis. The meso-level examines the processes of production and consumption of the discourse, while the macro-level involves intertextual and interdiscursive aspects, exploring power relations and dominance between social groups [van Dijk, 1993].

Political discourse analysis (PDA) sheds light on power abuse and dominance that occur through political communication. PDA studies the "discursive conditions and consequences of social and political inequality that result from such domination" [van Dijk, 1993]. As stated, "those groups

who control the most influential discourse also have greater chances to shape the thoughts and actions of others" [van Dijk, 1993].

2. The Politics of Language and the Language of Politics

The term Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) reflects the dual nature of both the concept itself and its analytical framework. According to van Dijk (1997), PDA can either focus on the analysis of political discourse specifically, the speech and communication of politicians in overtly political settings or adopt a critical approach to analyzing discourse in general [van Dijk, 1997]. PDA seeks to understand the characteristics and functions of political discourse while also critiquing the ways discourse reinforces, challenges, or abuses power in modern society. As van Dijk (1997) asserts, PDA must address "genuine and relevant political questions" and align with issues central to political science [van Dijk, 1997].

Chilton (2004) approaches political discourse through a fundamental question: What does the use of language in political contexts reveal about human nature? [Chilton, 2004]. This query under-scores the interconnections between language, politics, culture, and cognition. Chilton's framework examines how political speakers embed authority, evidence, and legitimacy into their communication, enabling them to establish credibility within specific political contexts [Chilton, 2004]. The roots of this perspective can be traced to a linguistic transition from Chomsky's generative framework to Halliday's systemic functional linguistics and social semiotics [Halliday, 1978, Halliday, 1994].

Okulska and Cap (2010) favor the term analysis of political discourse (APD), defining it as the socially-oriented study of political action and its connection to public discourse and social institutions [Okulska and Cap, 2010]. Their work aligns with the domain of Political Linguistics (PL), which studies language practices

predominantly within political contexts [Okulska and Cap, 2010]. Blommaert (1997) notes that Political Linguistics emerged amid a renewed focus on the dynamic relationship between language and politics, which subsequently influenced critical linguistics, CDA, language ideologies, and broader socio-linguistic studies on nationalism, policy, and planning [Blommaert, 1997].

This “political turn” in linguistics paralleled a linguistic turn in political science. Scholars began recognizing the linguistic, discursive, and symbolic dimensions of politics [Bell, 1975]. Bell (1975, 1988) emphasized that core political concepts power, influence, and authority are inherently tied to language as a mode of interaction for achieving political outcomes [Bell, 1975, Bell, 1988]. Hudson (1978) reinforced this view, arguing that language is a strategic resource politicians use to acquire and maintain power. Political statements, therefore, do not merely reflect objective truths but function as tools for alliance-building, creating divisions, and promoting national unity [Hudson, 1978].

Murray Edelman (1964, 1971, 1977, 1988) highlighted the symbolic nature of politics, arguing that meaning-making is central to political processes. Edelman insisted that “political language is political reality” because public perceptions of events, leaders, or policies are mediated through language [Edelman, 1964, Edelman, 1988]. Michael Shapiro (1981, 1984, 1988) similarly critiqued political science for its adherence to objectivity, urging analysts to examine how discursive practices shape perceptions and construct political realities [Shapiro, 1981, Shapiro, 1988].

2.1. Defining the Political in PDA

To understand how PDA is conducted and its object of study, it is essential to clarify conceptions of politics and political discourse. Wodak and de Cilia (2006) note that politics involves the actions of professional politicians, institutions, and citizens engaging in struggles over power and cooperation to achieve societal goals [Wodak and de Cilia, 2006]. Chilton (2004) expands on this, identifying micro-level politics, which occur in interpersonal and group dynamics, and macro-level politics, which manifest in institutionalized conflicts and legal frameworks [Chilton, 2004].

Van Dijk (1997) adopts a narrower definition, focusing on discourse produced by “central players in the polity” [van Dijk, 1997]. Others, however, advocate for a broader interpretation. Fairclough (2006) views political discourse as extending beyond formal institutions into grassroots movements and everyday communication, noting that “everyday language” is often infused with political meaning [Fairclough, 2006]. Similarly, Lemke (1995) contends that all acts of

meaning-making are inherently political [[Lemke, 1995](#)].

Chilton and Schaffner (1997) conceptualize politics as “potentially political,” arguing that politicization occurs when social actors, behaviors, or institutions are rendered political through functions such as coercion, resistance, legitimation, and dissimulation [[Chilton and Schaffner, 1997](#)]. Muntigl (2002) supports this view, emphasizing that PDA should examine “alternative forms of doing politics,” including emerging sub-political practices that challenge traditional forms of political action [[Muntigl, 2002](#)].

In conclusion, PDA provides a robust framework for analyzing how discourse shapes and is shaped by power dynamics. It recognizes that language is not merely a neutral vehicle for communication but a strategic tool through which political actors construct meaning, assert authority, and negotiate power in both institutional and everyday contexts.

3. Critical Discourse Analysis as Political Discourse Assessment

Aspects of a critical examination of political discourse are similarly in line with the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The convergent nature of CTA and CDA highlights the need to scrutinize political discourse, as CDA is itself a politically charged process/effect. As argued by van Dijk (1997), PDA includes not just the scrutiny of political discourse, i.e., the speech and actions of political actors, but also a political approach to discourse analysis, i.e., a critique of the power, dominance, and difference structures that permeate discourse [[van Dijk, 1997](#)]. He proposes a “critical-political discourse analysis”, emphasizing the importance of examining how power, abuse, or domination is exercised and enforced through the structural and interpretative elements of discourse [[van Dijk, 1997](#)].

The scope of PDA goes to the extent to which political discourse is defined. One can define this very narrowly as just the domain of the formal institutions, and political actors or much more inclusively, as Muntigl’s (2002) inclusive model does, where discourse is perceived as involved in multiplicities of power, cooption, and resistance [[Muntigl, 2002](#)]. This perspective includes all forms of discourse, which is inherently political as it shapes both meaning and material resources.

3.1. Foundational Contributions of CDA

CDAs are typically credited back to the foundational formulations of CDA, which can be traced back to the work of Fairclough (1985) and van Dijk (1990). In a micro-level, Fairclough called for analysts to link discourse interactions to the macro-focus of social and political

conditions, including power relations embedded in institutions and social structures [Fairclough, 1985]. CDA, he argued, should show how ideology is naturalized in discourse, what the social determinants and social consequences of such ideologies are, because the participants themselves often do not see these but are only trained to see the noticeable [Fairclough, 1985].

Van Dijk (1990) on the other hand, criticized mainstream discourse analysis to the neglect of important social and political issues in theoretical abstractions [van Dijk, 1990]. In the context of this new paradigm, [van Dijk, 1990] urged us to address power, inequality, and domination as it relates to discourse, and to that end, he presented new exploratory frameworks to examine how discourse reflects and shapes the symbiotic processes of society and culture. For van Dijk, CDA should do the work of deepening our understanding of social problems as well as contributing to tackling and solving problems such as discrimination and power abuse [van Dijk, 1990]. His multi-disciplinary approach emphasized the discursive mediation of social reproduction, reconceptualizing the link between discourse and society.

4. Case Study: The Use of Linguistic Strategies in Political Speeches and Their Impact on the Audience

Political speeches are critical medium that politicians use to communicate their ideas, influence public opinion, and mobilize action. Taking place in highly politicized venues, their rhetorical force hinges on linguistic tactics that stimulate emotional and intellectual dimensions of audience engagement, inciting strong responses to augment perceptions of communal reality. The study identifies key aspects of political speeches such as rhetoric, inclusion, repetition, pathos and metaphors whilst referencing examples of political speeches that have been influential or iconic.

4.1. Rhetorical Devices and Persuasion

From rhetorical devices to group think, we love a good (or bad) argument. Devices like anaphora (the repetition of phrases), parallelism and antithesis help politicians structure their arguments in a way that is both memorable and makes for good rhythm. For example, Winston Churchill's "We shall fight on the beaches" speech (1940) effectively leveraged repetition to empower his listeners with resilience and resolution during World War II [Churchill, 1940]. In a similar fashion, politicians use ethos, pathos, and logos three classical rhetorical appeals to establish credibility, inspire emotion, and provide logical reasoning. Example of

pathos: Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" (1963) speech is a classic example of pathos, as King uses evocative language and vivid imagery to inspire hope and unity in the civil rights movement. But such speeches also reflect the strength of rhetorical devices in communicating political values and striking an emotional chord with the audience [King Jr., 1963].

4.2. Inclusive Pronouns and Collective Identity

The frequent invocation of inclusive pronouns especially "we," "us" and "our" is one of the signatures of political speech. First person pronoun creates a sense of unity and common purpose between speaker and listeners. By including listeners in the narrative, politicians create a bond that transcends individual identity and focuses on collective goals.

For example, in John F. Kennedy's inaugural address (1961), the line "Ask not what your country can do for you ask what you can do for your country" invoked a sense of responsibility and shared civic duty. Similarly, the phrase "We the People" in the U.S. Constitution has historically symbolized collective ownership and democratic principles. Inclusive language not only unifies but also motivates audiences to take collective action [British Psychological Society, 2022].

4.3. Repetition for Emphasis and Recall

Repetition is a widely recognized rhetorical strategy in political speeches. By repeating key phrases or ideas, politicians reinforce their message, making it easier for the audience to remember and internalize. Repetition also adds rhythm to speech, enhancing its emotional impact and resonance. For example, Barack Obama's phrase "Yes we can" during his 2008 campaign speeches underscored themes of hope and empowerment [Obama, 2008]. Similarly, Margaret Thatcher's "The lady's not for turning" (1980) repeated firm assertions to signal her unyielding stance on political policies [Thatcher, 1980]. Repetition allows politicians to solidify their core message, emphasizing themes that resonate with the audience while creating a memorable, rallying cry.

4.4. Emotional Appeals and Storytelling

Political speeches often integrate emotional appeals and narrative storytelling to establish connections with the audience. Stories humanize politicians and allow audiences to relate to broader issues on a personal level. Effective storytelling often references historical events, cultural values, or personal anecdotes that reflect the

struggles and aspirations of the people.

For instance, Ronald Reagan's "Shining City on a Hill" metaphor, notably referenced in his 1989 Farewell Address, painted a hopeful image of America as a beacon of opportunity and progress. By invoking national pride and optimism, Reagan engaged his audience emotionally while articulating his vision for the future [Reagan, 1989].

Likewise, the speeches of Nelson Mandela, for example his address after being released from prison in 1990, were filled with descriptions of his personal history of incarceration which delivered perseverance, resilience and moral authority which engendered trust and admiration [Mandela, 1990].

These are not real-life incidents, but how political speeches are made and are having their effects on the minds of the people through storytelling and emotional appeals to their needs, identity, and purpose.

4.5. Metaphors and Symbolism

Metaphors are successfully used in political speech, as they convey complex ideas in imaginative and relatable way. Metaphors help reduce bend, if you will abstract ideas to elements that a general audience can grasp and relate to a political vision.

For example, King's metaphor of a "bad check" in his "I Have a Dream" speech represented the unrealized promise of equality for African Americans. Likewise, politicians frequently evoke imagery of "bridges," "barriers" and "storms" when speaking about challenges and the paths to solutions to inspire action. Also, symbolism is crucial since cultural values and collective meanings are important to the audience [Charteris-Black, 2005, Lenard-Cosic, 2014].

4.6. Audience Impact and Reception

The strength of these linguistic strategies consists of the way they involve the audience on intellectual, emotional and psychological levels. Political speeches are usually designed for specific purposes:

- To spark hope in times of uncertainty (e.g., Churchill's wartime speeches).*
- To unify disparate groups with "inclusive" (or rallying) language (e.g., Obama's campaign speeches).*
- To persuade and mobilize citizens to take action (e.g., Kennedy's inaugural address).*

Audience reception is determined by cultural, historical, and situational contexts, in addition to the speaker's ability to relate the message at hand to the audience's values and aspirations. Effective speeches create a collective sense of self and a common goal, shaping public opinion and political action.

5. Conclusion

Into the analysis of political discourse: First you develop the structured analysis of political discourse, how we learn from structured analysis of political discourse and then how political discourse shapes collective thought or collective, shared policies. The Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) articulated previously accentuates the maneuvers of politicians using linguistic features like rhetorical devices, inclusive pronouns, repetition, emotional appeals, and metaphors to make a bond with their audience, convince them, and exercise dominion. These techniques show that political discourse is not neutral but calculated to obtain a certain ideological, social, and political end.

The fact that PDA serves both as a framework to analyse political speech and as a tool to scrutinize potential abuses of power bestows significance to it within the fields of linguistics. Indeed, Scholars like van Dijk, Chilton and Fairclough have carried similar agendas forward namely popularizing the notion of discourse as a reflection of effective power structures within broader social systems, arguing that political discourse serves not only to legitimize views but also to act as a vehicle of power and resistance. This study also elucidates those political speeches are not only communicative acts but also robust means of mobilizing citizens, creating unity and addressing collective struggles.

My case study examined classic speeches by the likes of Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, Nelson Mandela, Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama. Political oratory is both unique and universal, and these speeches show its wide geographical and temporal range. Devices like repetition, storytelling and symbolism allow leaders to distill complex ideas, motivate action and create emotional resonance with their audiences.

Political discourse is deeply embedded in the both the practice of politics and the study of language. It speaks to the relationship between power and society through persuasion, showcasing the potential of language to frame perceptions, influence decisions, and inspire social transformation. Insert for Date: Future studies on political discourse should take into account how communication mediums will change with the integration of social media how digital platforms completely reformulates

political rhetoric and how audiences receive messages in new ways. At the end of the day, further exploration of political language is an important part of overcoming political power processes and understanding the role of dialogue in shaping present-day reality.

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