

Critical Discourse Analysis of Legitimacy in Iraqi Political Discourse (2020–2022)

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تحليل الخطاب النقدي للشرعية في الخطاب السياسي العراقي (2020-2022)

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Abstract

This research aimed to analyze Iraqi political discourse during the period 2020-2022 by examining three speeches by Iraqi politicians. The current research problem lies in studying Iraqi political discourse using the historical-discourse method to identify the linguistic and contextual dimensions of legitimacy. The historical-discourse approach (HAD) was used for analyzing political discourse during the period 2020-2022. Three official discourses within different political contexts were analyzed using the strategies of the historical-discourse approach, which are; nomination, predication, argumentation and perspectivization. The findings confirmed that legitimacy within Iraqi political discourse during the period 2020-2022 was not static; rather, it was shaped through language within different contexts, including historical, political, and social ones. The research also confirmed that highlighting risks in Iraqi political discourse reinforced the moral and political claims of those in power, and emphasized to the public the inevitability and indispensability of decisions. The results also highlighted the importance of the historical-discourse approach (HAD) in deconstructing existing ideologies within language, as it opens up numerous avenues for studying digital political discourse and discourses related to protests, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of power, legitimacy, and resistance within the current political crisis. The research recommended with studying the relationship between legitimacy and digital discourse in the Iraqi context, and employing language in political discourse without excluding society in a way that strengthens national cohesion and supports institutional legitimacy.

Key words: Critical Discourse Analysis, Legitimacy, Political, Iraq, 2020–2022

المخلص:

هدف البحث إلى تحليل الخطاب السياسي العراقي خلال الفترة ٢٠٢٠-٢٠٢٢ من خلال دراسة ثلاثة خطابات لسياسيين عراقيين. تكمن مشكلة البحث الحالية في دراسة الخطاب السياسي العراقي باستخدام المنهج التاريخي الخطابى لتحديد الأبعاد اللغوية والسياقية للشرعية. تم استخدام المنهج التاريخي الخطابى لتحليل الخطاب السياسي خلال الفترة ٢٠٢٠-٢٠٢٢. وتم تحليل ثلاثة خطابات رسمية ضمن سياقات سياسية مختلفة باستخدام استراتيجيات المنهج التاريخي الخطابى، وهي: التسمية، والتنبؤ، والمحاكاة، والتفسير المنظوري. أكدت النتائج أن الشرعية في الخطاب السياسي العراقي خلال الفترة ٢٠٢٠-٢٠٢٢ لم تكن ثابتة، بل تشكلت من خلال اللغة ضمن سياقات مختلفة، بما في ذلك السياقات التاريخية والسياسية والاجتماعية. أكدت الدراسة كذلك أن تسليط الضوء على المخاطر في الخطاب السياسي العراقي يعزز المزايم الأخلاقية والسياسية للسلطة، ويؤكد للجمهور حتمية القرارات وضرورتها. كما أبرزت النتائج أهمية منهج الخطاب التاريخي في تفكيك الأيديولوجيات القائمة في اللغة، إذ يفتح هذا المنهج آفاقاً عديدة لدراسة الخطاب السياسي الرقمي والخطابات المتعلقة بالاحتجاجات، مما يساهم في فهم أعمق لديناميات السلطة والشرعية والمقاومة في ظل الأزمة السياسية الراهنة. وأوصى البحث بدراسة العلاقة بين الشرعية والخطاب الرقمي في السياق العراقي، واستخدام اللغة في الخطاب السياسي دون استبعاد المجتمع بطريقة تعزز التماسك الوطني وتدعم الشرعية المؤسسية. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** تحليل الخطاب النقدي، الشرعية، السياسة، العراق، ٢٠٢٠-٢٠٢٢

1. Introduction

In contemporary political studies, critical discourse analysis has gained significant importance, particularly within societies experiencing political transformations and constantly changing events, or those facing conflicts within their governing systems and recurring legitimacy crises. This certainly applies on the Iraqi context during the period 2020-2022, which witnessed numerous political and social transformations and changes.

Kadhim et al. (2022) and FlahHassan and Mahdi (2025) indicated that Iraq during the period 2020-2022 experienced widespread popular protests linked to legitimacy changes, the holding of early elections as a response to these crises, and crises related to government formation. These various events inevitably impacted the linguistic structure of political discourse, and legitimacy emerged as a central theme in various political discourses. Economides (2024) emphasized that the issue of legitimacy is not limited to legal and institutional aspects; rather, it has become a linguistic, cultural, and social issue that can be shaped through discourse and is capable of producing and reshaping power.

Within this context, the historical-discourse approach (HDA) has emerged as a suitable tool for analyzing the construction of legitimacy within Iraqi political discourse. HDA allows for the contextualization of language within its historical, political, and social frameworks. HDA focuses on employing analytical strategies, including nomination, prediction, argumentation, perspective, and intensification/mitigation (Liu, 2025). In this regard; this research utilizes the DHA within the framework of critical discourse analysis, as it is considered one of the most suitable approaches for analyzing political legitimacy within its linguistic, historical, and social contexts. This approach reveals legitimization strategies in political discourse by providing appropriate analytical tools. It also connects political texts within the prevailing socio-political context, which applies to the nature of political discourse in Iraq during the period 2020–2022.

Accordingly, this research aims to analyze Iraqi political discourse during the period 2020–2022 using historical discourse analysis. Three political speeches by Iraqi politicians will be analyzed. The objective of this analysis is to identify and interpret the discursive strategies employed by these politicians within their respective socio-political contexts. This research employs discourse analysis as a crucial dynamic tool for understanding, analyzing, and interpreting historical events, particularly in countries undergoing political transformations and constantly changing circumstances, such as Iraq.

1.1 Research problem

Despite the importance of studying political discourses related to power and legitimacy, previous studies examining political discourses that analyzed the political situation in Iraq during the period 2020-2022 are limited. These studies did not clarify how legitimacy is constructed or eroded, and they suffered from a gap in explaining the rhetorical strategies used in political discourses to justify power.

Such gaps are considered important and need to be analyzed, because they hinder researchers and policymakers from providing dynamic analyses and interpretations related to power and legitimacy, specifically within the Iraqi context in the period 2020-2022. It also reduces the opportunities for using political discourse appropriately to promote national cohesion and consolidate political stability. Therefore, the current research problem lies in studying Iraqi political discourse using the historical-discourse method to identify the linguistic and contextual dimensions of legitimacy.

1.2 Research importance

From an academic level, this research contributes to filling the knowledge gap related to the use of the historical-discourse method in studying Iraqi political discourse. Furthermore, the current research allows for linking linguistic tools with the Iraqi social and political context.

On a political level, this research helps policymakers and media professionals understand the discourse strategies used to bolster or challenge legitimacy, enabling the effective use of political discourse. It also clarifies how language is used to generate power, thereby supporting national stability.

Furthermore, this research encourages future researchers to conduct further studies within the current context, including those related to digital discourse and social media in the Iraqi context, and their connection to legitimacy transformations.

2. Literature review

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis: Concept and Development

Critical discourse analysis examines the dialectical relationship between language, society, and power (Naait & Alshemmary, 2024). It focuses on the social analysis within linguistic studies and contributes to the critical analysis of discourse, clarifying the relationship between discourse elements and social elements as a whole,

including power relations, ideological relations, inter-institutional relations, and the formation of social identities (Bloor & Bloor, 2007; Muhammad & Al-Bajjari, 2025). Therefore, critical discourse analysis can be described as a normative and interpretive critique that describes and evaluates facts, determining their compatibility with the various values considered fundamental to just societies. Mnaathar et al. (2024) argued that critical discourse analysis views language as a neutral means of communication and a social practice used to produce meaning, clarify power relations, and generate ideologies within social and political contexts.

Critical discourse analysis depends on a fundamental pillar, which includes that discourse reflects social reality and, to some extent, contributes to shaping this reality (Hassan, 2025). This means that political discourse contributes to the construction of legitimizing perceptions that express identity and power through the selection of specific linguistic concepts.

Critical discourse analysis emerged in the late 20th century, influenced by several intellectual currents, including critical theories, social linguistics, social psychology, and political psychology (Ahmed, 2022). Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak are among the most prominent researchers who contributed to establishing this approach. They emphasized that critical discourse analysis necessarily reveals the mechanisms of power representation, the representation of hegemony, the ways in which political practices are legitimized, and the relationship between language and historical, social, and political contexts (Tenorio, 2011).

2.2 The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)

Ruth Wodak is considered the developer of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), which is one of the most prominent models of critical discourse analysis (Liu, 2025). DHA connects language with historical, social, and political contexts, focusing on analyzing political discourse within the context in which it was produced. DHA is based on the fundamental principle that political discourse cannot be properly understood without understanding its accompanying historical circumstances, analyzing the social and political events that influenced it, and studying the surrounding media and institutional interactions.

DHA possesses several characteristics that make it the most suitable for studying legitimacy within political discourse, including its focus on the ideological dimension, its multi-layered nature, its connection between the text and its historical context, and its analytical flexibility. Datondji and Amousou (2019) argued that the analytical flexibility of DHA allows for the use of linguistic tools appropriate to the nature of the discourse under study.

Generally, the historical-discursive approach relies on a set of analytical strategies used to uncover the construction of meaning within political discourse. These strategies include (Reisigl and Wodak, 2017):

1. The nomination strategy, which focuses on clarifying how social and political actors are named within political discourse, including the use of terms such as 'the people', 'the demonstrators', 'the opponents', and others.
2. The prediction strategy, which aims to clarify the qualities and attributes ascribed to social actors, whether positive or negative. This strategy contributes to providing a moral and political evaluation of the parties addressed within the political discourse.
3. The Argumentation strategy, which involves justifying political positions and decisions by relying on the constitution and laws, popular support, and national interest. This strategy reveals what are known as 'Topia of Legitimacy', such as the Topos of Necessity, the Topos of Responsibility, and the Topos of Danger.
4. The Perspectivization strategy, which involves determining the angle from which a political event is presented, such as whether it is a speech of solidarity with the people, a defensive speech against criticism, or an official, authoritarian, and dominant speech.
5. The Intensification/Mitigation strategy, which is used to strengthen or weaken political discourse through the use of different terms, such as emphatic language, softening language, and others.

٢.3 Legitimacy within the Framework of the Historical-Discourse Methodology

Legitimacy is considered one of the central concepts in political science, expressing the level of acceptance of the political system or ruling authority (Al-Hilali, 2023; Economides, 2024). According to critical discourse analysis, legitimacy is considered a discursive linguistic construct produced through language and discursive practices (Vaara et al., 2024).

The historical-discursive approach views legitimacy as a discursive construct produced through language. Within political discourse, legitimacy represents the political entity, considered the primary representative of the people, and it links political decisions to national and moral values. Furthermore, legitimacy within political discourse invokes precedents and historical events (Economides, 2024).

2.2 Related Previous Studies

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in analyzing political discourse from a critical perspective, particularly within contexts experiencing various transformations in political and legal aspects. Muhammad & Al-Bajjari (2025) analyzed a selection of Iraqi political speeches by Abdul Rahim Al-Shammari, Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani, and Jalal Talabani. The analysis focused on exploring the relationship between power, solidarity, and ideology within political discourse. The study employed three models, including Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model (1989), Halliday and Matthiessen's Transitivity System (2014), and Quirk et al.'s Modality framework (1985). The analysis highlighted how language is used to assert power and foster popular solidarity within a specific cultural and social context. The results confirmed that these speeches used emotionally charged phrases and words to promote solidarity, and they employed plural pronouns to emphasize collective responsibility, such as 'we' and 'our', reinforcing the idea of shared identity. These speeches also reinforced the emphasis on justice, legitimacy, and historical legitimacy. The study further confirmed that Iraqi political speeches attempt to blend solidarity as a rhetorical tool and an ideological tool to legitimize power in a way that contributes to strengthening social cohesion.

Mnaathar et al. (2024) analyzed presidential political discourse in post-conflict Iraq, confirming that it became more inclusive after initially focusing solely on security and stability. This new discourse attempted to link legitimate governance with reform within social, political, and cultural contexts. The study also confirms that the shift in rhetorical strategies reinforces the concept of legitimacy and highlights its fundamental reformist role after 2020. Furthermore, the findings confirm the tendency of political discourse to employ argumentation strategies to justify political decisions made during times of crisis.

Furthermore, Ahmed's (2022) study focused on analyzing political discourse in Iraqi political speeches within a linguistic context, employing critical discourse analysis tools to clarify the linguistic functions used by politicians in their speeches and to determine how they deal with interactive rules. The study emphasized that politicians carefully define and select their linguistic terms, ensuring they choose vocabulary and structures that lend legitimacy to their speeches within the linguistic context.

Al Fraij's study (2025) employed a pragmatic analysis to clarify the relationship between language and power in Iraqi media. The findings confirmed that political messages incorporate numerous linguistic concepts that are necessarily used to garner support and shape positive public perceptions of the political reality, including concepts related to legitimacy and reform. Naait & Alshemmary's study (2024) compared Iraqi political discourse with American political discourse. This study emphasized the use of legal language in Iraqi political discourse to formalize and institutionalize power, thereby contributing to the legitimacy of political decisions. This implies that the use of law in discourse is not limited to regulatory purposes; rather, it can be used as a rhetorical tool to enhance social acceptance.

Therefore, these various studies confirm that Iraqi political discourse is a crucial area for critical analysis. Language and ideology intersect within the political context to produce different forms of legitimacy, whether related to legal, ethical, security, reformist, popular, or other aspects.

3. Research Methodology

The historical-discourse approach (HAD) is considered the most suitable methodology for analyzing political discourse during the period 2020-2022, which is considered one of the most politically sensitive periods in modern Iraqi political history. This period witnessed numerous political events, including popular protests, early elections, crises related to government formation, and debates surrounding the legitimacy of political elites.

The historical-discourse approach provides a suitable analytical framework that reflects how political language is used to produce legitimacy within the complex Iraqi historical and political context. The current analysis will target three official discourses within different political contexts: crisis, international legitimacy, and confronting protests. These discourses will be analyzed using the strategies of the historical-discourse approach, which are; nomination, predication, argumentation and perspectivization.

It is worth noting that although the current research relies on the historical-discourse approach; however, it also seeks to achieve integration with other models within critical discourse analysis without compromising the analytical centrality of DHA, including Norman Fairclough's model, with regard to linking discourse to social practice and institutional context, and Teun van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach model, particularly in analyzing the polarization between 'our' and 'them' and ideological representations.

4. Analysis and result

Three official discourses within different political contexts will be analyzed in the following parts. These discourses will be analyzed using the strategies of the historical-discourse approach, which are; nomination, predication, argumentation and perspectivization as mentioned previously.

4.1 The first discourse: The discourse of the state and legal legitimacy

Speaker: Mustafa Al-Kadhimi (2020):

'The state must be stronger than any armed group, and the law must apply to everyone without exception'

- **Strategy of Nomination**

It is noticeable in the speech that the central actor is implicitly named the 'state', a symbol denoting supreme authority. In contrast, other actors are diminished and marginalized by the use of the term 'armed groups', which is a general description devoid of any specificity. The choice of this particular linguistic structure reflects the stripping of opponents of any political legitimacy.

- **Strategy of Predication**

The state is described as 'stronger', while armed groups are defined as a threat to the regime. Here, the speech attempts to project a positive image of the self, represented by the state, and a negative image of the other, represented by armed groups.

- **Strategy of Argumentation**

The Topos of Law is employed by asserting that law is the foundation of the state, which necessarily implies that the state is the sole source of legitimacy.

- **Strategy of Perspectivization**

It is evident that the speech is presented from an authoritarian perspective that emphasizes the legitimacy of the government. This legitimacy is institutional, based on the monopoly of legitimate violence.

4.2 The second discourse: The discourse of popular legitimacy

Speaker: Barham Salih (2021):

'The Iraqi people have clearly expressed their will, and respecting that will is the foundation of any legitimate political process'

- **Strategy of Nomination**

The central actor here is described as 'the Iraqi people', a description that elevates the people and establishes them as the ultimate source of legitimacy.

- **Strategy of Predication**

The people are described as having 'clearly expressed their will', emphasizing the rational awareness inherent in the popular will.

- **Strategy of Argumentation**

The Topos of Democracy is employed by stressing the necessity of respecting the people when they express their will, and that violating this expression signifies a lack of legitimacy.

- **Strategy of Perspectivization**

The discourse presents the language of moral mediation between competing political forces, thus granting a form of popular democratic legitimacy that alleviates the pressure on political actors.

4.3 The third discourse: The discourse of crisis and justification

Speaker: Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani (2022):

'Our decisions are driven by the urgent need to protect stability and prevent further chaos'

- **Strategy of Nomination**

The use of the plural pronoun 'our' indicates a lack of reliance on the individual element, instead emphasizing the integration of the government and the state.

- **Strategy of Predication**

The decisions were described as 'urgent need' and 'protection', lending them a security-oriented and justificatory character.

- **Strategy of Argumentation**

The Topos of Necessity were employed, clarifying that the danger justifies taking exceptional decisions, even if these decisions are controversial.

- **Strategy of Perspectivization**

The use of words that reinforce legitimacy, such as 'urgent' and 'further chaos'. Thus, legitimacy can be described as a security and preventative measure reflecting the surrounding danger.

5. Discission

An analysis of the three discourses within the DHA strategy reveals that these discourses employ this strategy with considerable flexibility to establish legitimacy through law, popular support, security, and morality. It also becomes clear that legitimacy is not a secondary concept; rather, it is linguistically constructed according to the prevailing political context and the crisis at hand. Furthermore, the analysis of the three Iraqi political discourses reveals that legitimacy has taken on numerous forms depending on the context during the period (2020-2022). One of these forms is legal and institutional legitimacy, where the first discourse targeted the state and the law, emphasizing that the law applies to everyone. This aligns with the findings of Naait & Alshemmery's (2024) regarding the use of legal language to bolster legitimacy. This finding also supports Muhammad & Al-Bajjari's (2025) study, which emphasized that language and affiliation are fundamental elements that solidify legitimacy. There is a clear relationship between cultural and ideological legitimacy within Iraqi political discourse, where legitimacy is constructed through the connection between political identity, national values, and sacrifices that express shared collective solidarity (Muhammad & Al-Bajjari). The second discourse highlighted popular and democratic legitimacy, emphasizing that the will of the people determines legitimacy. This conclusion aligns with the study by Mnaathar et al. (2024), which confirmed that Iraqi discourses have undergone a clear shift, focusing on reforms. This strengthens the relationship between legitimacy and popular approval, and underscores that legitimacy is not limited to traditional authority alone. Mnaathar et al. (2024) affirmed that language is employed as a means to both enshrine and, at times, redefine legitimacy. Presidential political speeches have shifted from those based on national power to reformist discourses that emphasize the necessity of building legitimacy. In the third discourse, the security and preventative moral legitimacy become clear, highlighting the use of the imperative of necessity to justify security decisions. This aligns with Al-Fraij's (2025) emphasis on the crucial role of language and media in constructing legitimacy during crises. It also justifies the importance of language in shaping moral and political legitimacy. Controlling media narratives contributes to legitimacy construction by regulating concepts related to security, stability, and the overall public interest (Al-Fraij, 2025). This is necessarily linked to the strategy of Intensification/Mitigation employed in media and political discourse, which primarily aims to reproduce legitimacy.

6. Conclusion

Three official discourses within different political contexts were analyzed using the strategies of the historical-discourse approach, which are; nomination, predication, argumentation and perspectivization as mentioned previously. The findings confirmed that legitimacy within Iraqi political discourse during the period 2020-2022 was not static; rather, it was shaped through language within different contexts, including historical, political, and social ones. Political actors relied on a range of rhetorical strategies to build, defend, or strip legitimacy from their opponents when threatened. Furthermore, the study confirmed that highlighting risks in Iraqi political discourse reinforced the moral and political claims of those in power, and emphasized to the public the inevitability and indispensability of decisions. The results also highlighted the importance of the historical-discourse approach (HAD) in deconstructing existing ideologies within language, as it opens up numerous avenues for studying digital political discourse and discourses related to protests, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of power, legitimacy, and resistance within the current political crisis.

6.1 Recommendation

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are provided:

1. Studying the relationship between legitimacy and digital discourse in the Iraqi context.
2. Employing language in political discourse without excluding society in a way that strengthens national cohesion and supports institutional legitimacy.
3. Using discourse analysis to understand how legitimacy is built up or its level declines during periods of crisis.

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