

## POWER AND RESISTANCE IN IMRAN KHAN'S OPEN LETTER: ANALYZING METAPHORS AND MODALITY

*Idrees<sup>1</sup>*

*College of Foreign Languages and Culture, Chengdu University of Technology  
610059 Chengdu, China*

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.63878/jalt1366>

Received: 30/08/2025

Accepted: 27/09/2025

Published: 18/10/2025

### **Abstract**

*Political discourse is one of the most powerful instruments for the negotiation of authority and dissent. In Pakistan's hybrid political system where military influence has historically shaped civilian governance language becomes a site of ideological struggle. This study employs Fairclough's (1992) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to examine Imran Khan's open letter (3 February 2025) addressed to Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir. The letter, written during a period of political tension, is analyzed to uncover how metaphors and modality encode discursive constructions of power, resistance, and legitimacy. Through systematic metaphor identification (Pragglejaz Group, 2007) and modality analysis (Simpson, 1993), the study reveals that metaphors such as "stolen mandate," "puppet government," and "ship of state" frame the military as a manipulative actor and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf as a moral defender of democracy. Modality choices particularly deontic ("must," "should") and epistemic ("clearly," "undoubtedly") forms are used to assert authority, signal moral obligation, and legitimize political defiance. The analysis demonstrates how language performs ideological work, positioning Khan as both victim and resistor of military dominance. The findings contribute to broader debates on political discourse, populism, and resistance in postcolonial democracies, offering a linguistic window into how power is represented and contested in Pakistan's contemporary political landscape.*

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Political Discourse, Metaphor and Modality, Power and Resistance, Imran Khan's Open Letter.

### **Introduction**

Political discourse is rarely neutral; it is a battleground where power is asserted, contested, and legitimized through language. In Pakistan, where the military has historically dominated politics, public texts like Imran Khan's 2025 open letter to the Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir serve as critical evidence for understanding how power dynamics are linguistically negotiated.

On 10<sup>th</sup> April, 2022 Imran Khan, former Pakistani Prime Minister and politician Imran Khan was ousted from his office by a no-confidence vote tabled by the opposition. Imran Khan accused American diplomat Donald Lu and former Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan General Javed Qamar Bajwa for the conspiracy against Pakistan. These events led to high tensions between Imran Khan and Military Establishment resulted in crackdown against Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Imran Khan's party).

Imran Khan was arrested on 9<sup>th</sup> May, 2023 from inside the High Court in Islamabad by National Accountability Bureau (NAB) on the charges of corruption in connection with the Al-Qadir Trust, which he owns alongside his wife, Bushra Bibi. He was convicted for corruption and barred from politics for five years. On Feb 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024 elections were held in Pakistan to elect the members of 16<sup>th</sup> National Assembly. The Military Establishment was accused of rigging in favor of the PML-N's leader Nawaz Sharif to keep the PTI's leader Imran Khan out of the electoral race. Imran Khan

called it historic rigging, and declined to forge alliances with other parties to establish a coalition government and instead chose to assume an opposition role in parliament. The elections were followed by political unrest, economic instability; controversial bills were passed from the assembly, crackdown on Imran Khan's party members and supporters. In response to the growing crackdown and atrocities by military Imran Khan wrote the first public letter to the current Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2025.

In the letter he accuses the military establishment of rigging elections, manipulating the judiciary, and perpetuating economic instability. While previous studies have examined military-civilian tensions in Pakistan (Siddiq, 2017; Hussain, 2023), few have focused on how 'metaphors' and 'modality'—linguistic tools that encode ideology—construct narratives of oppression and resistance in political texts.

This research fills this gap by applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to dissect Imran Khan's letter, revealing how language is used to frame the military as an illegitimate power and PTI as a moral resister and defender of constitution. By analyzing metaphors and modality, the study contributes to broader debates on discourse, democracy, and disagreement in hybrid regimes like Pakistan.

### **1.1 Research Objectives:**

1. To critically analyze the modality and metaphors used in Imran Khan's open letter on the 3<sup>rd</sup> February.
2. To critically analyze that how linguistic elements portray dynamics balance between civilian and military in Pakistan.

### **1.2 Research Questions:**

1. How does the strategic use of 'modality' signal authority, urgency, or defiance in the letter?
2. How do metaphors and modality interact to legitimize PTI's resistance while delegitimizing the military's political role?

### **1.3 Statement of the Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to examine the metaphors and modality used in Imran Khan open letter through critical discourse analysis. It also helps to analyze the deep understanding of Imran Khan open letter. Metaphors play a crucial role in shaping the people perception. These metaphors portray the abstract ideas like justice, oppression and sovereignty. Similarly, modality shows Imran Khan's attitude towards the establishment and puppet government. Together this modality gives an insight into the political situations. This letter is not just a political statement but a discourse that shows resistance and power which helps to control the establishment actions.

### **1.4 Significance of the Study:**

This research offers three key contributions:

1. Theoretical: It includes advancement in CDA scholarship by demonstrating how metaphors and modality together effectively construct power-resistance narratives in Pakistani political discourse.
2. Contextual: It sheds light on Imran Khan's rhetorical strategies, facilitating understanding of Pakistan's contemporary political discourse.
3. Methodological: It provides a replicable framework for analyzing metaphors and modality in political texts that can be applied to other hybrid regimes.

By bridging the gap between linguistic analysis and political science, this study underscores how language both reflects and shapes power struggles in fragile democracies.

## Literature Review

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as theorized by Fairclough (1992), posits that language is not merely a reflection of social reality but a tool for shaping it. Power relations are embedded in discourse, where dominant groups legitimize their authority, and marginalized groups resist it (Van Dijk, 2008). In Pakistan, where the military's influence permeates politics, media, and judiciary (Siddiqa, 2017), texts like Imran Khan's letter offer a lens to analyze how power is contested linguistically in the complex political structure of Pakistan.

Metaphors are not just decorative language; they structure thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In political discourse, metaphors like "war on terror" or "house of democracy" frame issues in ways that naturalize certain ideologies (Charteris-Black, 2004). For instance, describing opponents as "puppets" strips them of agency, while terms like "state terrorism" equate institutional actions with violence. Previous studies on Pakistani political rhetoric (Yousaf, 2021) have explored metaphors in speeches but ignored their role in written texts like open letters. This research will explore how metaphors are used to frame ideologies in the written discourse of Pakistani politics.

Modality—linguistic markers of obligation, possibility, or certainty—reveal a speaker's stance. Deontic modals like "must" or "should" impose moral or institutional obligations, while epistemic modals like 'will' project inevitability (Simpson, 1993). In resistance discourse, high-modality verbs (e.g., demand, require) assert defiance against authority (Fowler, 1991). However, research on modality in South Asian political texts remains scattered, particularly in contexts of military-civilian conflict. This research will analyze how the modality in the written discourse of Pakistani politics plays a key role in the power dynamics.

Pakistan's history of military coups and "hybrid democracy" (Siddiqa, 2017) provides a unique context for analyzing power-resistance discourse. Imran Khan's letter reflects longstanding tensions between elected governments and the "deep state," yet no study has systematically examined how the dominant rhetoric is reinforced or challenged. This research bridges that gap by situating Imran Khan's text within Pakistan's sociopolitical struggles.

The concept of power is one of the key and central aspects of political discourse. Power can be described through critical discourse analysis. As according to Michel Foucault's theory of Power (1977) stated that power is not just repressive but also productive, through discourse analysis power can be exercised verbally. On the other hand, resistance is inherent to power relations. Power and resistance have a direct relation with each other, when there is power there will be resistance.

Previous research on political communication especially in Pakistan has highlighted that how the popular leaders use different linguistic expression to frame themselves as pure representatives of the people (Ahmad, 2018; Zaidi, 2021). Popular discourse often gives awareness to the people against the corrupt elite (Laclau, 2005). This popular political discourse often becomes a threat to the opposition parties.

## Theoretical Frame Work and Methodology:

The study adopts Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional CDA model. Textual Analysis will be used to read and analyze metaphors and modality closely to recognize the ideological framing of military and Imran Khan in the letter and understand the current political landscape of Pakistan. Discursive Practice will identify intertextual links to Pakistan's political history (e.g., past military interventions). Socio-Cultural Practice is set to interpret it within Pakistan's power struggles.

The primary data is Imran Khan's first open letter (February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2025) to the Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir. Secondary sources include news articles and academic works on Pakistan's military-civilian relations.

The analytical procedure begins with metaphor identification, using the Pragglejaz Group's (2007) method to systematically extract metaphors by analyzing lexical units, determining their contextual meanings, and contrasting these with their basic meanings. Identified metaphors are then categorized into conceptual domains, such as "THEATER" (e.g., puppet government) or "WAR" (e.g., state terrorism), to uncover underlying rhetorical frameworks. Next, modality analysis focuses on coding modal verbs (e.g., must, will), classifying them as deontic (expressing obligation) or epistemic (expressing certainty), and examining their frequency and distribution to detect patterns, such as repeated use of "must" in demands for accountability. Finally, contextual interpretation integrates these findings with Pakistan's historical context of military dominance and the PTI's position as an opposition party, ensuring the analysis reflects socio-political dynamics shaping discourse. This structured approach bridges linguistic patterns with broader social and political realities of Pakistan.

### **Discussion and Analysis:**

Imran Khan's open letter on the 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 2025 to the Chief of Army Staff. This open letter has some hidden contextual ideas and meanings which can be thoroughly examine by applying Fairclough (1992) theory. This research examines some key aspects like Metaphors and Modality. This research allows examining linguistic features in details.

### **Metaphors of Power and Resistance:**

#### **Metaphors:**

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word and phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable, but is symbolically use to interpret an idea or concept.

Several metaphors have been employed in Imran Khan's speech to interpret the hidden and symbolic idea.

Metaphors in this open letter are used to frame political circumstances, give sense of presence, and give strong emotional responses.

#### **1) Stolen Mandate/ theft of the people's will:**

This is one of the powerful metaphors used by the Ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan to the opposition party. The metaphor employs the idea of unfair election. These phrases show that the democracy is purely for these people. They have stolen the rights of the people by deceiving them in the unfair election system. They use their authority and position to snatch the people rights. This also evokes a sense of unfairness, injustice and violation by using people as an entity for them.

**Power:** The metaphors "**stolen mandate and theft of the people's will**" implies an expression of power exercised by those who "stole" the mandate and rights of the people. Its' called power they are using to use the people will for their own purpose by not caring about the system constitutional and democratic norms and values.

**Resistance:** This metaphor clearly employs the sense of resistance in the open's letter of Ex-Prime minister Imran Khan. By suggesting that what has been stolen should be back to the deserve people. "The rightful owners" means the people should stand for their own rights and retrieve what has been stolen from them. As they have used the power to violate the rights of people by not giving their due election rights. Imran Khan warns the people to fight for their due rights and also suggest an immediate call for resistance.

2) **Puppet Government:** This metaphor describes the civilian people and their government as a mere puppet. By implying that they don't have any genuine skills and authority. Instead this civilian government is controlled by a hidden and unseen power. This unseen power acts like a booster to make them as a genuine authority. But in fact they are deprived from such type of independent will. Here this unseen agent could be the military or deep state.

#### Power Dynamics within the metaphor:

- The puppeteer (Hidden Power): There is a true hidden power behind the actions and decisions of the visible government. This hidden power controls every action of the civilian. That's why civilians are deprived from their real identity. They lack proper power; they cannot exercise their power against the will of the hidden power. This hidden power does whatever they want and manipulates the civilian actions and decisions.
- The Puppet (Visible Government): The puppet government doesn't have the genuine power and control. Their actions do not belong to them. Their decisions do not belong to them. They are just portraying as a proper group of government leaders but their actions are in vain. Their actions are portrayed as weak and incompetent. This shows its authority and government in the public eyes and the international keen observers.

#### Resistance Dynamics within the Metaphors:

The metaphor enforces resistance on the current puppet form of government. This letter shows resistance so that the puppet government is merely act as a robot and the hidden force is behind them which have taken control over every action of civilian government. There is a powerful entity behind the scenes.

**Moral Imperative for Resistance:** If the current government is mere a puppet, then cooperating with them in one way or the other is just useless, as they don't have proper authority to do anything without the wish of the hidden power. This metaphor creates a moral imperative to resist the actions of the puppeteer's and their influence.

**Resisting the Puppet (Refusing their legitimacy):** By the metaphor "Puppet" purely highlights the non-involvement and recognition of the government power and legitimacy. This metaphor shows some sort of protest, boycotts, and a general refusal to accept their puppet policies and their election results.

**Puppet as word of "Autonomy":** This metaphor clearly and implicitly calls for a struggle to gain real and genuine self-governance. Resistance in this scenario is breaking the strings and allows the elected representatives to work independently.

#### Empowering the Resister:

**Knowledge is Power:** The Ex-Prime minister Imran Khan by using this metaphor, giving himself a great status of a knowledgeable person. He reveals the truth and positions himself as the one who have a true knowledge of their oppositions. This metaphor grants him a noble personality. It reveals his genuine intellectual ability and power. He became the unmasker of the whole things. He used the metaphor of Puppet which explicitly empowers his followers.

**Collective Agency:** The metaphor also helps unite those who believe on their words that his words are totally based on truth.

#### 3) **Ship of State/ country at the Brink:**

This metaphor employs the misuse of power. The establishment and the government use their power in illegitimate way. They are the worse drivers which drive the vehicle in the wrong directions often lead to disaster.

**Power:** This metaphor implies that those who run the country (establishment and government) are driving the ship towards the dangerous directions showing their puppet nature, failure and misuse of the power. They are the incompetent heads of the state and disturbing the nation well.

**Resistance:** This metaphor calls for an urgent change, implying that if the current situation is not handled the country will sink the whole nation. This metaphor also employs to change the incompetent leaders as they are the threat for the nation. It's an urgent need of the time. Their changing is necessary.

**Modality:**

Modality is a linguistic feature usually used by the speaker to express the speaker's expression towards a particular word (truth or likelihood). It also shows the necessity, desirability and possibility of the action.

1. Deontic Modality: (obligation, Necessity, Permission)

These are the most crucial type of modality used by Imran Khan showing the sense of authority asserting by khan. And also appeals the higher authorities what should or must be happen.

➤ Must, should, need to and ought to:

- “The army must uphold its constitutional role.”
- “You should ensure a free and fair election.”
- “The nation needs to see justice prevail.”
- “The military leadership ought to reflect on its actions.”

**Implication of Power/Resistance:**

- Despite being in the jail, Imran Khan positioned himself moral authoritarian, who reminding the Chief of Army Staff of their own constitutional role. In the sentence he is not just commanding but rather give an option of what is right and wrong. What is necessary for them to do. It also challenges the COAS current duties and his actions. Reminding him what is needed to be done.
- Framing Justification for Resistance:  
By using must or should be done, he explicitly mentioned the resistance if these obligations are not full fill by the concern authority. If the establishment did not perform well in their duties, then a form of resistance will be showcasing from the public side. It would be necessary now to take full-fledged actions against the establishment.
- Implicit warning: All these statements carry an implicit warning. If they do not stick to their obligations. Then it will have dire consequences for the institution and the nation.

2. Epistemic Modality: (Certainly, Possibility, Belief)

The Ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan would use those modalities to establish the truth of his past and current claims about the unfair election and what it's impact on military actions.

Examples from Imran Khan Open Letter:

- “It is clearly evident that the elections were manipulated.”
- “The current economic policies are undoubtedly leading to disaster.”

**Implication of Power/Resistance:**

The epistemic modality clearly, undoubtedly and it is evident claims his truthfulness.

**Challenging the Official Narratives:** With the use of modality like clearly and undoubtedly imply a sense of undeniable facts. As he is behind the bar and clearly states what he knows about the rigging in the election. He is positioning himself as the one who know each and every thing even

if he is behind the bar. By using this modality, he challenges the official narratives about the state affairs and elections.

Mobilizing the action: Imran Khan used the word “Clearly” means something is without any confusion and problematic. This creates a sense of what need to be done as everything is clearly mentioned without any sense of confusion.

### 3. Boulomaic Modality (Desire, Wish)

In this modality the expression of words is less direct as compared to deontic or epistemic modality. In these modality the expression of desire and wish are present.

Examples from Imran Khan Open Letter:

- “We hope,” It is my earnest desire that”
- “It is my earnest desire to see a truly democratic Pakistan.”
- “I hope that wisdom will prevail.”

Implication of Power/Resistance:

Moral Appeal: This could be a softer form of appeal. Imran Khan uses these phrases by showcasing his desire for the nation goodwill. It is a human element which he used in the open letter. By using these words it shows the moral aspects of human. He just not wishes or desires for his own purpose but he demand something good for the improvement of the nation.

Legitimizing Resistance:

Imran khan uses these terms to legitimize what is good for their country. This is also framing his own struggle for the national aspirations. He gives a sense of wish and desire to the nation’s people in order to achieve by forcing the concern authority.

### 4. Dynamic Modality (Ability, Capability)

Examples from the text:

- 1) The people can no longer be silenced.
- 2) The institutions can still rectify their mistakes.

These dynamic modality has been used the open letter of Imran Khan to the COAS. In the letter some useful dynamic modality has been utilized to show the people’s ability to resist. Imran Khan used these terms to highlight the people capacity to change and show resistance. He also used these dynamic modalities by suggesting that institutions still have the opportunity to rectify their mistakes.

### EXPECTED FINDINGS:

The expected findings suggest that metaphors such as “**puppet government**” will strategically frame the military as a manipulative “puppeteer” and rival politicians as powerless actors stripped of agency. Additionally, “**state terrorism**” will equate military actions with systematic violence, evoking public empathy for the PTI by portraying it as a victim of institutional aggression. In terms of modality, **deontic modals** (e.g., “The establishment **must** reconsider”) are expected to assert moral authority, positioning Imran Khan and the PTI as reformers demanding accountability. On the other hand, **epistemic modals** (e.g., “This **will** threaten national security”) will project catastrophic consequences, intensifying urgency and legitimizing calls for resistance. The interplay of these metaphors and modal strategies is expected to construct a binary narrative of “oppressor” (military) versus “resister” (PTI), reinforcing Imran Khan’s populist appeal by framing the conflict as a moral struggle for democratic integrity and real freedom of Pakistan. These linguistic devices aim to excite public sentiment, positioning the PTI’s rhetoric within broader socio-political tensions in Pakistan.

### ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS:

1. The study uses publicly available texts and cites sources appropriately.
2. Political biases are reduced by grounding interpretations in linguistic evidence rather than personal opinions or media.

### CONCLUSION:

Imran Khan's 3rd February 2025 open letter functions as a deliberate discursive strategy to contest power and legitimize resistance within Pakistan's hybrid democratic system. By employing metaphors such as "puppet government," "stolen mandate," and "ship of state at the brink," the letter symbolically exposes the imbalance of power between civilian authorities and the military establishment, portraying PTI as the moral agent advocating for democratic accountability.

The analysis of modality highlights how deontic expressions assert constitutional and moral obligations, epistemic modals reinforce the certainty of institutional failings, Boulomaic modals communicate aspirational desires for democratic restoration, and dynamic modals emphasize the agency of the populace. The combination of metaphors and modality constructs a narrative of oppression versus resistance, delegitimizing military influence while empowering citizens and supporters to recognize and act upon injustices.

This study demonstrates the critical role of language in shaping political perception, mobilizing civic engagement, and contesting authority. It contributes to scholarship on political discourse by illustrating how metaphors and modality operate together to negotiate power relations in contexts of civil-military tension. Ultimately, Khan's letter exemplifies the capacity of political discourse to influence public understanding, legitimize resistance, and reinforce democratic values, offering valuable insights for scholars, policymakers, and citizens navigating contested political environments.

### References:

1. Ahmad, S. (2018). *Political discourse and populism in Pakistan*. Journal of South Asian Studies, 33(2), 45–62.
2. Charteris-Black, J. (2004). *Corpus approaches to critical metaphor analysis*. Palgrave Macmillan.
3. Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Polity Press.
4. Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
5. Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Pantheon Books.
6. Fowler, R. (1991). *Language in the news: Discourse and ideology in the press*. Routledge.
7. Hussain, Z. (2023). *Military and democracy in Pakistan: Continuities and ruptures*. Oxford University Press.
8. Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
9. Pragglejaz Group. (2007). *MIP: A method for identifying metaphorically used words in discourse*. Metaphor and Symbol, 22(1), 1–39.
10. Siddiq, A. (2017). *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's military economy*. Pluto Press.
11. Simpson, P. (1993). *Language, ideology and point of view*. Routledge.
12. Van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. Sage Publications.
13. Van Dijk, T. A. (2008). *Discourse and power*. Palgrave Macmillan.
14. Wodak, R. (2001). *The discourse-historical approach*. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (pp. 63–94). Sage.
15. Yousaf, F. (2021). *Metaphors of nationalism and resistance in Pakistani political speeches*. Asian Journal of Communication, 31(4), 375–391.
16. Zaidi, S. (2021). *Populist rhetoric in South Asia: A discourse perspective*. Discourse & Society, 32(5), 543–560.