

US VERSUS THEM POLARIZATION AND POLITICAL LEGITIMATION IN ZOHRAN MAMDANI'S INAUGURAL ADDRESS: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Hijab Aqdas

MS Scholar, Department of Humanities, CUI, Islamabad

hijabaqdas503@gmail.com

Zumer Rubab

Lecturer, Department of English, Federal Urdu University of Arts, Science and Technology, Islamabad

zumerrubab5@gmail.com

Sumaira Khanum

MS Scholar, Department of Linguistics, Fatima Jinnah Women University

Sumairakhan888@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper analyzes how ideological meanings and political legitimization are discursively formed in Zohran Mamdani's inaugural speech. It aims to understand how linguistic choices influence collective identity, ideological polarization, and political authority. Methodologically, this qualitative research employs textual analysis and van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework to investigate Mamdani's inaugural speech. The findings reveal that Mamdani's inaugural speech constructs "the people" as a morally legitimate collective, organizes political meaning through implicit us-versus-them polarization, and legitimizes authority by grounding governance in shared experiences, moral responsibility, and collective struggle. Ideological meanings are shown to be cognitively embedded through narrative framing, experiential references, and evaluative language rather than explicit ideological statements. The research contributes to CDA by demonstrating the relevance of socio-cognitive mechanisms in analyzing contemporary inaugural discourse delivered by a non-traditional political actor. It extends existing CDA research on political legitimization and highlights the value of socio-cognitive approaches for understanding how political authority is normalized and made acceptable in diverse democratic contexts, offering directions for future research on political speeches and leadership discourse.

Keywords: Discursive Legitimation, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Us-Them Polarization, Inaugural Speech

1.0 Introduction

Social reality is shaped by political discourse, which influences how events, identities, and power relations are understood and legitimized within a society (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). Language in political contexts does not merely reflect objective conditions; rather, it actively constructs social meanings by framing problems, attributing responsibility, and naturalizing particular ideological positions as common sense (Chilton, 2004; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). As a result, political discourse functions as a key mechanism through which dominance and resistance are negotiated in democratic societies (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998).

Among political genres, speeches delivered by political leaders are especially significant because they are highly public, institutionally sanctioned, and ideologically strategic forms of communication (Chilton, 2004). Such speeches often aim to unify audiences while simultaneously advancing specific political agendas through selective representations of social actors, events, and values (van Dijk, 2006). These representations frequently rely on implicit ideological structures rather than overt persuasion, making discourse an effective tool for shaping public cognition and social attitudes (van Dijk, 1998, 2006).

Inaugural speeches, in particular, occupy a distinctive position within political discourse due to their ceremonial and legitimizing function. They are typically delivered at moments of political transition and are designed to establish authority, foster collective identity, and articulate a vision for governance (Santulli & Degano, 2022). Despite their unifying appearance, inaugural addresses often embed ideological assumptions that privilege certain

groups, perspectives, and policy orientations while marginalizing others (van Dijk, 1998; Chilton, 2004). This makes them especially suitable for critical investigation.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a systematic framework for examining how such ideological meanings are produced and reproduced through language. CDA conceptualizes discourse as a form of social practice and emphasizes the relationship between linguistic structures and broader socio-political contexts (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Within CDA, van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach is particularly relevant because it explains how discourse influences society through shared mental models, group knowledge, and ideologies that guide interpretation and evaluation (van Dijk, 1998, 2006).

From this perspective, ideology is understood as a socially shared system of beliefs that organizes group identities and sustains patterns of "us versus them" polarization in political communication (van Dijk, 1998). Political actors strategically employ discursive structures such as positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation to reinforce group boundaries and legitimize their positions (van Dijk, 2006).

Grounded in a critical understanding of political discourse and ideology, this research analyzes the inaugural speech delivered by Zohran Mamdani, employing qualitative textual analysis to systematically interpret meaning in political texts (McKee, 2003). Drawing on van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework within Critical Discourse Analysis, the research examines how linguistic choices construct social actors, articulate ideological positions, and legitimize political authority.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite the extensive use of inaugural speeches as instruments of political legitimization, there remains a limited critical understanding of how ideological meanings are cognitively structured and discursively enacted through linguistic choices in contemporary political inaugurations. In particular, insufficient attention has been paid to the role of socio-cognitive mechanisms in shaping political meaning. To address this gap, the present research analyzes Zohran Mamdani's inaugural speech using van Dijk's socio-cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis framework.

2.0 Literature Review

A significant number of studies have applied CDA to political speeches to uncover ideological positioning and power relations. Van Dijk (2002) analyzes parliamentary debates on immigration and demonstrates how ideological polarization is enacted through positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. Similarly, Chilton and Schäffner (2002) show that political speeches employ strategic lexical choices and argumentation patterns to legitimize policy decisions. Liu (2012), in a CDA-based analysis of U.S. presidential inaugural speeches, reveals how national identity and political legitimacy are discursively constructed through evaluative language and collective symbolism. Fairclough (2012) further illustrates that political speeches rely on practical argumentation to justify political actions, reinforcing the ideological function of discourse.

Other CDA-based studies focus on how political discourse represents social actors and constructs ideological boundaries. Rashidi (2010) examines American and Iranian political speeches and demonstrates how agency and responsibility are discursively assigned to legitimize in-group actions and delegitimize out-groups. KhosraviNik (2010) analyzes British political and media discourse on immigration and shows how "us versus them" polarization is normalized through repeated discursive patterns. Hart (2010) combines CDA with cognitive linguistics to reveal how ideological meanings are framed through mental models and conceptual structures. These findings align with Cap's (2008) analysis of political legitimization, which identifies discourse strategies that justify authority through moral and rational appeals.

Several empirical studies explicitly adopt van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework to analyze ideological cognition in political discourse. Van Dijk (2006) demonstrates how shared social cognition underpins ideological discourse structures in political communication. Building on this framework, KhosraviNik and Zia (2014) show how political actors strategically activate shared beliefs to construct legitimacy in discourse about immigration. Hart and Cap (2014) further illustrate how cognitive mechanisms guide audience interpretation of political argumentation. Similarly, Cap (2013) analyzes crisis discourse and shows how proximization is used to legitimize political action by construing threats as immediate and urgent.

Although CDA has been widely applied to political speeches to examine ideology and legitimization, most existing research focuses on parliamentary debates or inaugural speeches by established political leaders. Fewer studies employ van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework to analyze contemporary inaugural speeches as a distinct genre of political legitimization. To address this gap, this research utilizes van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework to the inaugural speech of Zohran Mamdani.

3.0 Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative research design to examine ideological meanings and representational patterns embedded in political discourse. Guided by McKee's (2003) textual analysis as the method of analysis, discourse is approached as a socially and culturally situated site of meaning production. The inaugural speech delivered by Zohran Mamdani constitutes the data for this research and is transcribed verbatim to facilitate close and systematic textual analysis. The analysis focuses on how linguistic choices construct social actors, mobilize ideology, and frame political authority and legitimacy. Through this approach, the study seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of political discourse as a mechanism of ideological meaning-making and persuasion. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach serves as the theoretical framework guiding the analysis.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research is Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach conceptualizes political discourse as a form of social practice whose relationship with society is mediated by shared systems of group knowledge, beliefs, and ideologies. Van Dijk (1998) explicitly argues that "the relations between society and discourse are necessarily indirect, and mediated by shared mental representations of social actors as group members" (p. 18). This perspective is particularly suited to the analysis of Mamdani's inaugural speech, in which ideological meanings are rarely articulated directly but are embedded in representations of social groups, political events, and moral evaluations.

Within this socio-cognitive framework, ideology is understood as a form of social cognition. Van Dijk (2006) defines ideologies as "the fundamental beliefs of a group and its members" (p. 6) and further explains that ideologies "organize social group attitudes consisting of schematically organized general opinions about relevant social issues" (van Dijk, 1998, p. 8). From this perspective, Mamdani's inaugural speech is analyzed as a discursive site where group-based ideological beliefs are articulated, reproduced, and rendered socially meaningful through language.

A central analytical concept within van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach is ideological polarization. Van Dijk (1998) identifies polarization as a defining structural property of ideological discourse, noting that ideologies typically "show a polarizing structure between US and THEM" (p. 9). This polarization reflects underlying cognitive structures that organize group identity and intergroup relations (van Dijk, 1998). In inaugural speeches, such polarization becomes particularly salient as speakers symbolically affirm the moral

legitimacy of the in-group while delegitimizing political opponents or entrenched power structures.

To systematically analyze ideological polarization, this study operationalizes van Dijk's (1998) Ideological Square, an analytical tool developed within the socio-cognitive framework. Van Dijk formulates the ideological square as a set of discursive strategies involving "emphasizing our good things, emphasizing their bad things, de-emphasizing our bad things, and de-emphasizing their good things" (p. 33). The Ideological Square provides a structured means of examining how Mamdani's inaugural speech constructs positive representations of his political movement and supporters while negatively representing opposing actors, institutions, or systems. These representational strategies are interpreted as ideologically motivated practices grounded in shared group cognition.

Another core component of van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach employed in this research is the concept of mental models, which explains how ideology becomes operational in discourse. Van Dijk (1998) argues that "these personal cognitions, represented in mental models of concrete events and situations (including communicative situations), in turn control discourse" (p. 10). Mental models enable speakers to translate abstract ideological principles into concrete narratives and evaluations of specific events. In Mamdani's inaugural speech, mental models shape how the electoral victory is framed, how political struggle is narrated, and how future governance is envisioned.

The framework further accounts for argumentation as an ideologically structured practice. Van Dijk (1998) emphasizes that ideologies are not neutral belief systems but are frequently mobilized in discourse to justify political positions, observing that "ideologies may be used to legitimate or oppose power and dominance" (p. 20). Within the socio-cognitive approach, argumentation is analyzed as a mechanism through which ideological assumptions embedded in group cognition are used to legitimize political authority and present political goals as morally necessary and socially justified.

Finally, the analysis draws on van Dijk's socio-cognitive conception of group representation, which is central to political discourse. Van Dijk (1998) argues that "ideologies are the basis of the social representations shared by members of a group" (p. 8). Through discourse, political actors define group boundaries, articulate shared values, and construct collective identities. In Mamdani's inaugural speech, this process is particularly significant, as the speech symbolically constitutes a political community and reinforces solidarity among supporters by reaffirming shared ideological commitments.

4.0 Data Analysis

This section presents the analysis of the data.

4.1 Ideological Thinking, Social Meaning, and Collective Identity

Zohran Mamdani's inaugural speech constructs the people as a shared political and moral community whose collective identity legitimizes political authority. From the outset, Mamdani frames governance not as an individual achievement but as a collective moment, declaring, "My fellow New Yorkers, today begins a new era." The use of the inclusive address "New Yorkers" immediately establishes a broad in-group identity, situating the audience as co-participants in historical change rather than passive recipients of leadership. This ideological move aligns with van Dijk's (1998) assertion that group identities are discursively formed through shared mental representations that define who belongs and who has the right to political power.

The speech deepens this collective identity through a vivid catalog of everyday spaces, laboring bodies, and acts of care, thereby embedding ideology in lived experience. Mamdani repeatedly asserts, "I stand alongside you", before invoking "cramped kitchens in Flushing and barbershops in East New York," "hospitals in Mott Haven and libraries in El Barrio that

have too long known only neglect,” and “construction workers in steel-toed boots and halal cart vendors whose knees ache from working all day.” These references are not incidental; they function ideologically by constructing a shared cognitive model of “the people” as working, resilient, and morally grounded. By foregrounding manual labor, caregiving, and endurance, the speech associates legitimacy with ordinary struggle, reinforcing van Dijk’s (2006) claim that ideology organizes social knowledge by emphasizing certain group traits while marginalizing others.

Significantly, Mamdani expands the boundaries of the in-group beyond electoral support, stating, “I stand alongside over one million New Yorkers who voted for this day... and I stand just as resolutely alongside those who did not. If you are a New Yorker, I am your Mayor.” This rhetorical move neutralizes political division by redefining belonging as civic rather than partisan. Ideologically, this constructs a collective mental model in which disagreement does not negate membership, allowing the speaker to claim democratic legitimacy while positioning himself as accountable to all. This is reinforced by the pledge, “never, not for a second, hide from you,” which frames transparency as a moral obligation to the collective rather than a strategic.

The speech further frames “the people” as historical agents by emphasizing their role in moments of transformation. Mamdani notes that while “it is rare for those moments to come around,” it is “rarer still... the people themselves whose hands are the ones upon the levers of change.” This formulation situates political power within the collective rather than the institution, constructing an ideological belief that meaningful change occurs only when ordinary people are empowered. He contrasts this potential with past political failures, lamenting that “moments of great possibility have been promptly surrendered to small imagination and smaller ambition,” and that “what was promised was never pursued, what could have changed remained the same.” These statements contribute to a shared cognitive schema in which stagnation is attributed not to inevitability but to insufficient political will.

A central ideological reorientation in the speech is the rejection of diminished expectations. Mamdani recalls being advised to “encourage the people of New York to ask for little and expect even less,” a suggestion he categorically refuses: “I will do no such thing. The only expectation I seek to reset is that of small expectations.” By redefining what is politically reasonable, the speech reconstructs group norms around governance, encouraging the in-group to view expansive demands as legitimate. This ideological repositioning culminates in the declaration, “Beginning today, we will govern expansively and audaciously,” which frames ambition as a collective right rather than an elite prerogative.

The speech anchors collective identity around the question of ownership, asking, “Who does New York belong to?” Mamdani acknowledges a historical reality in which the city “belongs only to the wealthy and well-connected,” while “working people have reckoned with the consequences.” However, he reconstructs this narrative by invoking a tradition of inclusive governance and concluding that New York “belongs to all who live in it.” This declaration encapsulates the ideological project of the speech: redefining political authority as collective ownership rooted in shared experience, moral worth, and civic belonging. In van Dijk’s terms, the speech successfully transforms individual grievances into a shared social cognition that legitimizes power through the people themselves (van Dijk, 1998, 2006).

4.2 Us versus Them Polarization and Ideological Dichotomies

In line with van Dijk’s (1998, 2006) concept of ideological polarization, Mamdani’s inaugural speech systematically organizes political meaning through a clear US versus THEM framework, in which social groups are evaluated according to moral worth, responsibility, and entitlement. This polarization follows the logic of van Dijk’s Ideological Square, which emphasizes positive representations of the in-group (“us”) while highlighting negative

representations of the out-group (“them”), and correspondingly de-emphasizing in-group shortcomings and out-group virtues. The speech activates this structure most explicitly through the repeated contrast between “working people” and entrenched economic elites, thereby situating inequality as the result of deliberate power arrangements rather than abstract economic forces.

The in-group (“us”) is consistently portrayed as collective, laboring, and morally legitimate. Mamdani foregrounds “working people” as the primary social actors who have endured systemic neglect, stating that “working people have reckoned with the consequences” of political decisions that prioritized elite interests. This group is further characterized by endurance and contribution rather than privilege, as illustrated through references to “construction workers in steel-toed boots,” “halal cart vendors whose knees ache from working all day,” and “neighbors who carry a plate of food... and lift strangers’ strollers up subway stairs.” Through these representations, the in-group is associated with productivity, care, and civic virtue, reinforcing positive self-presentation in accordance with the ideological square (van Dijk, 1998).

In contrast, the out-group (“them”) is constructed as narrow, exclusionary, and responsible for structural inequality. Mamdani explicitly states that for too long New York has functioned as a city that “belongs only to the wealthy and well-connected.” This formulation not only identifies an elite out-group but also attributes ownership, access, and influence to a small minority, implicitly positioning them as beneficiaries of unjust systems. The negative representation is sharpened by the causal link he draws between elite dominance and popular suffering, emphasizing that while wealth accumulated at the top, “working people have reckoned with the consequences.” In van Dijk’s terms, this is a classic ideological move in which negative actions and outcomes are attributed to the out-group, reinforcing moral polarization (van Dijk, 2006).

The speech also employs historical polarization to reinforce this ideological contrast. Mamdani critiques previous moments of political opportunity that failed to deliver transformation, asserting that “moments of great possibility have been promptly surrendered to small imagination and smaller ambition” and that “what was promised was never pursued, what could have changed remained the same.” Although individual actors are not named, these statements implicitly locate blame within political elites and governing institutions aligned with elite interests. This rhetorical strategy allows the speaker to condemn systemic failure without alienating the broader public, thereby protecting the positive self-image of the in-group while intensifying critique of entrenched power structures, another key feature of ideological square dynamics (van Dijk, 1998).

Mamdani further intensifies polarization by rejecting elite-driven norms of political modesty. He recounts being advised to “encourage the people of New York to ask for little and expect even less,” a position he immediately repudiates by declaring, “I will do no such thing.” Here, diminished expectations are implicitly attributed to elite governance logics that seek to manage rather than empower the population. By asserting that “the only expectation I seek to reset is that of small expectations,” the speaker aligns himself with the in-group’s aspirations while positioning elite caution and incrementalism as morally and politically inadequate. This reinforces the ideological contrast between an audacious, people-centered vision and a conservative, elite-centered status quo.

Crucially, the polarization in the speech is not merely oppositional but redistributive in its ideological aim. The central question “Who does New York belong to?” functions as a discursive pivot that exposes historical exclusion while reassigning ownership to the collective. While the out-group is associated with exclusivity and accumulation, the in-group is ultimately framed as the rightful owner of the city: New York, Mamdani asserts, “belongs

to all who live in it.” This move completes the ideological square by transforming critique into legitimization, delegitimizing elite dominance while morally authorizing collective governance. In doing so, the speech constructs a polarized but coherent ideological narrative in which political authority is reclaimed from the few and reassigned to the many, consistent with van Dijk’s model of ideological discourse as a means of structuring social power relations (van Dijk, 1998, 2006).

4.3 Mental Models, Narrative, and Ideological Meaning-Making

According to van Dijk (1998, 2006), ideological discourse operates through mental models that allow social actors to interpret political reality by organizing experiences into coherent narratives of cause, responsibility, and possibility. In Mamdani’s inaugural speech, ideological meaning is constructed through a narrative of historical interruption, in which the present is framed as a decisive break from entrenched patterns of exclusion. This framing is introduced when Mamdani states, “Today begins a new era”, a temporal marker that signals not merely administrative succession but ideological transformation. By naming the moment as an “era,” the speech encourages listeners to cognitively reclassify the present as historically distinct, thereby legitimizing expansive political action.

The speech develops this mental model further by situating the city’s challenges within a long trajectory of unmet need and deferred justice. Mamdani acknowledges that New York has endured prolonged structural neglect, referring to institutions that “have too long known only neglect.” The phrase “too long” functions as a narrative cue that activates shared memories of persistent inequality, allowing audiences to interpret current conditions as historically produced rather than accidental. This aligns with van Dijk’s argument that mental models embed personal and collective memory into ideological understanding, shaping how groups perceive continuity and rupture in political life (van Dijk, 2006).

Mamdani also employs narrative anticipation to reshape how audiences imagine governance. Rather than presenting policy outcomes, he foregrounds ethical commitment and presence, promising that he will “never, not for a second, hide from you.” This declaration constructs a mental model of leadership defined by visibility and accountability, contrasting implicitly with past administrations perceived as distant or inaccessible. By emphasizing relational governance, the speech transforms authority from a hierarchical position into an ongoing moral relationship between the mayor and the public, reinforcing ideological expectations of democratic proximity.

Another key narrative strategy involves redefining political struggle as collective perseverance rather than isolated hardship. Mamdani speaks of “knees aching from working all day” and “lives shaped by effort that too often goes unseen.” These expressions personalize economic struggle without resorting to abstraction, enabling listeners to cognitively map systemic inequality onto bodily experience. In van Dijk’s terms, such experiential narration strengthens ideological internalization by grounding political meaning in everyday life, making structural critique emotionally and cognitively resonant (van Dijk, 1998).

The speech also constructs a forward-looking mental model centered on action rather than delay. Mamdani emphasizes immediacy and collective movement by asserting, “Beginning today, this city moves forward together.” The adverbial phrase “beginning today” collapses the distance between speech and action, encouraging listeners to conceptualize change as already underway. This narrative immediacy is ideologically significant, as it counters cynicism and determines expectations about political temporality; change is framed not as a distant promise but as a present trajectory.

Mamdani also invokes moral inheritance to solidify the ideological narrative. He references past leadership not to idealize it but to situate the present administration within a lineage of

unfinished work, suggesting that history imposes obligation rather than nostalgia. By framing governance as a continuation of struggles that remain unresolved, the speech invites audiences to adopt a mental model in which political responsibility is collective and intergenerational. Through these narrative strategies, Mamdani constructs ideological meaning by shaping how New Yorkers understand their past, interpret their present, and imagine their political future, confirming van Dijk's assertion that ideology becomes effective when it is cognitively embedded in shared stories and experiential frameworks (van Dijk, 1998, 2006).

4.4 Moral Legitimation and Political Accountability

In van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, political authority is legitimized through argumentation strategies that present leadership as reasonable, moral, and aligned with shared group interests (van Dijk, 1998, 2006). In Mamdani's inaugural speech, legitimation is achieved not through institutional dominance but through arguments that frame authority as service, obligation, and collective trust. This is immediately evident in the oath-centered framing of leadership, where Mamdani emphasizes responsibility rather than power, stating that he assumes office "with humility, with gratitude, and with an unshakable sense of duty." The sequencing of these values constructs an argument that moral readiness, rather than ambition, qualifies the speaker to govern.

The speech further legitimates authority by grounding it in democratic consent and collective effort rather than individual achievement. Mamdani explicitly rejects personal triumph narratives by asserting that "this moment was not made by one campaign or one candidate" but by "countless conversations, acts of courage, and shared belief in something better." This argument redistributes credit to the collective, reinforcing a group representation in which political change is co-produced by the people. According to van Dijk (2006), such argumentative moves strengthen legitimacy by aligning leadership with group cognition, which "we" believe we have accomplished together.

Mamdani also constructs legitimacy through ethical argumentation that frames governance as a moral contract. He assures the audience that "the doors of this administration will remain open to the people who sent us here." This statement functions as a warrant in argumentative terms: openness is presented as evidence that authority will be exercised transparently and inclusively. By linking institutional access to popular mandate, the speech reframes City Hall as a shared civic space rather than a distant seat of power, reinforcing van Dijk's notion that discourse legitimizes authority when it resonates with shared norms of fairness and accountability (van Dijk, 1998).

The legitimation of authority is further strengthened through Mamdani's articulation of obligation toward marginalized communities. He asserts that governance must be measured by whom it serves, declaring that "a city is judged not by the wealth it creates, but by who that wealth is allowed to reach." This evaluative argument positions redistributive justice as a rational and ethical criterion for leadership. By embedding this principle within a broader moral framework, Mamdani aligns his authority with values already embedded in the in-group's social cognition, thereby normalizing expansive intervention as both necessary and justified (van Dijk, 2006).

Another key argumentative strategy involves the projection of collective endurance into the future. Mamdani emphasizes perseverance by stating that "the work ahead will be difficult, and it will demand patience, courage, and solidarity." Rather than presenting challenges as threats to legitimacy, he incorporates them into a shared narrative of effort, framing hardship as a collective test rather than a failure of leadership. This argument positions authority as resilient and honest, strengthening trust by acknowledging difficulty without retreating from responsibility.

Finally, Mamdani consolidates legitimacy by reaffirming unity as a governing principle, stating that “we move forward not as separate boroughs or interests, but as one city.” This representation of the political community as cohesive supports the argument that authority must operate across difference while remaining rooted in collective identity. In van Dijk’s terms, such discourse stabilizes ideological coherence by reinforcing shared group membership and common purpose, allowing political power to be exercised as a socially sanctioned mandate rather than a coercive force (van Dijk, 1998).

Through these interconnected argumentative strategies, moral qualification, collective credit, openness, ethical evaluation, shared struggle, and unity, Mamdani’s inaugural speech legitimizes political authority as an extension of group will and responsibility. Authority is thus discursively constructed not as domination over the people, but as accountability to them, completing the ideological project established across the preceding analytical sections (van Dijk, 1998, 2006).

5.0 Discussion

The findings of this research are consistent with existing CDA research showing that political speeches construct ideology and legitimization through discourse (Ali et al., 2025). The findings of this research revealed that Mamdani’s inaugural address employs inclusive language and moral evaluation to construct collective identity. This confirms that inaugural speeches function as ideologically structured genres despite their unifying surface rhetoric.

The ideological polarization identified in this research aligns with empirical CDA findings by Rashidi (2010) and KhosraviNik (2010), who demonstrated that political discourse routinely constructs in-groups and out-groups through representational strategies rather than overt antagonism. Mamdani’s construction of “working people” as a morally legitimate in-group. The role of narrative framing and cognitive alignment in Mamdani’s speech also corresponds with applied CDA studies integrating cognitive perspectives. Hart (2010) and Hart and Cap (2014) show that political discourse becomes persuasive when it resonates with shared beliefs and experiential frames. Similarly, this research demonstrates how ideological meanings are embedded in everyday narratives and historical references, making political authority cognitively accessible and socially legitimate.

5.1 Conclusion

This research analyzed Zohran Mamdani’s inaugural speech using van Dijk’s socio-cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis framework to examine how ideological meanings and political legitimacy are constructed through language. The findings show that the speech discursively constructs a collective political identity, organizes meaning through implicit ideological polarization, and legitimizes authority by grounding governance in shared moral values and everyday experiences. These patterns demonstrate that inaugural speeches remain ideologically active genres, even when framed in inclusive and unifying terms.

Beyond its empirical findings, this research contributes to applied CDA by extending socio-cognitive analysis to a contemporary inaugural speech delivered by a non-traditional political actor. By foregrounding shared mental models, narrative framing, and group representation, the research highlights the utility of socio-cognitive CDA for understanding how political authority is normalized and rendered acceptable to diverse audiences. Future research may build on this approach by examining other contemporary political speeches to further explore how ideology and legitimization operate across different political contexts and leadership styles.

References

Ali, S., Javed, M., & Aqdas, H. (2025). Discursively Constituting Democratic Power: A Socio-cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis of Zohran Mamdani’s Victory

Speech. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL (JALT)*, 8(4), 1469–1480.
<https://doi.org/10.63878/jalt1624>

Cap, P. (2013). *Proximization: The pragmatics of symbolic distance crossing*. John Benjamins.

Cap, P. (2014). Proximization and legitimization in political discourse. In C. Hart & P. Cap (Eds.), *Contemporary critical discourse studies* (pp. 63–85). Bloomsbury Academic.

Chilton, P. (2004). *Analysing political discourse: Theory and practice*. Routledge.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.

Fairclough, N. (2012). Critical discourse analysis. In J. P. Gee & M. Handford (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 9–20). Routledge.

Hart, C. (2010). *Critical discourse analysis and cognitive science: New perspectives on immigration discourse*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Hart, C., & Cap, P. (Eds.). (2014). *Contemporary critical discourse studies*. Bloomsbury Academic.

KhosraviNik, M. (2010). The representation of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants in British newspapers: A critical discourse analysis. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 9(1), 1–28.

KhosraviNik, M., & Zia, M. (2014). Persian nationalism, identity and anti-Arab sentiments in Iranian Facebook discourses: Critical discourse analysis and social media communication. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 13(4), 755–780.

Liu, F. (2012). Genre and ideology: A critical analysis of a Chinese President's speech. *Text & Talk*, 32(2), 243–258.

McKee, A. (2003). *Textual analysis: A beginner's guide*. SAGE.

Rashidi, N., & Souzandehfar, M. (2010). A critical discourse analysis of the debates between Republicans and Democrats over the continuation of war in Iraq. *Journal of Linguistic and Intercultural Education*, 3, 55–82.

Santulli, F., & Degano, C. (2022). *Agreement in argumentation: A discursive perspective*. Springer.

van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. SAGE.

van Dijk, T. A. (2002). Political discourse and political cognition. In P. Chilton & C. Schäffner (Eds.), *Politics as text and talk: Analytic approaches to political discourse* (pp. 203–237). John Benjamins.

van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Discourse and manipulation. *Discourse & Society*, 17(3), 359–383.

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (2nd ed.). SAGE.