

REPRESENTING SOCIAL ACTORS IN KEIR STARMER'S RESIGNATION SPEECH: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Political resignation speeches play a significant role in constructing leadership, accountability, and democratic continuity during periods of political transition. However, they have received comparatively little scholarly attention, particularly through Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Theory. This research investigates how Keir Starmer represents social actors in his resignation speech to construct political identity, responsibility, legitimacy, and collective action. Adopting McKee's (2003) textual analysis as the method of analysis and Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Theory as the theoretical framework, the analysis focuses on representational strategies including inclusion and exclusion, role allocation, personalization and impersonalization, assimilation and individualization, nomination and categorization, and genericization and specification. The findings reveal that Starmer strategically foregrounds himself, the Labour Party, democratic institutions, and the British public while backgrounding political opponents and internal critics. He further allocates agency to balance personal accountability with collective governance and employs representational choices that reinforce legitimacy, solidarity, and democratic continuity. The findings support existing Critical Discourse Analysis research by demonstrating that political discourse strategically constructs leadership and legitimacy through the representation of social actors. The research highlights the value of Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Theory for analyzing political resignation speeches and suggests that such speeches function as strategic discourses through which political leaders negotiate accountability, preserve institutional legitimacy, and maintain public confidence during leadership transitions.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Political Discourse, Social Actor Theory; Political Resignation Speech, Keir Starmer, Political Identity*

Introduction

Political discourse plays a central role in shaping how societies understand political events, institutions, and leadership. Rather than simply conveying information, political language constructs particular versions of social reality by representing actors, defining problems, allocating responsibility, and legitimizing political actions. From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), discourse is viewed as a form of social practice through which power relations and ideological meanings are produced and reproduced (Fairclough, 2003). Similarly, Van Dijk (2008) argues that political discourse contributes to the formation and circulation of shared beliefs

and ideologies that influence how political realities are interpreted. Consequently, the study of political discourse provides important insights into the relationship between language, power, and society.

Among the various forms of political discourse, political speeches occupy a particularly significant position because they constitute direct and highly strategic forms of communication between political leaders and the public. Political speeches are designed not only to communicate policies but also to persuade audiences, construct leadership, and legitimize political authority. As Chilton (2004) observes, political language is inherently strategic and serves multiple communicative purposes beyond the simple transmission of information. Likewise, Wodak and Meyer (2009) maintain that political discourse is closely connected with the exercise of power and the construction of social identities, making political speeches an important site for discourse-analytic investigation.

In political communication, resignation speeches constitute a distinctive genre, delivered at moments of political transition and institutional uncertainty. Unlike campaign or inaugural speeches, resignation speeches require political leaders to explain their departure from office, reflect on their leadership, defend their political legacy, and reassure audiences about the continuity of democratic governance. Such speeches, therefore, extend beyond announcing a resignation; they also serve to maintain public confidence, preserve institutional stability, and shape historical interpretations of political leadership. As a result, resignation speeches provide valuable material for examining how political leaders manage public perception during periods of constitutional and political change.

Keir Starmer's resignation speech represents one such moment of political transition. Delivered following the withdrawal of support within his parliamentary party, the speech reflects upon the achievements of the Labour government while announcing an orderly transfer of leadership. Throughout the speech, Starmer addresses multiple audiences, including the Labour Party, constitutional institutions, political colleagues, and the wider British public. At the same time, he reflects on his leadership, acknowledges governmental accomplishments, and expresses support for his successor, making the speech a rich source for examining the linguistic construction of political leadership during a period of democratic transition.

Against this background, the research examines how Keir Starmer represents social actors in his resignation speech by employing Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Theory as the theoretical framework and McKee's (2003) textual analysis as the method of analysis. The research investigates how linguistic choices construct political identity, distribute responsibility, establish legitimacy, and promote collective action through the representation of social actors.

Problem Statement

Political resignation speeches are delivered at critical moments of leadership transition, where political leaders seek to justify their decisions, preserve their credibility, and maintain public confidence in democratic institutions. These communicative objectives are achieved largely through the strategic representation of social actors, which shapes perceptions of responsibility, legitimacy, and collective identity. However, the representational strategies employed in political resignation speeches have not been sufficiently examined. Therefore, the present research analyzes Keir Starmer's resignation speech to investigate how social actors are represented in the construction of political identity, responsibility, legitimacy, and collective action.

Literature Review

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has become one of the most influential approaches for examining the relationship between language, ideology, and power in political discourse. Rather than treating language as a neutral medium of communication, CDA conceptualizes discourse as a form of social practice through which social realities, identities, and power relations are constructed and negotiated (Fairclough, 1992, 1995, 2003; Van Dijk, 1998, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Chilton, 2004). Political discourse, therefore, extends beyond the transmission of information to the legitimation of authority, the construction of collective identities, and the representation of social actors (Van Leeuwen, 2008; Charteris-Black, 2011). Within this perspective, political speeches constitute valuable sites for investigating how leaders strategically employ language to shape public perception, mobilize audiences, and justify political decisions (Chilton, 2004; Fairclough, 2003; Van Dijk, 2008). Beyond political discourse, discourse-oriented research has also examined diverse communicative contexts to demonstrate how linguistic choices construct meaning and achieve strategic purposes. For example, Zubair et al. (2025) showed that marginalized speakers employ language strategically to achieve communicative goals, highlighting the broader applicability of discourse analysis across different genres.

A substantial body of research has applied CDA to different genres of political speeches. Studies of presidential, campaign, victory, inaugural, and election speeches consistently demonstrate that political leaders construct ideological meanings through lexical choices, agency, pronoun use, metaphor, and evaluative language (Fairclough, 1995, 2003; Van Dijk, 1998, 2006, 2008; Wodak, 2009). For example, Siregar (2021) examined Joe Biden's presidential victory speech through Van Dijk's model and found that discourse structures and linguistic choices promoted the ideologies of unity, equality, and freedom. Similarly, Kadim (2022) analyzed Donald Trump's election campaign speeches and demonstrated how discourse strategies were employed to construct a positive self-presentation while portraying political opponents and immigrants negatively, thereby reinforcing ideological polarization.

Recent CDA scholarship has increasingly explored how political discourse constructs legitimacy, authority, and collective identity during democratic transitions. Research on Zohran Mamdani's victory and inaugural speeches demonstrates that political authority is discursively constituted through representations of collective struggle, shared identity, and ideological legitimation rather than merely institutional power (Ali et al., 2025; Aqdas et al., 2025). Likewise, Ali et al. (2026) showed that Mamdani's victory speech strategically reconstructed the traditional "Us versus Them" dichotomy by promoting an inclusive socialist identity that united diverse social groups against economic and political elites. Complementing these findings, Tahir and Hussain (2026) argued that leadership identity is progressively constructed through discourse as political actors adapt their linguistic choices across different stages of political development. Together, these studies demonstrate that political speeches function as discursive sites where leadership, legitimacy, and collective identities are continuously negotiated rather than simply expressed.

Alongside broader CDA approaches, Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Theory has provided a systematic framework for examining how discourse represents people and institutions. Rather than focusing solely on ideology, the framework explains how representational choices such as inclusion and exclusion, activation and passivation, personalization and impersonalization, individualization and assimilation, nomination and categorization, and genericization and specification construct political identities and distribute responsibility. The theory has been applied

across political, media, and institutional discourse to reveal how linguistic representation legitimizes authority, foregrounds particular actors, and backgrounds or excludes others (Van Leeuwen, 2008). Recent research has similarly emphasized representational processes such as lexical choice, agency, foregrounding, and recontextualization in examining ideological meanings across political and media texts (Rubab et al., 2025).

Extensive research has examined political discourse across campaign, victory, inaugural, and parliamentary speeches. However, political resignation speeches have received comparatively little attention, particularly through Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Theory. This study addresses that gap by analyzing Keir Starmer's resignation speech to examine how social actors are represented in constructing political identity, responsibility, legitimacy, and collective action.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative research design to examine the representation of social actors in Keir Starmer's resignation speech. Guided by McKee's (2003) textual analysis as the method of analysis, the research is situated within the broader field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The resignation speech delivered by Keir Starmer constitutes the data for this research and is transcribed verbatim to facilitate close textual analysis. Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Theory provides the theoretical framework guiding the analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopts Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Theory as the theoretical framework to examine how Keir Starmer constructs political identity, responsibility, legitimacy, and collective action in his resignation speech. Van Leeuwen (2008) conceptualizes discourse as a social practice that reconstructs people, institutions, and events through representational choices rather than simply reflecting reality.

Van Leeuwen's (2008) framework begins with the concepts of inclusion and exclusion, arguing that discourse selectively represents participants. He stated that "representations include or exclude social actors to suit their interests and purposes in relation to the readers for whom they are intended" (p. 28). Inclusion foregrounds particular social actors, whereas exclusion reduces or removes their visibility. Thus, these concepts provide an effective framework for examining which actors Starmer foregrounds and which he backgrounds in his resignation speech.

Van Leeuwen (2008) further distinguishes between suppression and backgrounding as two forms of exclusion. He explains that "social actors can either be excluded entirely" or "they can be backgrounded" (p. 29). In suppression, participants are omitted completely, whereas in backgrounding they remain identifiable elsewhere in the discourse.

Another important category is role allocation, which concerns the assignment of agency to social actors. Van Leeuwen (2008) explained that "activation occurs when social actors are represented as the active, dynamic forces in an activity," whereas "passivation" occurs when they are represented as "undergoing the activity, or as being at the receiving end of it" (p. 33). He further noted that representations may "endow social actors with either active or passive roles" (p. 33). These choices determine how responsibility and accountability are distributed within discourse. Activated actors appear responsible for initiating actions, whereas passivated actors are portrayed as recipients or beneficiaries. In political discourse, this distinction shapes perceptions of leadership and accountability, making activation and passivation particularly relevant to examining how Starmer allocates agency in his resignation speech.

Van Leeuwen (2008) also distinguishes between personalization and impersonalization, arguing that "social actors can be represented as human beings or as non-human entities" (p. 46). Personalization represents participants as identifiable human beings, whereas impersonalization represents them through institutions, organizations, places, or abstract entities. He further explained that impersonalization may be realized through "abstraction" or "objectivation" (p. 46), allowing institutions and abstract concepts to function as social actors. These strategies either foreground individual responsibility or shift attention to institutional authority and legitimacy.

Van Leeuwen (2008) further argued that social actors may be represented either as individuals or as members of a collective. He defines individualization as representing social actors "as individuals," whereas assimilation occurs when they are represented "as groups" (p. 37). He further distinguished collectivization, which represents actors collectively, from aggregation, which represents them "by means of statistics" (pp. 37–38). These strategies determine whether discourse foregrounds individual responsibility or collective identity. In political speeches, assimilation promotes solidarity, whereas individualization emphasizes leadership and accountability. This distinction is particularly relevant for examining how Starmer shifts between personal and collective identities throughout his resignation speech.

Van Leeuwen (2008) also explains that social actors may be represented through nomination or categorization. He states that "nomination is realized by proper names only" (p. 40), whereas categorization represents actors "in terms of the identities and functions they share with others" (p. 40). Within categorization, functionalization represents social actors "in terms of an activity, in terms of something they do" (p. 42), while identification defines them "not by what they do but by what they, more or less permanently or unavoidably, are" (p. 43). Together, these strategies reveal how discourse constructs authority, expertise, solidarity, and legitimacy by emphasizing different aspects of social identity. They are particularly useful for analysing how Starmer represents himself and others through official roles, institutional affiliations, and personal relationships.

Finally, Van Leeuwen (2008) distinguishes between genericization and specification, explaining that "genericization occurs when social actors are represented as classes," whereas "specification occurs when they are represented as identifiable individuals" (p. 35). Genericization constructs broad social categories, while specification refers to identifiable individuals or groups. These strategies shape how discourse constructs inclusiveness and legitimacy. In political discourse, genericization broadens appeals to the public, whereas specification strengthens credibility by referring to particular political and personal actors. Accordingly, this distinction provides a useful framework for analysing how Starmer balances references to the wider public with specific individuals and institutions.

Data Analysis

This section presents the analysis of the data. Guided by van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Theory, the analysis examines how Keir Starmer represents social actors and constructs political identity, responsibility, and legitimacy through linguistic choices in his resignation speech.

Inclusion and Exclusion

The representation of social actors in Starmer's resignation speech is primarily characterized by the strategic use of inclusion and exclusion to construct political legitimacy, distribute responsibility, and maintain party unity. Throughout the speech, Starmer deliberately foregrounds himself, the Labour Party, the government, and the British public, while simultaneously minimizing the visibility of political opponents and internal critics. These representational choices

reflect what Van Leeuwen (2008) describes as the ideological function of inclusion and exclusion, whereby discourse selectively foregrounds certain participants while reducing or omitting others. Rather than presenting a neutral account of his resignation, Starmer constructs a discourse that emphasizes collective achievement, democratic accountability, and institutional continuity.

The most prominent pattern of inclusion is Starmer's self-representation through the repeated use of the first-person singular pronoun "I." From the opening of the speech, he places himself at the centre of the political narrative by declaring, "I inherited a Labour Party that was politically, financially and morally bankrupt," and later, "I have heard the answer of my parliamentary party to that question. And I accept that answer with good grace" and "I will resign as leader of the Labour Party" (Starmer, 2026). These repeated self-references foreground Starmer as the principal political actor who assumes responsibility for both the party's transformation and his eventual resignation. The first-person singular is used predominantly when discussing difficult decisions, leadership responsibilities, and constitutional obligations. By explicitly representing himself as the actor responsible for inheriting a divided party, accepting his parliamentary party's decision, and resigning from office, Starmer constructs an image of personal accountability and democratic leadership rather than political victimhood.

However, this individual representation shifts noticeably when the speech turns to the achievements of the Labour government. Instead of emphasizing personal accomplishment, Starmer repeatedly employs the first-person plural pronoun "we," stating, "we proved those people wrong because we changed our party," "look at what we've achieved in just two years," and "we came to power" (Starmer, 2026). This transition from "I" to "we" is a significant strategy of inclusion. Whereas personal responsibility is individualized through "I," political success becomes collective through "we." The repeated inclusion of the Labour Party and government within a shared political identity distributes achievement across the party rather than concentrating it solely in the leader. Such collective representation projects unity and reinforces the idea that political change is the result of collaborative effort rather than individual authority. Consequently, Starmer constructs himself not as an isolated political figure but as a member of a successful governing team.

The speech further broadens inclusion by incorporating the wider British public into the discourse. Expressions such as "the lives of millions of people," "everyone is seen, everyone is valued," "wealth and opportunity for all," "workers," "renters," "young people," and "half a million children" extend the scope of political representation beyond government institutions to encompass diverse sections of society (Starmer, 2026). These references portray Labour's policies as serving the collective interests of the nation rather than particular political groups. By repeatedly foregrounding beneficiaries of government policies, Starmer legitimizes his administration through its perceived social impact. The public is therefore represented not as passive observers of political change but as the intended beneficiaries whose lives have improved because of governmental action.

At the same time, the speech strategically excludes political opponents. Perhaps the clearest example occurs in the statement, "we proved those people wrong because we changed our party." Rather than identifying critics by name, political affiliation, or institutional role, Starmer refers to them only as "those people." This represents a clear instance of suppression, as the identities of these actors are omitted entirely from the discourse. Readers or listeners cannot determine precisely who these opponents are because no further information is provided. By suppressing

their identities, Starmer avoids direct political confrontation while simultaneously emphasizing Labour's success over unnamed critics. The omission shifts attention away from conflict and redirects it toward the party's achievements, thereby preserving the conciliatory tone expected of a resignation speech.

A subtler form of exclusion appears through backgrounding, particularly in Starmer's discussion of his departure from office. He acknowledges that "the question my party is asking now is whether I am best placed to lead us into the next general election," before adding, "I have heard the answer of my parliamentary party to that question" (Starmer, 2026). Although the parliamentary party is mentioned, the individuals responsible for withdrawing their support remain unidentified. No MPs, factions, or internal disagreements are explicitly referenced. Their agency is therefore backgrounded rather than fully articulated. This strategy allows Starmer to recognize the democratic process within the Labour Party without exposing internal divisions or assigning blame to particular individuals. Consequently, the resignation is framed as the outcome of a collective constitutional process rather than a personal or factional conflict.

Another noteworthy pattern of inclusion is the representation of institutional actors that reinforce constitutional legitimacy. References to "His Majesty the King," "the National Executive Committee," and "Parliament" situate Starmer's resignation within established democratic institutions rather than within a narrative of political crisis (Starmer, 2026). Their inclusion emphasizes constitutional continuity and orderly governance, portraying the transition of leadership as a routine democratic procedure. By foregrounding these institutions, Starmer reassures his audience that political stability will be maintained despite his resignation.

Role Allocation

Another significant representational strategy in Starmer's resignation speech is the allocation of agency through activation and passivation. Throughout the speech, Starmer carefully distributes agency among himself, the Labour government, political institutions, and the British public to construct a narrative of responsible leadership and effective governance. By activating particular social actors while passivating others, he controls how responsibility for political achievements, policy outcomes, and his resignation is interpreted.

The speech consistently activates Starmer when discussing leadership, responsibility, and political decision-making. This is evident in statements such as "I inherited a Labour Party that was politically, financially and morally bankrupt," "I have heard the answer of my parliamentary party," "I accept that answer with good grace," "I will resign as leader of the Labour Party," and "I have spoken to His Majesty the King this morning to inform him of my decision." In each case, the first-person singular functions as the grammatical and semantic agent performing deliberate actions. Starmer is represented as the individual who inherits, accepts, resigns, and informs, portraying him as an active political leader who assumes responsibility for both his successes and his departure from office. Rather than attributing these actions to external pressures or circumstances, the discourse constructs resignation as a conscious and voluntary decision, reinforcing an image of democratic accountability.

While responsibility is individualized through "I," political achievements are largely attributed to collective actors. The repeated use of "we" in expressions such as "we proved those people wrong because we changed our party," "we came to power," and "look at what we've achieved in just two years" activates the Labour Party and the government as collective agents of political change. Similarly, institutional actors are activated in the slogan-like sequence, "Change promised by a

Labour government. Change fought for by a Labour government, change delivered by a Labour government." The repetition of "Labour government" as the agent of promising, fighting for, and delivering change emphasizes institutional capability rather than individual leadership. This collective activation distributes credit across the governing party, presenting political success as the product of coordinated government action rather than the achievement of a single leader.

The speech also activates institutions responsible for ensuring democratic continuity during the leadership transition. Starmer states, "I will ask the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party to set out a timetable," while adding that "Parliament returns in September" and "I will remain in post as prime minister until the contest is complete." These institutional actors are represented as participating in an orderly constitutional process rather than reacting to political instability. The National Executive Committee, Parliament, and the office of Prime Minister are therefore activated as functioning democratic institutions that facilitate a smooth transfer of power. Their representation reinforces the legitimacy of the political process and reassures the audience that governmental stability extends beyond the tenure of an individual leader.

In contrast, several social actors are represented through passivation, particularly when Starmer discusses the beneficiaries of government policies. Expressions such as "half a million children being lifted out of poverty," "protecting young people from social media," and "the lives of millions of people" portray children, young people, and the wider public primarily as recipients of governmental action. Rather than initiating change themselves, these groups are portrayed as benefiting from government decisions. This passivisation reinforces the traditional relationship between governing institutions and citizens, whereby political authority is presented as acting on behalf of society. It also strengthens the legitimacy of Labour's policies by emphasizing their positive social consequences rather than the political mechanisms through which they were implemented.

A significant pattern emerges in Starmer's discussion of his own political achievements. Although many policy outcomes are expressed through passive constructions or participial forms, such as "investment secured," "infrastructure being built," "our reputation in the world restored," and "asylum hotels closing," Starmer later reconnects these achievements to his own agency by stating that "half a million children [were] being lifted out of poverty because of the choices that I made." This statement links passivated outcomes directly to an activated decision-maker. The linguistic structure allows the speech to foreground the positive results of government policies while ultimately attributing their success to deliberate political leadership. As a result, Starmer simultaneously projects humility by emphasizing outcomes and reinforces accountability by acknowledging his role in achieving them.

The allocation of agency also shapes the representation of Starmer's resignation itself. Rather than portraying himself as being forced from office, he consistently activates himself through declarations such as "I will resign," "I will remain in post," "I will do everything I can to ensure an orderly handover of power," and "I will also give my successor my full and unequivocal support." These future-oriented active constructions portray resignation not as a political defeat but as a responsible transition managed by an accountable leader. Even after announcing his departure, Starmer remains the principal agent responsible for safeguarding governmental continuity and supporting the next leader. This sustained activation preserves his authority and reinforces his commitment to democratic institutions until the leadership transition is complete.

Personalization and Impersonalization

Another significant representational strategy in Starmer's resignation speech is the distinction between personalization and impersonalization. Throughout the speech, Starmer alternates between representing social actors as identifiable individuals and as institutions or abstract entities. This strategic movement enables him to humanize his leadership while simultaneously reinforcing the legitimacy and continuity of political institutions. By personalizing some actors and impersonalizing others, the speech balances personal responsibility with institutional authority.

The speech is predominantly characterized by the speaker's personalization through the repeated use of the first-person pronouns "I" and "my." Statements such as "I inherited a Labour Party," "I have heard the answer," "I will resign as leader of the Labour Party," and "I will remain in post as prime minister" consistently present Starmer as an identifiable individual rather than an anonymous officeholder. This personalization establishes a direct relationship between the speaker and the audience, portraying him as a leader who openly accepts responsibility for political decisions and their consequences. The frequent use of the personal pronoun also creates an impression of sincerity and transparency, allowing Starmer to present his resignation as a personal decision grounded in democratic principles rather than political necessity.

The personalization of Starmer becomes particularly prominent in the closing section of the speech, where political identity gives way to personal identity. Instead of concluding with governmental achievements, he states that he would spend more time "being the best husband I can to my fantastic wife, Vic," and "being the best dad I can to my beautiful children." The explicit reference to "my fantastic wife, Vic" and "my beautiful children" shifts the discourse from the public sphere to the private sphere. Rather than representing himself solely as a political leader, Starmer constructs multiple personal identities as a husband and a father. This transition humanizes the speaker and encourages the audience to view him beyond the institutional role of Prime Minister. The resignation is therefore framed not merely as the end of a political career but as a return to family responsibilities, reinforcing an image of humility and personal integrity.

The speech also personalizes several other social actors who are closely associated with Starmer's political journey. Expressions such as "friends and colleagues," "the brilliant Number 10 staff," and "our country's extraordinary civil service" acknowledge the contributions of individuals to his leadership. By thanking these actors for their "commitment, service and support," Starmer recognizes political governance as a collective human endeavour rather than the achievement of one individual. This personalization not only expresses gratitude but also constructs solidarity between the outgoing leader and those who supported his government. It reinforces the image of leadership based on cooperation and shared commitment rather than personal authority.

Alongside these personalized representations, the speech makes extensive use of impersonalization, particularly through institutions and abstract political entities. Rather than consistently referring to individuals, Starmer frequently attributes actions and achievements to institutions such as "the Labour government," "the Labour Party," "the National Executive Committee," "Parliament," and "His Majesty the King." For example, the repeated formulation "Change promised by a Labour government. Change fought for by a Labour government, change delivered by a Labour government" assigns political agency to the institution itself rather than to specific ministers or political figures. This impersonalization shifts attention away from individual politicians and emphasizes the collective and institutional nature of governance. Consequently, political success is represented as the accomplishment of government as an institution rather than of Starmer alone.

The speech also employs abstraction by attributing agency to concepts and national entities. Expressions such as "our reputation in the world restored," "Britain once again standing up for decency, respect and the rule of law," and "the hard work of change" represent abstract ideas and the nation itself as participants in political action. Similarly, "change" becomes a recurring abstract actor throughout the speech, particularly in the repeated declaration that "Change promised... Change fought for... Change delivered." Although change is not a human participant, it is represented as the central objective around which political action is organized. This abstraction strengthens the ideological message that Labour's achievements extend beyond individual leaders to encompass broader national transformation.

A notable interaction between personalization and impersonalization occurs in Starmer's discussion of governmental achievements. While policy successes are frequently attributed to "the Labour government," he later reconnects these institutional accomplishments to his personal leadership by stating that "half a million children [were] being lifted out of poverty because of the choices that I made." Here, impersonalized governmental action and personalized political responsibility operate simultaneously. Institutional achievements are acknowledged, yet the speaker does not entirely detach himself from the decisions that produced them. This balanced representation enables Starmer to project both humility and accountability, recognizing collective governance while accepting personal responsibility for key policy choices.

Assimilation and Individualization

Another prominent representational strategy in Starmer's resignation speech is the use of assimilation and individualization. Throughout the speech, Starmer alternates between representing himself as an individual political leader and as part of a collective political body. This strategic shift enables him to balance personal accountability with collective responsibility, constructing an image of leadership that is both individual and collaborative. Rather than consistently foregrounding either himself or the Labour Party, the speech carefully moves between "I" and "we" according to the communicative purpose of each section.

The speech opens with a strong emphasis on individualization, presenting Starmer as the central political actor responsible for both the Labour Party's transformation and his resignation. Statements such as "I inherited a Labour Party that was politically, financially and morally bankrupt," "I have heard the answer of my parliamentary party," "I accept that answer with good grace," and "I will resign as leader of the Labour Party" consistently foreground the speaker as an individual. Through these repeated first-person singular constructions, responsibility for major political decisions is personalized rather than shared with others. This individualization reinforces Starmer's image as a leader who accepts responsibility for difficult decisions instead of attributing them to external circumstances or collective pressure. His resignation is therefore represented as a personal act of democratic accountability rather than an outcome imposed by political events.

However, when the speech turns to Labour's political achievements, the discourse shifts noticeably towards assimilation through the repeated use of collective pronouns. Starmer declares, "we proved those people wrong because we changed our party," "we came to power," and "look at what we've achieved in just two years." These expressions assimilate Starmer into the wider Labour Party and government, presenting political success as the product of collective effort rather than individual leadership. By replacing "I" with "we," the speech distributes credit among party members and government institutions, reinforcing internal unity and shared responsibility. This collective representation also minimizes any perception that Labour's achievements depended

solely on Starmer's personal leadership, instead portraying them as the outcome of coordinated political action.

Assimilation is further reinforced through collective expressions that construct broader political and national identities. References to "our country," "our national flag," "our reputation in the world," and "our allies in Europe" extend the collective identity beyond the Labour Party to include the nation as a whole. Similarly, the repeated reference to "a Labour government" emphasizes institutional rather than personal identity, presenting government as a unified political actor working collectively to achieve national change. These assimilated representations reduce distinctions between individual politicians and the institutions they serve, constructing a discourse of national solidarity during a period of political transition.

Starmer also employs assimilation when referring to groups that benefit from government policies. Expressions such as "millions of people," "everyone," "workers," "renters," "young people," and "half a million children" represent citizens collectively rather than individually. Instead of focusing on specific beneficiaries, these assimilated groups symbolize broader sections of British society. This strategy broadens the perceived impact of Labour's policies by suggesting that governmental achievements extend across the population rather than serving isolated individuals. As a result, political success is represented as collective social progress rather than a series of individual policy outcomes.

Although assimilation dominates the discussion of political achievements, Starmer consistently returns to individualization when addressing leadership responsibilities and the future transition of power. Statements such as "I will remain in post as prime minister until the contest is complete," "I will do everything I can to ensure an orderly handover of power," and "I will also give my successor my full and unequivocal support" once again foreground the speaker as an individual actor. This return to the singular pronoun is significant because it associates personal identity with constitutional duty rather than political success. While achievements are shared collectively, responsibility for ensuring a smooth democratic transition remains individualized. This contrast strengthens Starmer's portrayal as a leader who accepts personal responsibility during moments of institutional change while willingly sharing credit for governmental accomplishments.

A further aspect of assimilation appears through Starmer's repeated construction of a shared relationship between the government and the public. Expressions such as "everyone is seen, everyone is valued," "wealth and opportunity for all," and "to change the lives of millions of people for the better" establish an inclusive discourse that minimizes divisions between political leaders and citizens. Rather than presenting government as separate from society, these collective representations construct a common national identity based on shared values and collective progress. The repeated emphasis on inclusiveness reinforces Labour's broader political message that governmental action is undertaken on behalf of the whole nation rather than particular social or political interests.

Nomination, Categorization, Functionalization, and Identification

Another important representational strategy in Starmer's resignation speech is the way social actors are represented through nomination, categorization, functionalization, and identification. Rather than referring to participants in a single way, Starmer strategically shifts among naming individuals, classifying them by shared identities, emphasizing their institutional functions, and defining them through personal relationships. These representational choices construct authority,

legitimacy, and solidarity while reinforcing both the institutional and personal dimensions of political leadership.

The speech employs nomination selectively, reserving proper names for actors whose identities carry constitutional or personal significance. The clearest examples are "His Majesty the King" and "Vic." Starmer states, "I have spoken to His Majesty the King this morning to inform him of my decision," explicitly naming the monarch rather than referring to him through a generic institutional label. The King's nomination reinforces the constitutional legitimacy of Starmer's resignation by presenting it as a formal democratic process conducted in accordance with established political conventions. Likewise, the nomination of "Vic" in the closing remarks, "my fantastic wife, Vic, who has been a rock by my side", introduces a deeply personal dimension to the speech. Unlike political actors who remain unnamed, Vic is presented as a unique individual whose emotional support has been central to Starmer's political journey. These selective nominations therefore distinguish between actors whose individual identities are considered politically or personally significant and those whose identities remain less important to the communicative purpose of the speech.

In contrast, many participants are represented through categorization, whereby their individual identities are replaced by broader social or institutional memberships. Rather than naming individual Members of Parliament, ministers, or civil servants, Starmer refers to "my parliamentary party," "friends and colleagues," "Number 10 staff," "our country's extraordinary civil service," and "our allies in Europe." These expressions categorize participants according to shared political, professional, or institutional identities rather than individual characteristics. Such categorization shifts attention away from particular personalities and emphasizes collective affiliation and shared responsibility. For example, "my parliamentary party" refers to an entire political institution rather than to specific individuals who influenced Starmer's resignation. This allows the speech to acknowledge internal democratic processes while avoiding personal criticism or political division. Similarly, references to "friends and colleagues" recognize collective support without privileging particular individuals, reinforcing an image of unity within the Labour Party. A particularly prominent feature of the speech is functionalization, through which social actors are represented according to the roles they perform. Throughout the speech, Starmer consistently foregrounds institutional and professional functions rather than personal identities. He refers to himself as "leader of the Labour Party" and "prime minister," while other actors are represented as "His Majesty the King," "the National Executive Committee," "the Labour government," and "the civil service." These functional labels emphasize political responsibilities rather than individual personalities. Even the repeated reference to "a Labour government" represents governance as an institutional function rather than the actions of particular ministers. This pattern reinforces the idea that political authority derives from constitutional offices and institutional responsibilities rather than from individual leaders alone. Consequently, Starmer's resignation is represented not merely as the departure of an individual but as a transition within stable democratic institutions.

Alongside functionalization, the speech increasingly relies on identification, particularly in its concluding section. Unlike functionalization, which defines actors by what they do, identification emphasizes who they are in relation to others. This is evident when Starmer refers to "my fantastic wife," "my beautiful children," and "friends and colleagues who have been at my side." These expressions define social actors through personal and relational identities rather than political functions. Starmer also redefines his own identity by declaring that after leaving "the biggest job

in the country," he will focus on "being the best husband I can" and "being the best dad I can." This shift from political office to family roles is particularly significant. Whereas earlier sections construct him through institutional functions such as leader and Prime Minister, the conclusion reconstructs him through familial identities. The transition humanizes the speaker and presents resignation not as the end of public service but as a return to equally meaningful personal responsibilities.

The interaction between functionalization and identification is especially important in shaping Starmer's political image. During the first part of the speech, his identity is dominated by institutional functions associated with leadership, governance, and constitutional responsibility. As the speech progresses, however, these official roles gradually give way to personal relationships and family identities. This transition creates a balanced representation of Starmer as both a statesman and an ordinary individual. It also softens the political nature of the resignation by concluding on an emotional rather than institutional note. Instead of ending with governmental achievements or political conflict, the speech ends with gratitude, family, and personal commitment, encouraging the audience to evaluate Starmer not only as a political leader but also as a husband, father, and colleague.

Genericization and Specification

Another important representational strategy in Starmer's resignation speech is the use of genericization and specification. Throughout the speech, Starmer alternates between referring to broad social groups and identifiable individuals, enabling him to universalize Labour's political achievements while lending credibility and authenticity to his personal narrative. This strategic movement broadens the appeal of the speech while reinforcing its constitutional and personal dimensions.

The speech predominantly employs genericization when referring to the beneficiaries of Labour's policies. Expressions such as "millions of people," "everyone," "workers," "renters," "young people," "half a million children," and "the privileged few" represent social actors as broad social categories rather than identifiable individuals. Similarly, references to "our allies in Europe" and "my parliamentary party" portray collective entities instead of particular members. These generalized representations extend the perceived impact of Labour's achievements beyond isolated individuals to society as a whole. By representing beneficiaries collectively, Starmer constructs his government's policies as inclusive and nationally significant, reinforcing the image of Labour as governing for the wider public rather than for specific interests.

In contrast, specification is reserved for social actors whose individual identities strengthen the speech's constitutional legitimacy or emotional appeal. This is evident in references to "His Majesty the King" and "Vic," both of whom are presented as identifiable individuals. Likewise, Starmer specifies himself through repeated first-person references, particularly when discussing leadership responsibilities and his resignation. These individualized representations lend authenticity to the speech by connecting political events to real and identifiable participants. While the King symbolizes constitutional continuity, Vic represents the personal support underlying Starmer's political career, thereby balancing the institutional and human dimensions of the resignation.

The interaction between genericization and specification reflects the broader communicative purpose of the speech. Genericization broadens Labour's achievements into benefits for the nation, whereas specification personalizes responsibility and reinforces the legitimacy of the leadership

transition. Through these complementary strategies, Starmer constructs a discourse that is both inclusive and personal, presenting his resignation not only as an individual political decision but also as part of a broader democratic process that serves the collective interests of the British public.

Discussion

This research examined how Keir Starmer constructs political identity, responsibility, legitimacy, and collective action through the representation of social actors in his resignation speech. The findings demonstrate that Starmer strategically employs inclusion and exclusion, role allocation, personalization and impersonalization, assimilation and individualization, nomination and categorization, and genericization and specification to present his resignation as a responsible and democratic transition rather than a political defeat. These findings support Van Leeuwen's (2008) argument that discourse strategically represents social actors to achieve particular ideological and communicative purposes.

The findings reveal that Starmer consistently foregrounds himself, the Labour Party, democratic institutions, and the British public while suppressing or backgrounding political opponents and internal critics. Similarly, the strategic use of activation and passivation enables him to assume personal responsibility for leadership decisions while attributing political achievements to collective actors such as the Labour government. These representational choices construct an image of accountable leadership, institutional stability, and collective governance. The findings align with Fairclough (2003), Van Dijk (2008), and Wodak and Meyer (2009), who argue that political discourse constructs legitimacy, power, and ideology through strategic linguistic representation. They are also consistent with the findings of Siregar (2021) and Kadim (2022), who found that political leaders employ discourse strategies to strengthen leadership credibility and shape public perception.

The findings further demonstrate that Starmer balances personal identity with institutional authority through the strategic use of personalization, impersonalization, assimilation, and individualization. While he presents himself as an accountable political leader, he simultaneously emphasizes collective identity and constitutional institutions, thereby reinforcing democratic continuity. Likewise, nomination, categorization, functionalization, identification, genericization, and specification contribute to constructing authority, solidarity, and inclusiveness. These findings support the research of Ali et al. (2025), Aqdas et al. (2025), and Ali et al. (2026), which similarly show that political speeches construct leadership and legitimacy through representations of collective identity and shared political purpose.

Conclusion

This research examined the representation of social actors in Keir Starmer's resignation speech through Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Theory. The findings demonstrate that Starmer strategically employs representational strategies such as inclusion and exclusion, role allocation, personalization and impersonalization, assimilation and individualization, nomination and categorization, and genericization and specification to construct political identity, allocate responsibility, establish legitimacy, and promote collective action. These linguistic choices present his resignation as a responsible democratic transition while reinforcing institutional continuity and public confidence.

The research suggests that the representation of social actors is fundamental to understanding how political leaders manage public perception during periods of leadership transition. Rather than functioning solely as announcements of departure, resignation speeches serve as strategic

discourses through which leaders negotiate accountability, preserve legitimacy, and reinforce collective identity. The findings underscore the value of Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Theory in revealing how linguistic representation shapes political meaning and contributes to the broader understanding of political discourse.

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