

IDEOLOGICAL SCHEMATA IN “I’VE BEEN TO THE MOUNTAINTOP”: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MARTIN LUTHER’S FINAL SPEECH

Sumera Mukhtar

PhD Scholar Institute of English Language and Literature (IELL), University of Sindh,
Jamshoro

Email: shafaqahmad84@gmail.com

Dr. Sameena Khokhar

Associate Professor PhD Scholar Institute of English Language and Literature (IELL),
University of Sindh, Jamshoro

Email: sameena_khokhar@yahoo.com

Abstract

The present study employs Teun A. van Dijk’s socio-cognitive approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore the ideological construction of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s final speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” (April 3, 1968). As the final words were delivered by MLK before his assassination within the Memphis sanitation strike, so this speech represents a critical intersection of labor rights, theological prophecy, and systemic civil rights resistance. The existing literature on King’s speeches mostly focuses on his rhetorical style and overlooks the cognitive mechanisms behind his persuasive power. By using the lens of Van Dijk’s Model, the study fills the gap and explores that King did not merely challenge the laws of discriminations, but systematically dismantled the subjugated minds that naturalized racial and economic oppression. This study also highlights the influence of microstructure on collective social representations, and the analysis exhibits that King strategically employed ideological schemata to reframe a localized labor dispute into a universal mandate for resistance publically.

Key words: Socio-Cognitive Approach, micro and macro structures, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Introduction

The fulfillment of societal needs are structurally dependent on linguistic mediation as a primary mechanism through which individuals communicate and engage in intergroup discourse. As Sholeh (2019) advances language functions as the indispensable medium through which this cooperative enterprise is actualized.

In a communication process, public addresses or speeches also represent a distinct, unidirectional mode of discursive transmission. In this paradigm, the speaker as a primary focal person, strategically use argumentation, persuasion, and rhetorical adaptations that suit to the audience’s specific mindset and cultural background. Every speech has a certain meaning that relies on the situation in which it is delivered.

In history, the influential leaders have used language as a powerful instrument to inspire, challenge, and reshape societies. Martin Luther’s speeches and writings considered as the prime examples in advancing the Protestant Reformation. His linguistic choices were not passive expressions of belief but active instruments designed to destabilize institutional power and reimagine the bonds between faith, hierarchy, and the individual soul. Sipra and Rashid (2013) emphasize the socio-political significance of Martin Luther King Jr.’s discourse, highlighting his foundational stance on a unified, non-discriminatory nation.

The effective use of persuasive strategies is also the prominent style of delivering a speech. These strategies not only enhance the certain rhetorical effects but also reshape the ideologies of society. The political leaders and social reformers use language to convey actions through voice and paralanguage, body movements, gestures, postures, eye contacts and use of their energy level while performing their speeches at public places. (Nowak, 2004).

Aristotle also signifies different styles to deliver a speech. After recognizing the importance of pitch, rhythm and intonation, he says that voice plays a vital to express speaker’s ideology as

well as emotion. He further asserts that the use of these techniques and styles are compulsory to change the opinions of the audience because the audience are mostly biased towards the speaker whose style they like (Aristotle translated by Kennedy 2007).

The term discourse is used to describe speech patterns, dialects, and acceptable comments within a community. In critical discourse analysis, the linguistic patterns of any text or speech are examined within a social context. The current study also includes a critical discourse analysis of Martin Luther King's chosen speech "I have been the Mountaintop" by applying Van Dijk's socio-cognitive Model.

Rationale of the Study

As a principal device, language can influence or enforce the idea, paradigm and perspective of the person, so it plays a crucial role to present the ideology of a leader and a nation. After extensive review, the researcher selected to analyze Martin Luther's final speech one night before his assassination, "I Have Been to the Mountaintop," using Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model of CDA, a novel approach in this context. The majority of prior studies have relied upon Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to examine some of Luther's famous speeches, the application of Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model to the selected speech remains visibly unexplored. This study not only contributes to critical discourse analysis but also sheds light on persuasive techniques employed by Martin Luther and has also explored the influence of speaker's ideology on set of beliefs and minds of the people through the use of different linguistic choices.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine King Martin Luther's ideology through the linguistic choices that he used in his selected speech "I have been to the Mountaintop"
2. To analyze discourses of power which shape cultural and political consciousness, sustain or disrupt racial, class, and ideological structures in the selected speech

Literature Review

In Critical discourse analysis (CDA) the language used by people and organizations is deeply examined and analyzed (Richardson, 2007). Critical is used in the special sense of aiming to show up connections that may be hidden from people such as the connections between language, power, strategies, and ideology (Fairclough, 1989). Critical discourse analysis offers not only a description and interpretation of discourses in any social context, but also offers an explanation of why and how discourses work (Rogers, 2004).

In addition to address more general social issues, CDA pays attention to outside variables like power, ideology, and inequality and uses social philosophical theory to evaluate and interpret spoken and written texts. According to Van Dijk (Van Dijk, 1993), CDA focuses on the relationship among discourse, power, dominance, and social inequality. A critical viewpoint on discourse analysis investigates the relationships that exist between language use and the social, political, and contextual factors in which it is used. It is accomplished by addressing social, political, and economic concerns and critically examining the standards and expectations of specific discourse communities.

According to Eriyanto (2012), Van Dijk has divided critical discourse analysis into five components. First, every discourse is seen to convince the people by affecting, and reacting to context and the speaker's action is concerned with that discourse. Second, the critical analysis of discourse takes into specific context, including background, circumstance, event, condition, and everything outside of the text. It also takes into account other aspects that affect discourse meanings, like language participants and the environment in which the text is generated. It implies that conversation should be understood within specific parameters. Third, history situates speech inside a particular social framework, and it is impossible to comprehend discourse without taking this framework. Fourth, power clarifies that a discourse is a type of

conflict over power. Fifth, ideology emphasizes discourse and texts as examples of ideological praxis.

The analysis of Martin Luther's speeches through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) holds considerable scholarly significance across multiple interrelated dimensions. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reveals how Martin Luther's language both reflected and constituted a form of power that contributed to the social and ideological upheaval of the Reformation (Amandara et al., 2024).

Hidayah (2018) conducted a study on Martin Luther's speeches. She analyzed the ideology that was applied by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches through his use of language. Her research's objective was to evaluate the text's organization that reflect the ideologies through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It dealt with. The findings indicated that the injustice committed by the powerful institutes which is regarded as a form of oppression based on class was the central concern, or what we would refer to as the macrostructure of those speech texts.

Josiah (2015) studied the pragmatic interpretations of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. The goals of this study were to characterize the socioeconomic and political ideology of the speech, as well as to explore how the speaker used the speech as a platform to address racism and promote equality. The study enriches historical understanding of the Reformation by conceptualizing it as a fundamentally discursive phenomenon. By centering the text of Luther's speech, this study illuminates the constitutive role of language in shaping and propelling historical transformation.

The socio-cognitive approach within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was initially coined by Van Dijk (1995), who foregrounded the pivotal role of cognition in revealing the relationship between social interaction and discourse structures. Van Dijk's initial work underscored the profound influence of mental representations, cognitive processes, and social cognition upon linguistic production and interpretation within discursive contexts. This theoretical trajectory was subsequently extended by Wodak (2001), who further examined the mechanisms through which social cognition and mental constructions shape and are shaped by discursive behaviors, thereby enriching the socio-cognitive apparatus of CDA.

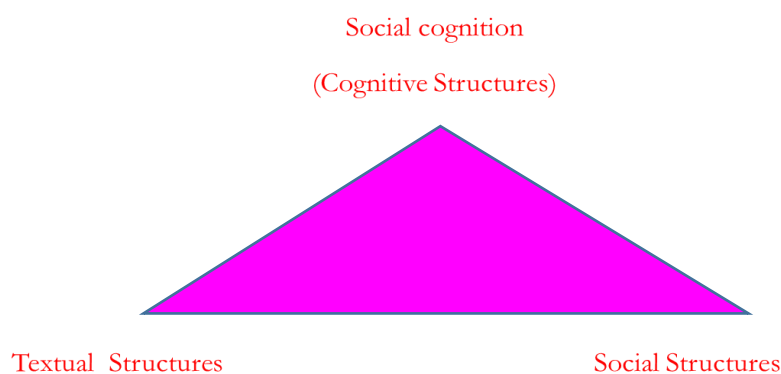


Figure 1: Textual-cognitive-social structures triangle

Smith and Johnson (2012), examined political speeches through socio-cognitive analytical lens to explore the cognitive biasness and meditation of mental frameworks by the interpreting the construction of political discourse. Similarly, Brown and Lee (2017) applied socio-cognitive

methodologies to explore the influence of cognitive schemata and social representations upon the production of leadership discourse.

The analytical utility of socio-cognitive approach has further been demonstrated across a spectrum of discursive contexts in Garcia and Ahmed's (2019) study on gendered language within motivational speeches, examining the social schemas and cognitive structures to inform linguistic choices and power asymmetries. On the other hand, Chen and Williams (2020) adopted socio-cognitive perspectives to analyze the impact of cultural cognition on persuasive strategies within corporate speeches, revealing the intricate relationship between culturally embedded mental models and rhetorical efficacy.

By examining the ideological schemata and social cognition through motivational discourse, this study uncovers the persuasive strategies underlying Luther's speech and its broader societal effects, contributing to both CDA scholarship and the practical understanding of rhetorical influence on the people.

Methodology

The research is qualitative in design. A qualitative approach associates to the data which is not in the form of numbers or statistics, but in the form of words using sentences, statements, descriptions or images, and videotapes (Moleong, 2007). The researcher has selected Martin Luther's significant speech "I have been to the Mountaintop" which is not critically analyzed before.

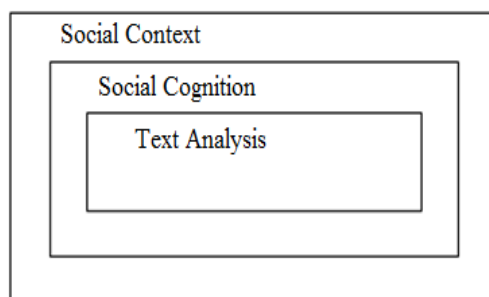
Van Dijk's (1988) framework of CDA by delving into production, reception, and comprehension levels, examining coherence, themes, and rhetorical dimensions has been used on three levels: Macrostructure provides an overview of the themes of text's content and simplifies complex information into macro-propositions. Superstructure examines the schematic level of structural patterns that shape the text's form. Microstructure analyzes the semantic, syntactic, and rhetoric levels in discourse to the exclusion of other meanings.

ELEMENTS	TOOLS	OBJECTS
Macrostructure	Thematic A topic or theme that is emphasized in the text	Topic: Actors, events, groups
Superstructure	Schematic Highlighting how a discourse is presented in terms of the scheme or order in which it is presented	Plot and scheme: Opening, content, closing
Microstructure	Semantics Analyzing how a meaning is emphasized in discourse to the exclusion of other meanings. For example, exacerbating one party and favoring the Other	Background, details, meaning, presupposition

	Syntactic Analyzing the form and structure of sentences used in a discourse	Pronouns, coherence
	Rhetoric Analyzing how a discourse is presented	Metaphor

Data analysis procedure and tools

The most critical aspect of any study is to gather data by using different research tools. The current study is not required a large number of instruments to collect data because there is not any involvement of participants according to the study's subjects. The data for this study is procured through web-scraping techniques applied to online platforms. The textual content of the selected speech "I've been to the Mountaintop" by Martin Luther King Jr is accessed and downloaded from an internet source. The researcher has applied Van Dijk's Socio-cognitive model



The following research instruments are used in the study

- Observation
- Content analysis
- Library research

Ethical considerations

The author declares that this study adheres to research ethics, acknowledges all cited sources appropriately, and utilizes authentic secondary data. This work is original and has not been submitted elsewhere for publication.

Data analysis

The following subsections present the result of the analysis of Martin Luther King's speech "I've been to the Mountaintop" that use three elements of text; macrostructure, superstructure, and microstructure by applying Van Dijk's model of CDA and the ideology that represented in the speech text.

Macrostructure Analysis

Themes and Topic

"I'm delighted to see each of you here tonight in spite of a storm warning. You reveal that you are determined to go on anyhow".

Martin Luther's speech "**I've been to the mountaintop**" has some following key topics:

- **Crisis and Opportunity**_____ "Only when it is dark enough can you see the stars"
- **Collective Unity**_____ "Either we go up together, or we go down together"
- **Mortality and Legacy**_____ "I've been to the mountaintop... I may not get there with you"

In this speech, Martin Luther King Jr. shares his perspective on the civil rights movement, the Memphis struggle, and his vision for humanity. He expresses gratitude for the gathering despite a "storm warning" and believes that he would live in the "second half of the 20th century" if given a choice. He sees God working in this era, where the masses of people are rising up globally, with a universal cry of "**We want to be free**" heard in places like Johannesburg, Nairobi, Accra, New York City, Atlanta, Jackson, and Memphis. He connects the local fight to a global "human rights revolution" and calls for dignity and respect for all individuals, emphasizing the determination to be men.

Super Structure Analysis

Schematic Elements

"Thank you very kindly, my friends. As I listened to Ralph Abernathy and his eloquent and generous introduction and then thought You reveal that you are determined to go on anyhow."

The opening section of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech begins with a warm and personal connection with his audience and close associates, expressing appreciation. This opening sets the stage for a speech that connects the immediate struggle to the grand narrative of human history and the enduring pursuit of freedom and justice. King's speech highlights the resilience and shared commitment of the audience to the cause, demonstrating that the challenges they face will not deter them.

The humble self-deprecation, acknowledgement of community support and praise for audience perseverance ("in spite of a storm warning") are main schematic elements of the speech.

"I too am happy that I didn't sneeze", highlighting the importance of his continued presence in the fight for justice powerful vision of the future: "He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"

He emphasizes the importance of his continued presence in the fight for justice and acknowledges the threats against him in Memphis. Despite the threats, the speaker declares that it doesn't matter with him now, as he has been to the mountaintop, expressing a profound understanding and acceptance of his role in the movement. He expresses that while he would like a long life, he is not concerned about that now. The speech culminates with a powerful vision of the future, expressing hope and conviction in the ultimate success of their struggle for equality and justice.

But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop". He continues, "And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain.

The speech concludes with an expression of his current state of mind: *"And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!"* This ending section is characterized by a sense of having reached a significant spiritual understanding and a confident hope for the future success of the movement, even in the face of personal danger and the possibility of not seeing that future himself.

Microstructure Analysis

Background and Details

The context of the gathering is related to a significant event happening in Memphis: *"Something is happening in Memphis; something is happening in our world"*. Later in the speech, it becomes clear that this *"something"* is the struggle of thirteen hundred sanitation workers who are on strike because Memphis is *"not being fair to them"*. The speaker emphasizes that the core issue is *"injustice"* and *"the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants, who happen to be sanitation workers"*.

Meaning and Presuppositions

The discourse meaning of the speech revolves around galvanizing support for the Memphis sanitation workers' strike while simultaneously placing this local struggle within a larger historical and spiritual context of the fight for human rights and justice.

When King says, *"And whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court..."* the clause *"whenever the slaves get together"* presupposes that there have been instances in the past when slaves did get together. Similarly, *"When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery"* presupposes that there is a state of slavery from which to get out.

The phrase, *"...his public servants, who happen to be sanitation workers", who happen to be sanitation workers."* This presupposes that the audience knows who are the public servants and adds the additional (and perhaps less expected or emphasized) information that they are sanitation workers.

Syntactic Level

Simple and Direct Sentences: The speech includes many straightforward, declarative sentences that convey a sense of clarity and determination. For example, *"Something is happening in Memphis; something is happening in our world"*. Similarly, *"We mean business now, and we are determined to gain our rightful place in God's world"*. These simple structures can create emphasis and make the message easily accessible.

Complex Sentences with Subordination: The speech also features complex sentences that incorporate subordinate clauses, adding layers of meaning and detail. For instance, *"And you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, 'Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?' I would take my mental flight by Egypt..."* the clause at the beginning sets up a hypothetical scenario that leads to the main clause. Another example is: *"Now that's a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up"*, where the *"because"* clause provides a reason for the preceding statement.

Pronouns

The frequent use of *"we"* is central to creating a sense of collective identity and shared struggle. King consistently uses *"we"* to refer to the African American community and those fighting for civil rights. For example, *"We mean business now, and we are determined to gain our rightful place in God's world"*. This inclusive *"we"* fosters solidarity and emphasizes the shared goals and determination of the movement. He extends this *"we"* to include the audience, as in *"We need all of you"*.

Shift of pronouns

"I would take my mental flight" (Personal authority)

"We've got to stay together" (Collective unity)

"You need to be there" (Direct address)

"They kept the slaves fighting" (Opposition)

Coherence

"If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1960... If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1961... If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1962..."

It Builds cumulative emotional impact, creates rhythmic power. Through Anaphora expressions

"Somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read of the freedom of press."

This is the example of parallelism that Reinforces American values to highlight contradiction with injustice.

"We are saying that we are determined to be men. We are determined to be people. We are saying—we are saying that we are God's children."

It elevates identity from mere survival to divine dignity by using the technique of antithesis.

Metaphors

Difficult times are metaphorically described as darkness that allows hope to become visible: "only when it is dark enough can you see the stars". Darkness intensifies vision rather than obscuring it, a rhetorical reversal that transforms despair into expectation.

"That's power right there, if we know how to pool it" "Withdrawing economic support" "Take your money out of the banks downtown"

In the speech, as a rhetorical strategy, King literalizes economic metaphors into concrete actions, moving from abstract "power" to specific instructions that transforms inspiration into mobilization.

Findings and Discussions

After applying Van Dijk's Socio-cognitive model, the critical discourse analysis of King's final speech reveals that his ideology fuses sacred and political worldviews, constructing racial justice as both God's command and America's unfinished promise. Through his linguistic and rhetoric strategies he has selectively blended biblical language like "promised land" alongside constitutional terms like "First Amendment", gives the movement two sources of authority, so people could not easily call it radical or anti-American.

The prophetic use of linguistic choices are deeply connected with the significance of research objectives that function as powerful instruments to disrupt and reshape power structures. His metaphors (journey, light, economic power) are not decorations but mental frameworks that has power to change the mindset of people think about race, class, and justice. His pronoun shifts are not grammar tricks but relationship-building strategies that create both group unity and personal prophetic authority.

King's discourse works as a counter-hegemonic force that keeps hope alive among the oppressed while shaking the conscience of oppressors. By clearly naming injustice *"Memphis is not being fair"* while rejecting violence *"we don't need any bricks and bottles"*, King maintains moral high ground and breaks the stereotype of angry black protest. His economic language gives practical power *"take your money out"*, reducing dependence on white-owned institutions and building alternative black economic structures.

The structure of speech also indicates the schematic progression. From personal introduction to historical panorama to urgent call to action to mountaintop testimony, is carefully designed to fulfill both objectives. King's discursive tactics ensures audiences are intellectually persuaded and emotionally mobilized, transforming the speech into a complete ideological intervention. Together, these linguistic and structural choices construct a new social reality where resistance is righteous, solidarity is strength, and liberation is inevitable.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The current study lies in its contribution to understanding the rhetorical strategies employed in influential social movements, illustrating the role of language in shaping public consciousness and drives social change.

By examining King's speeches through the lens of Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model of CDA, the readers get insights into the effectiveness of discourse in addressing systemic injustices, ultimately highlighting the enduring relevance of his messages in contemporary struggles for equality and justice. This study also recommends applying Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model to contemporary social justice discourses for example public, social or political speeches and religious sermons for insights into language's role in mobilizing communities. Expanding the analysis to include more of King's works could further illuminate his rhetorical strategies and their ongoing relevance.

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