



Journal for Social
Science Archives

Journal for Social Science Archives

Online ISSN: 3006-3310

Print ISSN: 3006-3302

Volume 3, Number 4, 2025, Pages 166 – 173

Journal Home Page

<https://jssarchives.com/index.php/Journal/about>



Language, Power, and Ideology: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Nelson Mandela's Speeches

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: August 27, 2025
Revised: September 18, 2025
Accepted: September 30, 2025
Available Online: October 14, 2025

Keywords:

Language, Power, and Ideology, Nelson Mandela

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines Nelson Mandela's political rhetoric through Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, focusing on how language constructs and conveys ideology. By analyzing three of Mandela's landmark speeches—his 1994 Presidential Inaugural Address, the 2000 Laureus World Sports Awards speech, and the 2004 Johannesburg press conference—the research explores the intersection of language, power, and ideology in post-apartheid South Africa. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model (text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice), the study identifies key ideological components such as freedom, unity, reconciliation, and equality, which underpin Mandela's vision of a democratic and inclusive nation. Through rhetorical strategies including metaphor, repetition, inclusivity, and moral appeals, Mandela's discourse not only reflected his ideological commitments but also reshaped collective consciousness toward national healing. The analysis reveals how his linguistic choices embodied resistance, reconciliation, and transformation, linking individual narratives with broader sociopolitical realities. The study contributes to CDA scholarship by illustrating how political language operates as a tool of both ideological reproduction and social transformation, offering insights into the power of discourse in leadership and nation-building.

Introduction

Language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a powerful instrument for shaping ideology and social transformation. In political contexts, it serves as both a mirror of society and a mechanism for constructing new realities. As Fairclough (1995) argues, discourse is a form of social practice through which ideologies are produced, maintained, and contested. Political leaders employ language strategically to legitimize authority, mobilize support, and

influence collective consciousness. This study examines how Nelson Mandela—one of the twentieth century’s most transformative leaders—used language to construct and convey ideologies of freedom, unity, equality, and reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa.

Mandela’s speeches exemplify how discourse operates as a catalyst for social change. His rhetoric transcended persuasion; it became a vehicle for moral vision and ideological reconstruction. Emerging from decades of oppression, Mandela redefined South Africa’s political narrative through inclusive language, metaphors of “journey” and “rainbow nation,” and appeals to shared humanity. These linguistic choices made his discourse an ideal subject for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

Using Fairclough’s (1992, 2001) three-dimensional CDA model—textual, discursive, and sociocultural analysis—this study investigates how Mandela’s speeches both reflected and reshaped post-apartheid ideology. The research analyzes three major speeches: the 1994 Inaugural Address, the 2000 Laureus World Sports Awards speech, and the 2004 Johannesburg press conference, representing distinct phases of his ideological evolution.

The study aims to: (1) identify dominant ideological components in Mandela’s discourse; (2) examine the linguistic and rhetorical strategies that articulate these ideologies; and (3) interpret their function within South Africa’s sociocultural context. By combining CDA with rhetorical analysis, the research reveals how Mandela’s language acted as a tool of reconciliation and nation-building—demonstrating the power of discourse to inspire unity, challenge injustice, and transform both politics and collective identity.

Literature Review

Language, power, and ideology are deeply intertwined within discourse. Scholars of critical linguistics argue that language is never neutral; it operates as a social practice that both reflects and constructs power relations (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2009). In political contexts, language functions as a tool for persuasion and ideological reproduction. The speeches of leaders such as Nelson Mandela exemplify how discourse can reshape collective consciousness and influence political transformation. This chapter reviews the theoretical foundations of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), its application to political discourse, the relationship between language and ideology, and prior studies on Mandela’s rhetoric—culminating in the identification of a research gap.

Theoretical Foundations of Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emerged in the late 20th century as a multidisciplinary response to linguistic models that ignored social power relations. Scholars such as Fairclough (1992), Van Dijk (1998), and Wodak (2001) established CDA as an approach that integrates linguistics, sociology, and political theory to uncover how discourse sustains dominance and inequality. CDA views language as a social practice embedded in structures of power and ideology (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000).

Fairclough’s three-dimensional model remains central to CDA. It involves: (1) *textual analysis*—studying vocabulary, grammar, and rhetoric; (2) *discursive practice*—examining production and interpretation of texts; and (3) *sociocultural practice*—linking discourse to broader ideological and institutional contexts (Fairclough, 2001). This model bridges micro-level linguistic detail and macro-level social meaning, allowing scholars to interpret how ideology operates through discourse.

While CDA has faced criticism for interpretive bias (Widdowson, 1995; Stubbs, 1997), it remains a powerful framework for revealing how linguistic structures shape social perception and reproduce ideology.

CDA and Political Discourse

Political discourse provides a rich site for CDA because it explicitly connects language and power. Van Dijk (1997) defines political discourse as elite communication aimed at influencing public opinion and legitimizing authority. Through strategies such as metaphor, framing, and intertextuality, leaders construct narratives that sustain hegemony. Fairclough's (2000) study of "New Labour" in Britain showed how neoliberal values were normalized through progressive-sounding language, while Reyes (2011) identified emotional appeal and legitimization as key strategies in political rhetoric.

In African contexts, CDA has been applied to leaders like Nkrumah, Kenyatta, and Obama, illustrating how linguistic choices promote postcolonial identity and nation-building (Sharififar & Rahimi, 2015; Mkhize, 2017). Yet, systematic CDA-based studies of Nelson Mandela's rhetoric remain scarce. Existing works often highlight his moral and historical impact (Clark, 2014; Soudien, 2017) but neglect the linguistic mechanisms through which his ideological meanings are produced. This study responds to that scholarly gap.

Language and Ideology

CDA is grounded in the principle that language both expresses and constructs ideology. Van Dijk (2006) defines ideology as a shared belief system that legitimizes the interests of specific groups. Fairclough (2015) argues that ideologies are "discursively constructed" because they depend on linguistic representation to become socially effective.

In political discourse, ideology manifests through evaluative language, pronouns, and metaphors. Inclusive pronouns like "we" and "our" promote solidarity, while oppositional binaries such as "us" and "them" reinforce division (Van Dijk, 1998). Metaphors also shape political reasoning (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Mandela's recurring metaphors—"the long walk to freedom" and "rainbow nation"—frame liberation as a shared moral and emotional journey. Language, therefore, becomes both a site of struggle and a means of resistance, as seen in Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, where power is maintained through consent rather than coercion. Mandela's discourse exemplifies this, as his inclusive, reconciliatory rhetoric subverted apartheid ideology while constructing new moral frameworks of equality and unity.

Nelson Mandela's Rhetoric and Ideological Discourse

Mandela's oratory reflects South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy—a moment defined by racial division and the pursuit of reconciliation. His speeches balance ethos, pathos, and logos, combining ethical credibility, emotional resonance, and rational appeal. The use of repetition, metaphor, and inclusive pronouns in lines such as "*We have triumphed*" constructs a collective identity of victory over division (Naqeeb, 2018; Cawood, 2014).

Mandela's language also embodies the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasizes shared humanity and communal responsibility. This moral ideology distinguishes his rhetoric from Western political traditions, situating it within indigenous frameworks of compassion and cooperation. Through CDA, these linguistic and moral elements reveal how Mandela's discourse functions as both ethical persuasion and ideological transformation.

Research Gap and Contribution

Although numerous scholars have explored Mandela's political and moral legacy (Sampson, 2012; Suttner, 2014), few have systematically analyzed his rhetoric using Fairclough's CDA model. The interplay between textual structure, discursive practice, and sociocultural context remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap by applying CDA to three major speeches (1994–2004), uncovering how Mandela's linguistic strategies act as ideological tools reinforcing freedom, unity, and reconciliation. By situating his discourse within CDA theory, the study contributes to the understanding of how political language operates as a transformative force in postcolonial societies.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist, and deductive approach to examine the ideological dimensions of Nelson Mandela's speeches through Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. The methodology outlines the research design, philosophical stance, data selection, and analytical process used to interpret the linguistic and ideological structures of Mandela's rhetoric.

A qualitative research design was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of how language constructs meaning within sociopolitical contexts. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) note, qualitative inquiry seeks to understand phenomena through the meanings people assign to them, making it appropriate for a study grounded in discourse analysis. Guided by the interpretivist paradigm, this research assumes that knowledge is socially constructed and context-dependent (Creswell, 2018). This aligns with Fairclough's (1995) view of discourse as a social practice that reflects and shapes reality.

The study employs a deductive approach, applying established CDA theories to Mandela's speeches to uncover ideological meanings of unity, freedom, and reconciliation. It follows a case study strategy, focusing on Mandela as a single, context-rich example of political and moral leadership (Yin, 2014).

Three speeches were purposively selected to represent key phases of Mandela's leadership:

1. *1994 Presidential Inaugural Address* – symbolizing democratic transition.
2. *2000 Laureus World Sports Awards Speech* – emphasizing global unity through sport.
3. *2004 Johannesburg Press Conference* – reflecting on justice and equality.

Analysis follows Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model: (1) *textual analysis* of linguistic features; (2) *discursive practice* examining production and interpretation; and (3) *sociocultural practice* linking discourse to South Africa's post-apartheid context. Ethical standards were maintained by using publicly available archival materials and proper citation.

Overall, this methodological framework enables a critical understanding of how Mandela's language functions as a tool of ideological construction and social transformation.

Analysis and Discussion

This chapter critically analyzes Nelson Mandela's selected speeches using Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model to explore how language constructs

ideology. Through textual, discursive, and sociocultural analysis, it examines how Mandela's rhetoric embodies the ideals of freedom, unity, equality, and reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa.

Textual Analysis

Mandela's 1994 Presidential Inaugural Address marks the symbolic birth of a democratic South Africa. His use of inclusive pronouns—"we," "our people," and "our nation"—creates a collective identity that transcends racial divisions. Metaphors such as "a new dawn" and "a long walk to freedom" represent liberation as both a spiritual and collective journey, blending humanist and moral imagery. Repetition in "never, never, and never again" transforms political declaration into moral conviction, while modal verbs like "must" and "shall" express determination and ethical commitment. These linguistic strategies construct unity and establish a vision of justice anchored in shared responsibility.

In his 2000 Laureus World Sports Awards speech, Mandela universalizes South Africa's struggle by framing sport as a global metaphor for peace and equality. The iconic statement "*Sport has the power to change the world*" redefines power as moral and emotional influence rather than domination. Personification—"Sport can create hope where once there was only despair"—positions sport as an agent of transformation, aligning with Fairclough's notion of language as social action. Inclusive expressions like "our world" and "our children" extend national unity into a global ideology of shared humanity.

By contrast, the 2004 Johannesburg press conference reveals Mandela's growing frustration with persistent inequality. Phrases such as "*We have achieved political freedom, but our people still suffer from economic bondage*" use antithesis to contrast ideals with reality. His tone becomes assertive and moralistic, employing active verbs and modal expressions like "must continue" and "cannot ignore." While his optimism gives way to accountability, his core ideology—justice and equality—remains constant. This linguistic evolution illustrates Fairclough's claim that discourse shifts with changing social practices.

Discursive Practice Analysis

Mandela's speeches function as performative acts of reconciliation, shaped by their contexts of production and reception. The 1994 address blends liberationist and humanist discourse to appeal to both black and white South Africans, achieving interdiscursivity that fostered unity. The 2000 speech, designed for a global audience, uses sport as a neutral platform to universalize peace and equality. By recontextualizing South Africa's moral struggle into a global narrative, Mandela transformed local experience into universal ideology. The 2004 speech, delivered as a statesman's reflection, signals a shift from inspiration to critique, demonstrating his adaptability to new sociopolitical realities. Across all three, his dialogic tone—inviting participation rather than dominance—reflects Bakhtin's (1981) concept of mutual understanding in discourse.

Socioculturally, Mandela's rhetoric redefined South Africa's identity through Ubuntu, the African philosophy of shared humanity. His speeches advanced three enduring ideological themes: freedom as moral duty, unity through diversity, and reconciliation as transformation. These values reframed power as collective responsibility and language as a tool for healing social divisions.

Sociocultural Practice Analysis

Mandela's discourse exemplifies the CDA principle that language and power are dialectically related. His rhetoric achieved what Fairclough (1995) calls "ideological hegemony through consent"—exercising influence via moral authority rather than coercion. Through metaphors of light, journey, and unity, he transformed language from a symbol of struggle into an instrument of peace. The analysis shows that Mandela's linguistic strategies—metaphor, repetition, inclusivity, and moral appeal—did not merely describe change; they performed it. His speeches illustrate how ethical discourse can reshape collective identity, redefine power, and construct ideology as a force for transformation.

Implications and Findings

The analysis revealed that Nelson Mandela's speeches are rich ideological texts demonstrating the transformative power of language in reconstructing social realities. Across the 1994 Inaugural Address, the 2000 Laureus World Sports Awards speech, and the 2004 Johannesburg Press Conference, four key ideological components emerged: freedom as a moral ideal, unity through inclusivity, equality as an ongoing struggle, and language as moral action. Mandela redefined freedom as a shared responsibility, employed inclusive pronouns to promote solidarity, and acknowledged that justice remained an unfinished project. His use of metaphor, repetition, and ethical appeals illustrates language as a form of transformative power capable of fostering empathy and reconciliation.

From a CDA perspective, Mandela's rhetoric supports Fairclough's view of discourse as a site of ideological struggle and Van Dijk's model of ideology as a cognitive framework shaped through metaphor and inclusion. His discourse achieved "hegemony through consent" (Fairclough, 1995), exercising moral influence rather than coercion.

The implications extend beyond his era: Mandela's ethical and inclusive rhetoric provides a model for political communication that bridges divisions and inspires collective identity. His speeches exemplify how words, grounded in empathy and justice, can reshape national consciousness and redefine leadership itself.

Conclusions/Recommendations

This study explored how Nelson Mandela's political discourse embodies the ideologies of freedom, unity, reconciliation, and equality through Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. Examining three key speeches—the 1994 Inaugural Address, the 2000 Laureus World Sports Awards speech, and the 2004 Johannesburg Press Conference—revealed that Mandela's language both reflected South Africa's historical transformation and actively reconstructed its ideological identity.

Mandela's rhetorical strategies—metaphor, repetition, inclusivity, and moral appeals—did not merely communicate ideals but performed social change. His discourse redefined power as moral responsibility and transformed the language of struggle into the language of reconciliation, constructing a shared vision of justice and humanity. Fairclough's CDA model showed that his speeches operated on textual, discursive, and sociocultural levels, demonstrating how language functions as a tool of empowerment and ideological renewal.

Future research should analyze a broader range of Mandela's speeches to trace his evolving ideology and compare his rhetoric with other African leaders such as Desmond Tutu, Thabo

Mbeki, and Kwame Nkrumah. Incorporating multimodal analysis—examining gesture, tone, and symbolism—could deepen understanding of political communication. Ultimately, Mandela’s discourse stands as a model of ethical leadership, proving that inclusive, empathetic language can heal divisions and transform societies.

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