

## A Critical Analysis of Language and Power in Political Context

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### Abstract

This research piece offers a critical analysis of how language functions in capturing and exercising political power. Language, being a central feature of communication, surreptitiously intersects with power, forming a significant part of persuasion, and contributing to forming narratives, opinions, and ideology. Advocating a critical overview of the theme, this work aims to identify how political leaders and governing institutions utilize language as a tool for coordinating discussions, maintaining social hierarchies, and eradicating specific non-dominant groups from the public sphere. The paper starts with the clarification of main concept of the language manipulation in the political context, describing, how politicians employ active use of such tools as rhetoric, euphemism, and propaganda in order to mobilize the community in the support of the authority. It explores how language is used to silence the opposition, enhance repression, and uphold authoritarianism, especially in nations where censorship and propaganda are the rife, and doxing is usual practice. Moreover, the applied analysis also focuses on the function of discourse as masqueraded as power, which means it shows how language serves to create and maintain hegemonic discourses, silence other voices that can be viewed as potentially threatening, and perpetuate various forms of oppression. Thus, English categorization, as well as the exclusion of other entities, provides certain populations with a negative profile and discriminates against them, reproducing the power relations. However, the paper does not lose sight of the fact that language is also an arena of contestation and transformation, where the oppressed and the rebels fight power and injustice in discursive terms through language and instances of collective action. Thus, such forms of linguistic resistance as counter-stories, irony, and metaphor help people take their power back and challenge the oppressive power relations, thereby transforming the political landscape. Hence, this critical analysis emphasizes that pragmatics and discourse analysis are key to understanding how power ties to language, especially in politics. Language as a function of power relations can be used to oppress people and to suppress their voices; nevertheless it is not powerless when positioned within a struggle for change. To summarize the examination of the language function it is necessary to take a look at the specifics of how power is given and contested in political practices in consideration of the social function of language.

**Keywords:** Language, Power, Politics, Discourse Analysis, Social Function, Manipulation.

## Introduction

Language and power cannot be separated in the discourse of politics as they are closely related. Through the practice of language, political leaders and institutions have been able to dominate and even manipulate the society as they create a particular understanding of reality. Reflecting upon the discursive construction of political realities and agency in relation to languages strategies and power relationships, this critical argument map examines the ways in which language works to assert, maintain, naturalizes and justify power. Thus, looking into the forms of argumentation and discursive strategies employed by political actors, one can study the processes by which language functions as a mean of power and come to learn various interpenetrating, subtle and not so subtle ways through which the act of communication affects its object and the world.

Rhetoric is a tool where political leaders make and tell captivating stories for the public hence ensuring that they remain in power. According to Fairclough (2001), language is a central aspect whereby political actor can influence the politics of language and construct the view on the reality, in a bid to gain support or eliminate rivals. The embracing of metaphors, framing and repetition fosters emotions and even Urgency/ solidarity aspects as described by Lakoff (2004). For instance, when one uses terms such as 'war' or 'battle' in relation to things like 'terror' or 'climate change,' it creates a strong imagery that makes people support a particular cause. This manipulation of words not only polls people's mentality but also promotes the authority and status quo that the rulers desire. But the way they phrase these messages is very important as this will make them bring the policies that they wish to implement into conformity with the ideologies of those who elected them. These are particularly seen in the case of campaign speeches, policy statements, media appearances and the like since the language used and the embrace of narrative are carefully crafted to win the hearts or the minds of the listeners or the audience.

Besides shaping the general perceptions of the audience, language also has a critical role in reinforcing or challenging power relations and other elements of socio-political systems. Cited in Van Dijk (1998), dominant and hegemonic groups use discourse as one of the instruments for asserting and reestablishing hegemonic control over their subordinates. Power relations are reflected at the deep level of language and they are connected with the political discourse that naturalizes some modes of practice and produces the others as deviant or marginal. For instance, the euphemism lowers the perception of the public towards controversial policies, hence weakening their resistance towards the key arguments (Chilton, 2004). Phrases such as 'collateral damage' instead of 'buckshot' or 'killer raid' and 'enhanced interrogation techniques' instead of 'torture' are euphonic terms which make the underlying implications less harsh.

In addition, through the manipulation of the information released into the public domain and establishment of rules that govern the political agenda, the rulers are in a position to shape the debate by only addressing that which is pre-approved and ensures that any opposition to the dominant paradigm is kept to a minimum. Freedom of speech and any open discussion is usually suppressed through 'media control', 'censorship' and 'propaganda' that are used to ensure people adhere to the norms of the dominating ideology. Language domination also applies to writing new

laws and implementing existing ones as well as establishing and implementing policies. The use of language in law, usually written in legal jargons that are intricate and grandiloquent, provides both the veneer of authority and a veil to hide it (Bourdieu, 1991). The conversion of these linguistic rules into law essentially entails the standardization of specific power relationships within specific forms of text, which makes it dangerous for ordinary citizens to regulate their interactions with the law on their own.

Legalized language includes the usage of technical terms, which coming from the legal aspect, often puts off the public in their legal issues. In addition, the perverted political and legal practices of differentiation enhance such power relations and contribute to the exclusion of marginalized groups or the suppression of oppositional voices. For example, measures that are formulated in a seemingly universal manner yet are processed as discriminative against certain groups identify how language instrumentalist oppression. In this context, it becomes clear that the language and power relationship is not only about political rhetoric, official discourse, and coded language announcing policy shifts and changes in government but also about the strategies of power-knowledge regulating agendas and practices at the grassroots level of society. It therefore becomes clear that there is need to examine the discursive construction of legal documents and the nature of policy making so that the relations of power inscribed in the linguistic practices can be brought to light in order to achieve greater fairness in the administration of justice.

### **Language as Manipulative**

The distal-near theories thus stress on language as a key weapon of influence in political contexts. That is why politicians and leaders often use rhetoric – to gain votes, change people’s perspective on certain issues, or simply to curb the influence of the opposing political camp. In other words, the parties use various figures of speech that include euphemisms, hype, and words with hidden meanings in an attempt to tame the storytelling narrative to fit their preferences. These coded grey concepts can alter the way people perceive situations and are able to accept rules normally observed as questionable, for example, instead of the term ‘burying civilians’ the term ‘collateral damage’ is used, which has made it easier for the Americans to carry on with the policies. The first one is that of hyperbole, where issues are exaggerated in order to create an element of fear or concern such as the demonization of immigration or the focus on national security. There are fans and non-fans, good guys and bad guys, justice and evil; this type of language therefore manipulates the feelings of people in a way to ensure they are on the side of the political framework being sold to them (Edelman, 1977, p.2).

Furthermore, the opposite side of this process was also present as it entailed more than just the art of speech and manipulation of words in order to control the flow of information but rather lies, distortion of facts and the spreading of propaganda. In autocratic governments for instance, language is employed as a tool for quelling dissent, rationalizing oppression, and providing a veneer of democracy to despotic rule. Herman and Chomsky argue that by restricting what people understand through information censorship, propaganda technique, or manipulation of information, those in power can maintain their control and ensure that opposition does not

emerge. Media and communication systems as well as genre of the state is usually used to promote a particular version of the reality that supports the objectives of a regime and where necessary suppressing any other voice from coming out (Althusser, 1971). Such manipulation makes the truth invisible, and the population unaware of the essential information necessary for making the right decisions, which further helps the rulers to stay in charge.

Hence, the consequences of the manipulation of language are far-reaching, going beyond immediate political concerns and permeating the societal context. When language is employed to twist facts and bend the tangent of the target community, it is not only counter to general democracy but also leads to a decline in people's confidence in bodies of governance. Reliance on bias within a repetitious language that is more misleading influences the political acclimatization process and thus forms political consciousness where extreme poles are firmly entrenched (Tuchman, 1978). This manipulation can result in the polarization of society with the abnormally extreme views being more dominant than relatively reasonable opinions, leading to polarization of social and political opinions. It therefore becomes very important to bring out the manipulative force of language as a positive step towards developing a democratic political culture where the players and audience are equally privileged to make informed decisions and judgments on the information presented to them (Habermas 1984).

#### **The Role of Discourse in Power Dynamics**

Discourse is therefore a significant factor in reproducing power relations within political realms. Employers, teachers, managers and other figures of authority replicate these tendencies of language through expressions that subordinate minority groups and reenact prejudice. Discourse can then play an important role in the maintenance of power relations in that it constructs organisations and individuals as active agents of meaning construction which in effect sustains and perpetuates one particular way of thinking thus ensuring the hegemonic practices of some organisations and individuals remain intact. As the narratives of political empowerment continue to be sold in the media, political elites retain their domination because people begin to adapt to this social reality. This, as Van Dijk (1998) explains, amounts to the use of language to consistently position discourses in ways that legitimize existing power relations and marginalize critical opinions and other voices.

Additionally, language can be used as a way of discriminating groups of people or even stigmatizing them, through formulation of registers that substandard them. Words and phrases like 'illegals,' 'criminals,' 'aliens,' or 'terrorists' do not refer to something factual but are themselves already biases that seek to disempower particular groups and paint them as outlaws to justify the oppressive measures being taken against them. However, as Chilton (2004) has pointed out, the appropriate application of such labels can construct a societal binary division of sorts between 'us' and 'them,' and instill fear and racism. Hereby, using linguistic othering, such diverging groups can be excluded and sanctioned with strict measures, thus, preserving the existing social segregation and the existing hierarchy. By creating these negative semantic associations to sink into the voters' consciousness, the rulers contribute to the manipulation of the masses for the sake

of implementing measures that would remain utterly inadmissible under any terms in democratic countries.

The coercive aspect of discourse is also seen in the regulation of who can speak and whose voices are listened to. Minorities in particular are not able to fully engage in political processes due to their inferior number of opportunities to express themselves. Not only do such groups go unseen and unheard but their disadvantaged status is reinforced by being deprived a voice through which they might contest their exclusion and present their case. As stated by Fairclough (2001), the control of discourse is a form of power, which helps mantle the existing and perpetuate injustice and inequality, by establishing and maintaining 'frames' that set out the parameters of what may be considered 'proper' or 'permissible' top-down within the social relations of the society. This is done through anteriority or ownership of media and other essential facilities, political influences to ensure rigidity of power and lack of pluralism that encompass and support the oppressors.

### **Resistance and Subversion through Language**

However, language is not only a tool of domination where political discourses are oppressive; it is also a discursive terrain of opposition. Linguistic features like irony, sarcasm, and metaphor are used by the opposition and the minority to fight against the majority and destroy the leading paradigm. For instance, counter narratives offer a different angle to the dominant and hegemonic discourses which sought to 'downplay,' 'other,' marginalize, and exclude the narratives of minorities and subjugated groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Such other histories may also provide a lens that the subordinate groups can use to exercise descriptive un-packaging and descriptive critique of the prevailing paradigm of worthwhile success. Like irony, satire also remains an effective weapon against oppression in that it uses humor to unmask the paradox of oppression in the political system, thus, denying the oppressors the moral ground to carry on with their practices (Hutcheon, 1994)..

This paper sought to explore how marginalized individuals and communities can regain control through counter narratives and how progressive social movements can leverage this mode of writing to change the dominant narratives. Irony and parody can be specifically employed to bring out the gap and the incongruity between the official representations of the ideology and the actual reality or the rhetorical performance can be done in such a way as to expose the contradictions inherent in the ideology of the ruling elites (Bakhtin, 1981). For instance, it has become customary for activist movements like Black Lives Matter to use media platforms, as well as rhetoric to fight against police brutality and systemic racism; they create a counter narrative to the otherwise dominant and hegemonic discourses on law and order in today's society (Rickford, 2016). Through them, such social groups can open the voices and actions that will challenge the established norms and stigmatized perceptions.

As shown through examples ranging from humor and irony to metonymic turns of phrase and the use of bacteria names to name a political party, it can be understood that resistance movements use language creativity to challenge the existing power relations and redraw the boundaries of political language. Language is used to reimagine and reimagine and communicate

possible worlds, build the union of feeling, and call for collective action (hooks 1994). Such counter discourse is not static and consists of various elements, as it illustrates the creativity and persistence of people who aim to change an unfair situation. Through performative subversion of dominant discourses, these movements also perform functions of subverting particular power-knowledge regimes and also of producing new politically possible subjectivities and an egalitarian world.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that language and power in political context is quite a complex issue. Being an effective means of precise communication and persuasion, language becomes a particularly influential weapon through which those in power promote specific messages and maintain control. Political actors use language and frequently engage in the use of euphemisms, hyperbole, inflammatory expressions and words, and the use of sets of words that are designed to favor their end of an argument and policies, gain public support, and exclude any form of opposition. This manipulation does not only have the influence of rhetoric but also facts are manipulated and also propaganda is put into circulation either to incite people or even justify despotic practices which are unlawful. I argued that language therefore serves a key part in supporting power relations and in governing political processes and forms.

Furthermore, discourse is central to preserving power and producing unjust relations since power relations within discourse are reflective of power in society. The language of the power and other authoritative agents continuously validates the status quo and increases the focus on the stigma attached to subordinate positions and groups, thereby constituting social hierarchies. Terms such as “illegal aliens” or “terrorists” contain associations that isolate and demonize, which in turn, certifies subjugation of certain groups. When the dominant group directs the conversation while not allowing the oppressed and disadvantaged groups a chance to interject, then the ruling party achieves the best results of maintaining its authority. Such exclusion in discursive practice furthers the political isolation and alienation of given groups, and affirms the role of language within special formative sociopolitical relations. However, it is also worth noting that power is present in politics and the will of the people, Language is also used as a space of struggle and counter-discourse, where minority groups as well as political dissidents can seek agency in overturning dominant narratives and framing movements for progressive change.

As counter-histories and messages, satire and symbolism in these groups allow them to challenge and reclaim dominant discourses, problematize dominant paradigms of oppression, and offer Liberationist possibilities of resistance. They reverse authoritative discursive regimes and resist subjugation to oppressive discourses while nurturing unity and coalition. If one pays close attention to the use of language, especially within political spheres, this paper shows that scholars will be in a better place to examine how political power is built, negotiated, and even revolutionized in a bid to create a fair political system. Awareness of this relationship enables a form of political activism that involves a consciousness aimed at changing existing systems and ways of thinking and therefore helps in formulation of constructive opinions about politics.

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