



A Critical Discourse Analysis Approach to Investigating Political Speech: MLK's 1963 "I Have a Dream" Speech as a Case Study

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Abstract

This study employs van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Modals (1998, 2000) of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech. The study discovers how King's discourse constructs and disseminates ideologies of justice, equality, and civil rights within the socio-historical context of the American Civil Rights Movement. By analysing the speech across three interconnected levels: macro (social context), meso (cognition), and micro (discourse), the study reveals how linguistic and rhetorical strategies such as metaphor, repetition, and moral vocabulary function to shape collective mental models and challenge prevailing racial ideologies. The analysis demonstrates how King strategically balances emotional appeal with logical argumentation to inspire unity, mobilise support, and resist systemic oppression. This integrated socio-cognitive approach provides a deeper understanding of political speech as a powerful medium for ideological contestation and social change.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, ideology, civil rights, metaphors, repetition, socio-cognitive approach, political speech.

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مقاربة تحليل الخطاب النقدي لاستقصاء الخطاب السياسي : خطاب مارتن لوثر كينغ

١٩٦٣ " لذي حلم" كدراسة حالة

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المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة خطاب مارتن لوثر كينغ الشهير لعام ١٩٦٣ والمعروف بعنوان "لذي حلم"، وذلك من خلال توظيف منهج التحليل النقدي للخطاب (CDA) بالاعتماد على النموذج المعرفي لفان داك (٢٠٠٠). وتهدف الدراسة إلى الكشف عن الكيفية التي يسهم بها خطاب كينغ في بناء ونشر أيديولوجيات العدالة والمساواة والحقوق المدنية ونشرها ضمن السياق الخطابي والتاريخي لحركة الحقوق المدنية الأمريكية. ولتحقيق ذلك، تم تحليل الخطاب على ثلاثة مستويات مترابطة، هي: المستوى الكلي (السياق الاجتماعي)، والمستوى الوسيط (المعرفي)، والمستوى الجزئي (البنية الخطابية). وقد أظهرت نتائج التحليل أن الاستراتيجيات اللغوية والبلاغية، كالاستعارة والتكرار والمفردات الأخلاقية، قد شكّلت أدوات فاعلة في صياغة النماذج الذهنية الجمعية وتحدي الأيديولوجيات العرقية السائدة. كما أظهر التحليل أن كينغ اعتمد توازناً استراتيجياً بين التأثير العاطفي والبرهنة المنطقية من أجل ارساء الوحدة، وحشد الدعم الجماهيري، ومقاومة القمع الممنهج. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن هذا المدخل -المعرفي المتكامل يقدّم فهماً معمقاً للخطاب السياسي بوصفه وسيلة مؤثرة في ميدان الصراع الأيديولوجي وأداة فعّالة في إحداث التحول الاجتماعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية

تحليل الخطاب النقدي، الأيديولوجيا، الحقوق المدنية، الاستعارة، التكرار النهج المعرفي الاجتماعي، الخطاب السياسي

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1. Introduction

Political speeches are powerful tools for shaping ideology and social influence. Through strategic language use, they create identities, frame social realities, and either challenge or support dominant ideological structures. This paper employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically drawing on van Dijk's (1998) Socio-Cognitive Model, to analyse Dr Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech as a key case study in political discourse and ideological resistance. Delivered during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on 28 August 1963, King's speech is recognised as one of the most iconic and rhetorically powerful examples of political oratory in American history. (King, M. L. Jr., 1963). It effectively combines emotional appeal, moral reasoning, and visionary rhetoric to highlight the injustice of racial segregation, promote a collective vision of unity and equality, and challenge the social and political status quo of segregated America.

Besides, the study explores how King employs discourse to expose racial injustice, foster in-group solidarity, and call for structural transformation. His speech is carefully crafted to resonate with a broad and diverse audience. To African Americans, King acknowledges their suffering and legitimises their struggle. To white Americans, conversely, he appeals to shared values such as justice and the American Dream. To political leaders, he issues a moral imperative to enact meaningful change. Through this multifaceted rhetorical strategy, King constructs a unifying narrative that mobilises support across racial and political divides.

2. Research Questions

The study triggers the following questions throughout:

1. The manner in which Martin Luther King Jr. used language to construct and promote ideological themes such as justice, freedom, and racial equality.
2. What are the cognitive and ideological structures (e.g., mental models, ideological square) embedded in the speech, as have been analysed through van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model?
3. What discursive strategies (e.g., metaphor, pronoun use, repetition) are used to influence the audience's beliefs, attitudes, and social cognition?

3. Objectives of the Study

The present study critically analyses Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech through the lens of Teun A. van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model of Critical Discourse Analysis. The main objectives are:

1. To use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) for examining the linguistic and discursive features of political speech.



2. To uncover the underlying cognitive and ideological structures embedded in King's discourse, including mental models and group schemata.
3. To discover how rhetorical and linguistic strategies (e.g., metaphor, pronouns, repetition) are employed to advance social and political goals such as racial justice, unity, and equality.

4. The Scope of the Study

This study is limited to one historical written speech: "I Have a Dream." The analysis is focused on how the discourse functions ideologically; and how it constructs and reinforces mental models related to civil rights, race, and justice using CDA framework.

5. Literature Review

Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach that views discourse as a form of social practice (Fairclough, 1995, p. 2). It emphasizes the central role of language in constructing, sustaining, and contesting power relations and ideologies. CDA offers a framework for critically examining how language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a tool for enacting power, shaping ideologies, and producing social realities.

Fairclough (1992) defines CDA as "a method to analyse the relationships between discourse, power, and ideology in institutional contexts" (p. 12). He further elaborates that CDA is concerned with systematically exploring the often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events, and texts, and (b) broader social and cultural structures, relationships, and processes. According to Fairclough (1993, p. 135), this opacity in the relationship between discourse and society serves as a mechanism for securing dominance and hegemony.

In essence, CDA seeks to clarify ambiguous and ideologically loaded discourse, revealing how such language can reinforce unequal power structures within society. Its focus is on exposing the mechanisms through which ideologies are constructed and reproduced through language, particularly in ways that benefit dominant social groups. This critical perspective challenges established narratives, questions taken-for-granted social norms, and aims to contribute to social transformation by making the political and ideological dimensions of language more transparent and accessible.

Teun A. van Dijk developed a comprehensive framework for ideological analysis that emphasises the interplay between cognition, discourse, and society. He argues that ideologies are socially shared mental representations that shape how groups perceive the world and organise their discourse (van Dijk, 1998, p. 6). These ideologies serve as the cognitive foundation for group beliefs, identity, and interaction, guiding discourse production and interpretation. Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model is particularly relevant for analysing political speech, as it explains how discourse strategies are employed to shape, reproduce, or resist dominant ideologies (van Dijk, 1998, pp. 23–24). A significant contribution of his model is the introduction of a cognitive aspect to CDA, which emphasises how literal and



discursive constructions impact conceptual models' single and mutual representations of events, individuals, and shared norms.

Similarly, Wodak and Mayer (2001, p. 2) describe CDA as fundamentally concerned with analysing both opaque and transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as they are manifested in language. These relationships are expressed, signalled, constituted, and legitimised through discourse. According to Wodak (2002, p. 1), CDA involves examining how such structural inequalities are overtly and subtly embedded in language use, and how discourse contributes to their maintenance and reproduction. Wodak further emphasises that political speeches function as “strategic tools” for legitimising ideologies, drawing attention to the historical and social dimensions that shape discourse (Wodak, 2009, p. 45). Her Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) situates language use within specific sociopolitical contexts and temporal frameworks, reinforcing the notion that discourse is not produced in a vacuum but is historically conditioned and ideologically motivated.

Numerous studies have examined Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech through rhetorical, historical, and ideological lenses. However, few have applied a comprehensive Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework that integrates textual, cognitive, and social dimensions of interpretation. Much of the existing scholarship has focused primarily on the rhetorical artistry and symbolic resonance of the speech, often overlooking the underlying cognitive models and ideological structures that inform its discourse and shape audience reception. For example, Leff and Utley “examined the discourse's influential and constitutive rhetoric, emphasising its persuasive function and its role in shaping national identity” (Leff and Utley, 2004, p 173). Likewise, Charteris-Black (2005) discovered that Martin uses a linguistic device, metaphor, based on how metaphorical language functions to create moral authority and encourage collective hopefulness. The present study employs van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model (1998) as a comprehensive analytical framework to understand how the speech is constructed, reinforced, and challenges ideological beliefs, and examined how King's speech activates shared conceptual models of equality, justice, freedom, and national identity over specific discursive strategies, such as “metaphor,” “repetition”, “pronoun usage”, and “intertextual allusion”.

Besides, another analysis by applying van Dijk's concept of the ideological square (2000) and representing the dynamic interaction among the speech text, perception, and society, this study presents a more profound and more systematic thought of the ethical functions embedded within Martin's rhetoric. It reveals a reflection of social injustice and as a strategic device for sociopolitical transformation with deeper cognitive and ideological frameworks.

6. Methodology

The study assumed a descriptive analysis based on the values of CDA, precisely using Teun A. van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model (1998, 2000). These models are appropriate for analysing political discourse mixes at three interrelated levels of analysis: the Micro, Meso and Macro levels. The analysis emphasises Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic 1963 “I Have a



Dream” discourse, exploring how language, cognition, and societal power relations (context) interact to create and propagate ideological sense.

Van Dijk’s Socio-Cognitive Model asserts that ideologies are “socially shared and mentally represented frameworks that influence how people perceive and produce discourse” (van Dijk, 1998, pp. 6, 24). This framework positions cognition as the essential mediating layer between discourse and society, providing the link between linguistic expression and broader socio-political realities. Thus, the model is employed here to identify how ideologically driven mental models are encoded in discourse and interpreted by audiences.

The analysis proceeds at three interconnected levels:

The micro level examines the textual and linguistic features of the speech (e.g., lexical choices, syntax, pronouns, metaphor). The meso level explores the cognitive dimension, focusing on how shared beliefs, knowledge structures, and mental models are activated and reinforced. The macro level investigates the broader social and historical context of the speech, including the racial and political climate of 1960s America. The crucial analysis related to van Dijk’s “ideological square” model (2000) under four vital points of view refers to the status of the group (in-groups and out-groups) through the use of pronouns (Us, We) embedded in the political discourse.

7. Data collection

The text analysis for this study examines a complete transcript of Martin Luther King Jr.’s influential address, “I Have a Dream,” delivered on 28 August 1963 during the “March on Washington” for Jobs and Freedom. This transcript was obtained from reputable online archives that provide accurate versions of historical speeches. The speech was selected because of its significance in the American civil rights movement and its rich rhetorical and ideological language aimed at both Black and white audiences. The speech was prepared for qualitative evaluation using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework focused on uncovering ideological elements, power relationships, and discursive strategies by employing van Dijk’s Socio-Cognitive (1998) and ideological square (2000) models. These models enable the researcher to examine how the speech expresses themes of justice, equality, resistance, and freedom from oppression at the textual, cognitive, and social levels.

8. The Analysis

Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech is classified as a political sermon, a form of rhetoric that combines prophetic preaching, moral encouragement, and political discourse. It marks a significant moment in the history of public speaking, enhancing its ideological influence through the use of biblical themes, patriotic values, and visionary leadership. The speech employs religious phrasing, such as the line “justice rolls down like waters,” to connect the civil rights movement with divine justice and moral integrity. This analysis highlights three main rhetorical techniques: repetition, metaphor, and logical appeals (logos). These techniques are examined to reveal how they work to sustain ideological meaning and shape the audience’s emotional and rational responses. The primary aim is to



assess how King balances emotional (pathos) and logical appeals to optimize the persuasive effect of his message.

Repetition functions as a key rhetorical device in Martin's speech, highlighted by the frequent use of the phrase "I have a dream," which serves both as a thematic foundation and a rhythmic call to hope. This technique not only enhances the speech's impact and emotional appeal but also reinforces collective perceptions of justice and equality. Moreover, metaphorical language plays a crucial role, exemplified by expressions like "the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination" and "America has given the Negro people a bad check." These metaphors transform complex social injustices into vivid and relatable images, making abstract concepts more emotionally accessible. Although King's logical appeal is less prominent than his emotional rhetoric, it is evident in his reference to the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence as promissory notes that guarantee rights for all citizens (black and white). By invoking these foundational texts, he situates his argument within the recognized moral and legal frameworks of American democracy, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of the civil rights movement's goals.

Rhetorical devices are vital to the language of political encouragement, as highlighted by Atkinson (2004, pp. 179–180). They act as key tools for shaping public opinion, stirring strong emotions, and boosting the impact and memorability of political discourse. By using these techniques, speakers can effectively express their views, build a sense of community, and gain support from a wider audience. In his "I Have a Dream" speech, Martin Luther King Jr. employs these rhetorical devices to advocate for revolutionary social change, unify his audience, and assert moral authority. The third level clarifies that the sociological background of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech is essential to understanding its ideological importance on a broader scale. The speech was delivered on 28 August 1963, during the American Civil Rights Movement, in Washington, for the rights to jobs and freedom. Throughout that period, African Americans faced economic inequality, social segregation, legal exclusion, and racism. The macro level of discourse analysis situates the text within larger societal frameworks, highlighting the power dynamics between historically oppressed Black communities and white-dominated institutions.

This disparity in power is immediately addressed in King's speech, which transforms the incident into a call for structural change and a rhetorical challenge to hegemonic narratives. In this sense, the speech's role as an instrument of resistance and ideological realignment is strengthened by the macro-social context, which emphasises the speaker's mental models, ideological frameworks, and shared ideas that influence the structure and interpretation of discourse. The meso level, representing the cognitive dimension of van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model, characterised by a strong belief in justice, equality, and peaceful resistance, is exemplified in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. The principles of the American Constitution and Declaration of Independence, such as freedom, democracy, and the intrinsic worth of every individual, form the foundation of his conceptualisation of the civil rights movement. At the micro level, focus is on how Martin expresses ideology through his speech. He employs rhetorical devices and discourse structures, prominent lexical choices and well-formed patterns that successfully communicate the ideological messages affirming his beliefs regarding the right of black and white Americans to live with dignity. He utilises



various terminology options and moral authority within the conceptual framework of universal human rights and Christian ethics. Terms such as "justice," "freedom," "dignity," and "brotherhood" appeal to shared social and religious values to underpin the call for racial equality.

To produce solid emotive reactions, Martin frequently used metaphors and sensitive terms and phrases, such as "joyous sunrise" and "seared in the flames of withering injustice." To highlight the moral insistence of the civil rights movement, the struggle of African Americans who suffered from discrimination and call for freedom. In addition, terms like "vicious racists," "nullification," and "police brutality" are used by Martin as a conversational act of resistance. He uses metaphors such as "oasis of freedom and justice," "substance of their character," and "table of brotherhood" to convey his aspirational vision.

Martin uses the techniques of repetition, pronouns, and metaphorical language to reinforce rhythm, unity, and ideological promise throughout discourse. The anaphoric repetition of basic phrases such as "I have a dream..." and "Let freedom ring..." not only forms rhetorical rhythm but also supports the speech's emotional echo and shared dream. Martin's considerate use of general pronouns such as (we and us) such as "We can never be satisfied...", "Let us not wallow..." to promote a strong sense of shared identity, free-for-all and solidarity.

Furthermore, Martin reflects his beliefs and ideologies by using mental equivalents of light and darkness to represent domination and liberation, respectively. For example, "Heat of tyranny," "Night of their imprisonment," and "beacon light of hope". These metaphors linguistically convey the power dynamic between the speaker and the listeners, emphasising the moral urgency of the civil rights movement. The biblical metaphor, "Justice flows down like floods, and righteousness like a strong stream," further depicts justice as a natural and divine force. In addition to inspiring the civil rights movement, this metaphor places it within a broader framework of moral progress. Martin also sometimes employs economic metaphors to highlight social and political inequality and systematic disloyalty. An example is "America has given the Negro people a bad check," which effectively exposes justice as a delayed but legitimate economic promise. See table (1).

Table (1) : The summary of the analysis

Discourse Feature	Example from the Speech	Discursive Function	Cognitive/Ideological Effect
Repetition	"I have a dream...", "Let freedom ring..."	Creates rhythm and emotional appeal; reinforces central vision	Fixes key ideas in collective memory; reinforces shared social representation of hope and unity
Pronouns (we/us)	"We can never be satisfied...", "Let us not wallow..."	Fosters group identity; includes the audience in the struggle	Builds an "in-group" identity; aligns the audience with the civil rights cause as a moral community
Metaphor:	"beacon light of hope",	Symbolisms good	Frames the civil rights



Light vs. Darkness	“long night of captivity”, “heat of oppression”	vs. evil, liberation vs. oppression	struggle as a universal, almost mythic battle between freedom and injustice
Metaphor: Justice as a Natural Force	“Justice rolls down like waters...”	Presents justice as inevitable and divinely sanctioned	Aligns civil rights with moral and religious truth; invokes shared values of faith and righteousness
Economic Metaphor	“America has given the Negro people a bad check...”	Frames justice in economic terms; broken promise from the state	Invokes the American Dream; highlights betrayal and institutional inequality in relatable, materialist language

To make his speech more dynamic, remarkable, and emotionally impactful, Martin Luther King Jr. employed implicit semantic tactics that go beyond literal meaning. Using this strategy, he can engage his audience's lived experiences and foster a shared emotional identity. Metaphor is a key rhetorical technique, especially the conceptual metaphor of freedom as light. In this metaphor, "light" stands for enlightenment, clarity, and optimism, highlighting the moral clarity of the fight against injustice and the transformational power of civil rights. Important metaphors like "beacon light of hope," "night of their captivity," and "heat of oppression" serve conceptually to draw attention to the contrast between institutional racism and freedom. These metaphors linguistically indicate the relations of power between the oppressed (African Americans) and institutional frameworks of racial domination, in addition to illuminating the conceptual difference between justice and injustice. They subtly place King and the audience in a morally superior position, making the speech not merely impressive but also ethically powerful.

The Bible references like "Justice rushes down like floods, and righteousness like a mighty torrent" give supernatural necessity to the civil rights movement by portraying it as part of a moral and universal system. Martin Luther used two distinct types of allusions, grounded in the history of the United States and deriving ethical authority from its founding ideals through historical references, including analogies to the declaration of freedom and American core beliefs. Martin says "Five Score Years Ago" and links the civil rights movement to Abraham Lincoln's legacy, indicating that the emancipation process is not yet complete. The speech is embedded within a spiritual framework through religious allusions, such as biblical imagery ("every valley shall be elevated"), which further legitimize the cause and imply divine approval of racial equality. He employs "Abraham Lincoln's legacy, implying the job of freedom is unfinished" as a mental image of the civil rights movement abstract, more resonant, and therefore more powerful and intimidating to opponents. The metaphor of justice is one of a long, potent, and sometimes punitive force.



The line, "Oh, deep in my heart, I do think, we shall overcome some day," is another example of optimism and faith that demonstrates a strong belief in justice and equality. The phrase "deep in my heart" suggests that the belief in fighting injustice is not just rational but also emotional and spiritual, reflecting a steadfast devotion to the cause. Destroy adversaries: "Every valley shall be exalted." "White man work together, Black man work together" is an obvious allusion to the crucial role of inter-racial unity in the pursuit of civil rights. This statement rejects discrimination and indicates that everyone, regardless of race, must collaborate in the fight for democracy. Moreover, he promotes an individual moral vision by drawing a comparison between racism and ethics in his ideological contrast. For example, "the colour of their skin" versus "the content of their character." Additionally, Dr Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech's philosophy and impact are linguistically expressed through various rhetorical and linguistic devices that bolster his call for equality, justice, and change.

9. The Role of Repetition in Political Discourse

Repetition is a fundamental rhetorical and linguistic strategy employed across political discourse to enhance persuasive impact, emotional appeal, and ideological reinforcement. According to Al-Khafaji (2005, pp. 1, 6), repetition involves the repeated words, phrases, or ideas—either in their original form or with minor variations—and serves playful, emotional, and rhetorical functions. It not only contributes to the aesthetic rhythm of political language but also enhances audience engagement and recall. Johnstone (1994, pp. 13, 16) similarly underscores the ubiquity of repetition across languages, highlighting its function as a persuasive device that aids memory retention, draws attention, and amplifies meaning. Through repetition, speakers clarify their message, enhance its emotional resonance, and ensure its endurance in the audience's cognitive schema.

From a critical discourse perspective, repetition plays an essential ideological role. As Khdair (2016, p. 36) notes, repetition in political speeches conveys a sense of authority and control, reinforcing the speaker's political stance and strengthening audience alignment. It becomes a tool through which political actors build power, present ideological certainty, and sway public opinion. Consequently, repetition serves both discursive and strategic purposes in shaping how messages are created, understood, and remembered. The use of repetition in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech functions as a powerful rhetorical device to emphasise the core message of civil rights and racial equality. By reiterating key phrases such as "freedom," "justice," and "I have a dream," King consolidates his ideological position and keeps his audience centred on the moral and political goals of the civil rights movement.

The terminology of "Let freedom ring..." is working rhythmically and firmly to yield a climactic value, motivating the emotional duty. This repetition not only supports the theme of freedom exclusively, but also freedom as a universal with democratic values. Martin's speech does not promote violence; he firmly begins his vision in the environment of nonviolent



resistance. He appeals to the people's moral awareness by demanding that the freedom be achieved by saying “justice for all,” “peace,” and “security.” Thus, the repetition in his talk is not merely a technical term; his speech includes ideological significance, shared beliefs and morals against racial inequality. See table (2) in page (14), which summaries the analysis.

Table (2): the summary analysis

Repeated Phrase	Example	Function	Ideological Message
“I have a dream”	“I have a dream that one day...”	Builds emotional rhythm, vision for the future	Envisions racial harmony and equal opportunity
“Let freedom ring”	“Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill...”	Invokes liberty and collective aspiration	National call for liberation; equality as a patriotic value
“Now is the time”	“Now is the time to make real the promises...”	Urges immediate action	Rejects delay; asserts civil rights as urgent and overdue
“We can never be satisfied	“We can never be satisfied as long as...”	Emphasizes persistent injustice	Calls for structural change, not superficial progress

According to van Dijk’s Socio-Cognitive Model (2008), political speakers often use positive self-presentations and negative other-presentations to influence ideological meaning. Martin’s approach differs from universal justice as a shared human experience, thus supporting himself with collective aspirations and avoiding divisive rhetoric. His persona is carefully crafted through inclusive pronouns (“we,” “our,” “us”) and recurrent metaphors of light, justice, and dreams. This enables the audience to not only identify with him but also to see him as a righteous, unifying figure, a role often compared to religious or prophetic figures in African-American rhetorical traditions (Jackson & Richardson, 2007, p. 22). Moreover, a key feature of King’s speech is his anaphoric repetition, especially of the phrases “I have a dream” and “let freedom ring.” Repetition, as Johnstone (1994, pp. 13-16) explains, is not simply stylistic but aims to fix key ideas in public consciousness, enhancing memorability, emotional impact, and persuasive power. According to van Dijk’s Socio-Cognitive Model (2008), political speakers often use positive self-presentations and negative other-presentations to influence ideological meaning. Martin’s approach differs from universal justice as a shared human experience, thus supporting himself with collective aspirations and avoiding divisive rhetoric. His persona is carefully crafted through inclusive pronouns (“we,” “our,” “us”) and recurrent metaphors of light, justice, and dreams. This enables the audience to not only identify with him but also see him as a righteous, unifying figure—roles often compared to religious or prophetic figures in African-American rhetorical traditions (Jackson & Richardson, 2007, p. 22). Moreover, a key feature of King’s speech is his anaphoric repetition, especially of the phrases “I have a dream” and “let freedom ring.” Repetition, as Johnstone (1994, pp. 13-16) explains, is not simply stylistic but aims to fix key ideas in public consciousness, enhancing memorability, emotional impact, and persuasive power.



Al-Khafaji (2005, pp. 1-6) similarly observes that repetition can evoke rhetorical playfulness and moral seriousness, both of which are evident in King’s oratorical rhythm. By repeating “freedom,” King invokes a moral imperative and insists on a visionary certainty, reinforcing the legitimacy of the civil rights movement and his dedication to its cause. Martin also uses metaphoric language to create moral contrast and emotional appeal. Phrases like “beacon light of hope,” “long night of captivity,” and “heat of oppression” linguistically embed the civil rights struggle within a cosmic and divine order. These metaphors, in accordance with Charteris-Black’s (2011, pp. 33-35) theory of metaphor and political myth, reframe civil rights not merely as a political goal but as a sacred mission aligned with universal values of justice and equality. See table (3).

Table (3): The summary analysis

Strategy	Example	Function	Effect
Repetition	“I have a dream”, “Let freedom ring”	Reinforces vision and confidence	Increases memorability and emotional power
Inclusive Pronouns	“We will not be satisfied”, “Let us...”	Fosters unity and shared struggle	Builds collective identity with the audience
Moral Framing	“I have a dream that one day...”	Frames struggle as part of the moral and divine order	Constructs King as righteous, visionary, and heroic
Metaphoric Language	“Beacon light of hope”, “Heat of oppression”	Linguistically encodes struggle and justice	Enhances symbolic and emotional appeal
Contrastive Framing	“Justice rolls down like waters...”	Aligns movement with divine and natural forces	Creates moral urgency and legitimisation

10. Ideological Construction Through Emotional Language and Repetition in Martin Luther King Jr.’s Speech

Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech powerfully constructs ideological meanings and power relations through emotional language and repetition. By invoking shared moral liability, Martin creates a sense of determination in the fight against racial injustice. For example, terminologies like "Now is the moment to emerge from the bleak and lonely valley of segregation into the bright path of racial justice" and "We cannot walk by ourselves" / "We can never be satisfied," which reflect a feeling of closeness, eliminate inadequate deviations, and emphasise the importance of complete justice. This repetition unites listeners from diverse races and presents Martin as an honourable leader whose perspective inspires beyond personal experience, fostering a shared identity centred on equality, freedom, and peaceful struggle. See table (4).

Table (4): The Ideological Function and the Effect on Audience



Rhetorical Strategy	Example from the Speech	Ideological Function	Effect on Audience
Emotional Language	“Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice.”	Constructs a moral binary between injustice (darkness) and justice (light); mobilises emotional urgency.	Inspires moral responsibility and emotional investment in the cause.
Inclusivity through Pronouns	“We cannot walk alone... we must pledge that we shall always march ahead.”	“We cannot walk alone... we must pledge that we shall always march ahead.”	Promotes solidarity and shared agency across racial lines.
Repetition of Key Phrases	“I have a dream...” “We can never be satisfied...”	Reinforces central ideological messages (hope, resistance, perseverance).	Enhances memory retention; emotionally energises the audience and aligns them with the vision.
Biblical and Moral Authority	“Justice rolls down like waters...”	Invokes divine legitimacy; positions civil rights as a sacred cause.	Appeals to religious values strengthen the moral weight of the movement.
Visionary Imagery	“The content of their character...”	Reimagines social order through moral and ethical values rather than race.	Encourages a hopeful and transformative vision of future society.

11. Power, Ideology, and Collective Identity in King's Rhetoric

Martin demonstrates power and ideology through the use of extraordinary modality language, which involves lexical choices that convey confidence, responsibility, or necessity. When he states "This is the faith that I go back to the South with" and "We will not be satisfied until...", he expresses a logic of insistence and moral superiority, emphasising justice. This modality shapes the ideological framing of the speech by both rejecting and asserting the certainty of change. Furthermore, he contrasts ideological ideals with socio-political realities, repeatedly comparing the American dogma of freedom and equality with the lived reality of Black Americans facing discrimination. See the summary of analysis in table (5).

Table (5): Types of Strategies for Rejecting and Asserting

Strategy	Example	Function
Inclusive Pronouns	"We, our, us"	Creates collective identity and shared responsibility
High Modality	"We will not be satisfied..."	Asserts certainty, projects authority, and conveys ideological resolve
Contrast Between Ideals	"One hundred years later,	Highlights systemic contradictions;



& Reality	the Negro still is not free"	legitimises the civil rights movement
Biblical/Universal Allusions	"Justice rolls down like waters..."	Adds moral legitimacy; appeals to shared values

12. Appeal to Logic (Logos) in King's Rhetorical Strategy

According to Halmari (2005, pp.118-120), appealing to logic-logos, is a fundamental strategy in persuasive rhetoric. It involves presenting arguments in a structured way, often implying logical premises rather than stating them outright, to influence the audience's reasoning and perception. Martin Luther King Jr. effectively uses this strategy throughout his "I Have a Dream" speech by constructing a coherent, logical argument rooted in moral consistency, historical references, and constitutional ideals.

Martin's use of repetition in the phrase "We can never be satisfied..." followed by "We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream" functions not only as an emotional appeal but also as a logical progression. Each clause reinforces the reasoning that civil rights cannot be delayed because injustice endures. His rhetoric implicitly contends: if freedom and justice are core American values, then denying them to African Americans is irrational and unjust. Thus, through a syllogistic reasoning structure, if justice is for all, and African Americans are denied justice, then America is failing its ideals. Martin appeals to the audience's sense of moral and logical coherence.

Moreover, when Martin declares, "I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists... little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers," he uses contrast and future projection as a logical extension of his vision. The current racial hostility in Alabama serves as the contextual premise, and the dream of interracial unity acts as the logical conclusion that follows if justice prevails. In this way, King invites his audience to accept the rationality of his vision by exposing the contradictions in present social arrangements and suggesting a coherent, inclusive alternative. See table (6).

Table (6): Categories of Rhetorical Strategy

Rhetorical Strategy	Example	Function
Structured Repetition	We can never be satisfied... We will not be satisfied..."	Builds logical momentum and reinforces the argument that inequality is morally and socially wrong
Implied Premises	"Justice rolls down like waters..."	Appeals to the idea that justice is natural and inevitable if moral logic is followed
Logical Projection (Dream)	"One day... little black boys and girls... will join hands with little white boys and girls..."	Constructs a logical, ideal future based on the moral failure of current systems



Contrast of Present/Future	Alabama's racism vs. future unity	Frames change as both desirable and logically necessary
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In summary, King draws on core American values of freedom, justice, and democracy to challenge the dominant racist system. His mental model is based on hope, nonviolence, and the pursuit of equality. By using inclusive language, powerful metaphors, and strategic repetition, King's discourse not only reflects and reinforces his ideological stance but also challenges the existing status quo. Ultimately, he presents a transformative vision of America where racial equality is fully achieved.

The third level, known as the macro-level or social context, reflects the wider societal conditions surrounding the speech. Delivered in 1963, King's address was deeply rooted in the political climate of the civil rights movement, which aimed to challenge systemic racism and call for national change. The speech occurred amid strong opposition to the demands of Black Americans for equality and justice. In his speech, King frames civil rights as a universal American issue rather than solely a "Black" issue, an intentional rhetorical strategy designed to unify the nation. By rejecting radical separatism and emphasizing collective healing and national solidarity, King appeals to shared democratic values to garner broader support for racial justice.

14. Critical Ideological Analysis: Rhetorical Framing and Power Relations

The analysis often describes rhetorical devices but could engage more critically with why these devices matter in shaping ideology and power relations. Martin Luther King Jr. consistently advocates for peaceful resistance, moral integrity, and social harmony, even as more radical voices within the civil rights movement demanded militant change. His rhetorical technique, grounded in the ideology of nonviolence, operates not merely as a moral principle but as a strategic discourse of empowerment, reconfiguring how power, justice, and legitimacy are perceived within the social order.

Drawing inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi, King frames nonviolent struggle as the most effective and ethically coherent response to oppression. This approach challenges hegemonic power without reproducing the same cycles of hatred or retaliation that sustain it. His statement, "We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline," encapsulates this ideological stance, positioning nonviolence as both a moral imperative and a tactical instrument for reshaping dominant narratives. Through such discourse, King constructs a moral hierarchy in which discipline and dignity triumph over violence and injustice, thereby legitimizing the civil rights movement as a superior moral force. Through these strategies, King's rhetoric both reflects and constructs an alternative ideological framework—one that challenges dominant racist narratives and offers a vision of collective transformation grounded in justice, equality, and shared destiny. See table (7).



Table (7): Analytical Category

Analytical Category	Example from Speech	Explanation
Emphasis on Our Good Properties	“We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline.”	King emphasises the moral superiority of the civil rights movement—peaceful, dignified, and disciplined—highlighting its ethical and strategic strength.
De-emphasise Our Bad Properties	Absence of retaliatory or militant language,	King avoids any endorsement of violence or hatred, presenting the movement as morally upright and unified, despite growing frustrations among activists.
Emphasise Their Bad Properties	Properties Implicit references to segregation, injustice, and police brutality	While not directly attacking individuals, King exposes systemic oppression as unjust and morally wrong, casting the power structures as ethically flawed.
De-emphasise Their Good Properties	Rarely acknowledges any virtue in segregationists or unjust institutions	King focuses on transformation rather than reconciliation with oppressive ideologies, leaving little room for justifying the status quo
Mental Model	“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise and live out the true meaning of its creed...”	King's cognitive framework centres on hope, justice, and shared national ideals. He envisions a future shaped by racial equality and American democratic values.

14. Findings and Discussion

King constructs a compelling ideological counter-narrative that reclaims American ideals such as liberty, justice, and equality. By invoking national symbols (Lincoln, Constitution), he positions African Americans not as outsiders but as rightful inheritors of the American dream. The speech disrupts the dominant ideology of white supremacy by humanizing Black experiences and embedding them within a broader moral and historical context. Through metaphor and repetition, King emotionally engages the audience, fostering empathy and prompting action. His use of inclusive language ("we," "our") subverts divisive narratives while also criticizing the hypocrisy of American democracy. van Dijk's model demonstrates how mental representations of ideology (e.g., freedom, justice) are reshaped by King's discourse and shared cognitively among listeners, reinforcing the moral legitimacy of the civil rights movement. See tables (8 and 9).



Table (8)

Strategy	"Us" (African Americans)	"Them" (White power structure)
Emphasis Our Good	"We will not be satisfied until justice rolls..."	White power structure
Emphasis Their Bad	"Negro is still not free..."	Exposes continued oppression
Downplay Our Bad	Non-violent resistance is highlighted	
Downplay Their Good	"They have defaulted on a promissory note..."	Challenging their moral authority

Table (9)

Feature	Example	Function
Repetition	"I have a dream..."; "Let freedom ring..."	Reinforces key ideological themes
Metaphor	"America has given the Negro a bad check..."	Frames justice as an economic moral debt
Pronouns	"We cannot walk alone..."	Builds an inclusive identity
Antithesis	"Justice rolls down like waters and righteousness..."	Biblical allusion empowering civil struggle

Tables (8 and 9) show that the macro level refers to the social context, and the speech was delivered in 1963 during the March on Washington. King's speech responded to the systemic oppression of African Americans, including racial segregation, economic inequality, and police brutality. The Civil Rights Movement sought justice, equal rights, and the dismantling of Jim Crow laws. The speech directly challenges the hegemonic structures that uphold white supremacy.

The speech is a political sermon and a landmark of oratory, combining elements of prophetic preaching, political rhetoric, and visionary leadership. Its genre enhances its ideological power, utilising religious motifs (e.g., biblical phrases like "justice rolls down like waters") to connect civil rights with divine justice. This frames the struggle not just as a social issue but as a moral crusade. Martin's construction of the speech as a journey from misery to hope begins with a critique of persistent racial injustices and concludes with a vision of a just future. The narrative concentrates on the power dynamics between domination and freedom, emphasizing the moral obligation to dismantle segregation and general racism.

Power dynamics are evident in Martin's speech, challenging fixed systems of racial inequality and the misuse of authority (e.g., discrimination laws, formal racism) while empowering the oppressed through calls for collective action and resilience. Ideology: King's ideology combines Christian ethics and American democratic principles. By referencing the Constitution, the Emancipation Proclamation, and biblical scripture, he presents racial justice



as both a sacred duty and a national obligation. This dual approach legitimises the civil rights movement and undermines racist ideologies.

On a meso-level, Martin's mental images and cognitive structures are based on shared American values, nonviolence, togetherness, and hope. He reframes the fight for civil rights as a moral and national imperative by appealing to mental schemas that his audience is accustomed to, such as Christian morality and the American Dream.

Discourse structures are identified at the micro level. Martin employs thoughtful and ideologically charged rhetorical devices. His speech is designed to inspire, persuade, and unify people. He constructs a counter-hegemonic narrative using inclusive language, metaphors, and repetition. He challenges systematic racism by operating on three levels: discursively, he uses strategic language to inspire and bring people together; cognitively, he appeals to widely held beliefs to advocate reform. His speech becomes a hub of ideological resistance, undermining white supremacy through the dominant rhetoric of democracy and justice.

Furthermore, the song's structure and tone draw from gospel traditions, making it both a prayer and a declaration of determination. Its origins in African American spirituals root the song in a history of resilience and faith, linking it to the legacy of overcoming slavery and systemic oppression. The crowd singing ("We'll walk hand in hand, we'll walk hand in hand some day! Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe, We Shall Overcome") illustrates how the song captures the emotional and spiritual core of the Civil Rights Movement. By combining faith, unity, and a call to action, it functions both as a rallying cry and a source of comfort for those fighting for equality. Its simple yet powerful lyrics remind us of the enduring strength of collective hope and resilience in the face of adversity. This quote from the song, "We'll walk hand in hand," is a poignant and evocative continuation of the anthem "We Shall Overcome." The line "We'll walk hand in hand" symbolises the ultimate goal of unity and equality, regardless of race, creed, or background. Walking hand in hand signifies partnership and mutual respect, emphasising that the pursuit of justice is a shared journey. It reinforces the principles of nonviolence and collaboration, which were fundamental to the Civil Rights Movement. See table (10)

Table (10)

1. Social Context (Macro Level)		
Element	Example	Function
Historical Moment	1963, Civil Rights Movement	King addresses racial injustice, segregation, and economic inequality.
Power Dynamics	Black Americans marginalised by laws/institutions	The speech challenges the dominant white hegemony in U.S. society.
Purpose	Social and legal reform	King calls for equality, civil rights, and an end to racial oppression.



Socioeconomic Inequality	"The Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty amid a vast ocean of material prosperity."	Highlights economic exclusion and disparity as part of systemic oppression.
2. Cognitive Level (Meso Level)		
Ideological Beliefs	Example from Speech	Function
Belief in nonviolence	"We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence."	Promoting peaceful resistance aligns with King's mental model of justice.
Belief in shared national values	"All men are created equal."	Uses American values to show hypocrisy and call for change.
Hope for unity	"Little black boys and black girls... with little white boys and white girls."	Belief in racial harmony and a shared future.
Moral Responsibility	"Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children."	Appeals to ethical and religious principles as cognitive anchors.
National Shame vs. Potential	"America has defaulted on this promissory note."	Frames the nation's failure as a breach of trust, not impossibility, leaving room for redemption.
3. Discourse Structures (Micro level)		
Technique	Example	Function
Repetition	"I have a dream..."	Creates rhythm, emphasis, and emotional engagement.
Metaphor	"A bad check"	Frames civil rights as a broken promise—an economic metaphor.
Pronouns	"We will not be satisfied..."	Builds unity and collective identity.
Contrast	"Colour of their skin... content of their character"	Frames justice as moral and internal, not racial.
Intertextuality	"Five score years ago..." (Lincoln)	Connects civil rights to the American historical legacy.
Symbolism	"Let freedom ring from the hilltops of New Hampshire..."	Uses geography as a symbol of nationwide unity and liberation.
Temporal Framing	"Now is the time..."	Creates urgency, situating the speech within an immediate and moral imperative.



4. Ideological Square Analysis

Discourse Strategy	Us (In-group)	Them (Out-group)
Emphasise Our Good	"All men are created equal"	
Emphasise Their Bad		"Negro is still not free"
De-emphasise Our Bad	Implicit: Avoids militant tone	
De-emphasise Their Good		"They have defaulted on a promissory note"





15. Conclusions

The study draws several conclusions that address the study questions. The results show that Martin employed three key discourse strategies, though to varying extents, to strengthen his statements and motivate his listeners. Through his careful use of language, King constructs a compelling critique of systemic racism and offers an alternative ideology rooted in equality, freedom, and justice. The main linguistic features used by Martin include repetition, metaphor, allusion, and inclusive pronouns—aimed at understanding the dynamics of power and ideology, challenging the oppressive status quo, and inspiring hope and collective action.

Moreover, he deliberately constructed it for political purposes. Thus, he selects specific words and strategies to communicate his ideology, imply different meanings and aims, and influence his listeners' attitudes. Additionally, the act of urging is best achieved through the use of logical statements, by which Martin legitimises his power over his audience. He effectively influences his listeners by employing these strategies, with logical appeals being the most prominent. Martin influenced his audience through logical reasoning and factual statements, inspiring them to adopt his perspective and support his cause. Which is obvious through singing. The speech resonates emotionally through its vivid imagery, hopeful tone, and rhythmic delivery.

Martin Luther's future vision, expressed through phrases like "the table of brotherhood" and "my four little children," personalises the struggle and makes it relatable. The phrase "some day" recognises that the struggle continues but also highlights that the goal is within reach. This blend of realism and hope fortifies the determination of those involved in the movement.



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