

# Discourse Analysis on Martin Luther King's Speech 'I Have a Dream'

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**Abstract** This paper aims to examine Martin Luther King's speech "I Have a Dream" using Gee's [1] building tasks. To specify, the paper will highlight King's use of language to build and destroy identity, relationship, and politics. Furthermore, analysis shows the ideologies and philosophical dogmas behind the speech, which relates to freedom, equality, and civil rights.

**Keywords:** building tasks, speech, discourse analysis, identity, relationship politics, ideology

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## 1. Introduction

August 28, 1963, has been a remarkable day for civil rights movement, wherein Martin Luther King has given the most powerful and influential speech entitled "I have a dream". The premise of the speech is an invitation to peaceful coexistence between the African Americans and the white citizens of America, along with a plea that both parties accept the forthcoming change in a non-violent way.

Jorgensen and Phillips [2] define discourse as the structured language, and define discourse analysis as the analysis of the patterns followed by people in daily utterances in different social life domains (12).

The phenomenal nature of the speech has led to a few attempts at analyzing it, and according to Gee [1], there are seven building tasks that can help us decode any discourse at hand. The building tasks are as follows: significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems. Moreover, Jorgensen and Phillips [2] highlight the importance of discursive practices and state that they "are viewed as an important form of social practice which contributes to the constitution of the social world including social identities and social relations" (61). With that in mind, and with Gee [1] view on effects of texts "inculcating and sustaining ideologies" (123), it is important not only analyze, but rather critique this speech as it has invoked many identities and ideologies in King's audience.

This paper aims to further investigate King's speech and interpret it using the aforementioned building tasks techniques. More specifically, this paper will use identities, relationships, and politics to analyze and critique this discourse.

## 2. Significance of the Study

Martin Luther King's speech "I Have a Dream" has been analyzed repeatedly. However, building tasks of discourse analysis have not been applied to said speech. Moreover, Sipra and Rashid [3] analyze King's speech using critical discourse analysis highlighting the social, cultural, and political factors surrounding the speech. However, they use critical discourse analysis on the first part of the speech and recommends further analysis on the rest of it.

Dlugan [4] suggests that a lengthy study is in order of Martin Luther King's speech after he analyzes it metaphorically. The analysis of the metaphor is quite important to understand the nature of the speech as well as the nature of the speaker. However, the analysis of the metaphors is not as profound as the building tasks in understanding the ideologies and agenda behind the speech.

Damak [5] in his study on the strategic purpose of belonging in King's speech, suggests that King selects a strategy of identification that rests on cultural conformity. However, Damak focuses in his analysis on metaphors and theoretical approaches, which again is not as practical to examine said cultural conformity. This paper will interpret the speech to examine the cultural compliance using the building tasks of Gee [1], particularly identity and relationship.

It is evident that understanding the speech needs a thorough look at the historical background of it, which is outside the scope of this paper. However, several historic and social factors will be mentioned in the analysis below using Morris's [6] book; *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*. With that in mind, this paper focuses on the

following building tasks; identity, relationship, and politics.

### 3. Research Objectives

1- This paper aims to study and apply building tasks on Martin Luther King's speech and analyze it accordingly.

2- This paper will attempt to highlight the social factors that constituted King's speech, and what social influence does the speech have on the African-American community.

3- Relevantly, this study is carried out to inspect the construction of King's speech, and the linguistic value it has, by using critical discourse analysis.

This leads to the research questions this paper attempts to answer, which are as follows:

1- What relation does this discourse have to the building task of identity?

2- What relation does this discourse have to the building task of politics?

3- What relation does this discourse have to the building task of relationships?

4- What effect does this discourse carry on the identity and ideology of Americans?

### 4. Review of Literature

#### 1. Critical Discourse Analysis and Gee's Building Tasks

Fairclough [7], suggests that critical discourse analysis has three basic characteristics, one of them is the rationality of it. He states that it is a rational form of research because it focuses primarily on social relations as well as entities and individuals. Furthermore, Fairclough carries on to mention the complexity of social relations and how it is layered due to the fact that they have relations within relations. These relations are a major part of the analysis of King's speech. Additionally, in their book *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, Jorgensen and Phillips [2] co-wrote a chapter on critical discourse analysis. Drawing on Fairclough and Wodak's [8] overview, the writers list the five common features of different approaches to critical discourse analysis. The feature we are about to examine in this paper is the feature that links social and cultural construction to linguistic-discursive. Critical Discourse Analysis as a theory is where Gee's [1] building tasks is elicited from. Gee [1] suggests that language-in-use means saying, doing and being (30). Moreover, it is used along with non-verbal tools to build one of seven areas of reality, which Gee [1], calls the seven building tasks. Those building tasks include; significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems. Therefore, any analyst can use these seven tools to analyze any discourse at hand.

#### 2. Previous Studies

Damak [5], conducts a study in on the strategic purpose of belonging in Martin Luther King's speech, in which he suggests that King selects a strategy of identification that rests on cultural conformity. Damak justifies the need to live in harmony with fellow white-citizens of America, but insists that the issue of belonging will only be solved

in favor of the dominant majority group. Equally as important is Sipra and Rashid's [3] work, in which they analyze King's speech using critical discourse analysis stressing the social, cultural, and political features of the speech. However, they use critical discourse analysis on the first part of the speech and recommend further analysis on the rest of it. From a different angle, Dlugan [4] analyzes King's speech in terms of metaphors. He notes that King mentions Mississippi four times during his speech, and suggests that it is not accidental. Dlugan states that "mentioning Mississippi would evoke some of the strongest emotions and images for his audience" (7). Such analysis highlights the ideology and paradigm behind King's speech, which this paper aims to examine more closely.

Bajri and Othman [9], conduct critical discourse analysis on Martin Luther King's speech 'I have a dream', and compare it to Malcolm X's speech 'a message to the grassroots'. Bajri and Othman examine the use of lexical items in both speeches, the use of metaphors, and rhetorical devices. They utilize Fairclough's 3D model to analyze the speeches and come to the conclusion that the influential power of these speeches lies in the strong language used in both. Additionally, they highlight the role of these powerful rhetoric in persuading the audiences as well as the government of the United States.

Another paper by Bajri and Mariesel [10] follows the same method of critical discourse analysis is recently published. The authors highlight the importance of language use in political discourse. They analyze Gamal Abdel Nasser's 1967 stepping down speech, and conclude that the lexical choices in the speech facilitate his agenda in addition to the rhetorical devices and metaphors. Along with his charisma, language helps Abdel Nasser endorsing his name further more even after the defeat.

#### 3. Discourse Legitimation

Essentially, any discourse analysis needs to answer the question of legitimation proposed by van Leeuwen [11], in which he asks "Why should we do this in this particular way". Before answering this question in reference to the current paper, it is important to look into the four categories of legitimation mentioned by van Leeuwen [11]. The first one is Authorizations, which is legitimation in relation to the authority of custom, law, and tradition. This authorization can be vested in persons representing institutions such as policemen or religious men. The second category of legitimation is the value system of a certain society, or what van Leeuwen [11] calls moral evaluation. Third, rationalization, which is legitimation in relation to the social practices that exist in a society. Mythopoesis is the last category, which are the narratives that reward legitimate actions and punishes non-legitimate actions. To answer the previously posited question "why", this paper investigates King's speech because of its historic and social importance, and for the impact it had done. To answer "why in this particular way", it is the seven building tasks of Gee [1] that will give us a precise detailed look into King's identity in the speech, the identities and relationships in the society that received the speech, and the politics of that time that needed to be built or destroyed by King.

To take a closer and more social look into the speech, the current paper refers to Morris' [6] work which gives a

detailed description of the civil rights movements, in which he mentions the approaches used by Martin Luther King to protest. Morris talks about the effectiveness of King's ways and his credibility as a former protester. He praises the civil rights movement for its cruciality in the sense that it is the first time that African Americans directly have confronted and disrupted the functions of the institutions responsible for their oppression (5). King mentions these institutions in his speech and talks about police brutality specifically, which will be further discussed in the analysis.

## 5. Method of Analysis

### 5.1. Theoretical Framework

In the broader sense, this paper utilizes Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze the speech. A more specified scope is Gee's [1] Seven Building Tasks, which include: significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems. The paper, however, focuses on identities, relationships, and politics. The reason behind choosing these three tasks is that they reflect the importance of the speech at that particular period of time. Combined together, these three tasks give a richer view of the society and its functions through Martin Luther King's eyes. They also give an indication of King's strong persona and leadership skills.

Gee [1] introduces identities as the ability to build roles into the discourse and to be recognized for these roles. The analysis discusses the identities built by King with an attempt to justify the need for these roles in the speech. In terms of the task "relationships", it looks into the connections between different social or individual classes. Last but not least, politics as defined by Gee [1] is the "social goods" that exist in a society. In this particular task, we use language to build and destroy privileges. In the speech, the discrimination against African-Americans is highlighted in contrast with white privilege.

### 5.2. Data Collection

Data will be obtained from an online source containing the full speech of Martin Luther King. However, only certain parts of the speech will be selected for analysis.

### 5.3. Data Analysis

The analysis will be divided into three categories in accordance with Gee's [1] building tasks; i.e. identities, politics, and relationships. To follow up, selected lines and paragraphs from the speech will go under appropriate categories for analysis.

## 5.4. Application and Discussion

### 5.4.1. Identity

Language enables one to build an identity and get recognized for that identity or role. In his speech, Martin Luther King builds many identities in order to communicate with his audience and reach out to them.

1. "So we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition" para. (2).

Notably, King attempts to build himself as a leader or a spiritual leader to the civil rights movement that has been going on for approximately 16 years during the deliverance of King's speech.

This line comes after many lines of describing the negroes' sufferance and hardship, in which King does not use "we" to belong to the "negros" or the African Americans. Instead, he describes their suffering from afar, and the first time he uses the word "we" is in the line above, where he urges them to march and change this shameful condition. With that in mind, it seems like King acknowledges the fact that he is a negro, yet refuses to submit to the weakness that comes with the word and to the conditions in which they live.

2. "We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline" para. (9).

Preserving the identity of sensibility and rationalism is very important for King since he is an advocate for peace and non-violent change. He presents this identity several times in his speech and urges the African Americans to claim it and commit to it.

3. "I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream" para. (18).

The identity of the American is a recurring theme in King's speech. Surely, one of the ways in which he can connect with the white citizens of America is to claim the identity of an American himself. As a result, King's speech is heavily loaded with what Damak [5] calls: the "Americanity" (214). He repeatedly mentions the American dream and the American citizenship, and that could only be a way to reinforce the ideology of belonging for the African Americans, and the ideology of unity for the white man.

4. "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" para. (14).

King presents his audience with an identity of his, i.e. a parent. Surely, with hundreds of thousands attending his speech, many of which are parents. By representing himself and selling this father figure image, people can relate to him and will have a higher capacity of compassion for King and the African American community.

### 5.4.2. Relationships

1. "Those who hope that the negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual" para. (7).

The relationship that King tries to introduce here is a relationship of dominance and power. It is a clear threat in case anything happens to the civil rights movement, or if the white people in power decide to dismiss this movement as a steam that needs to be blown off.

King does not mean a violent threat precisely, but "rude awakening" here gives us the impression that it could indeed develop into a threatening relationship if the demands of the African Americans are jeopardized.

2. "In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy

our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred" para. (9).

King suggests that African Americans should demand their rights with reasonability, and not be dragged into hatred and bitterness with the white man. He seeks to establish a relationship of sensibility between both parties to avoid any violence that could arise.

3. *"The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny"* para. (10).

Another aspect of the relationship between the African Americans and the white citizens of America that King endeavors to establish or endorse is the friendship between the two. King realizes that in their struggle, there are some righteous white men who aspire to achieve justice in America.

The significance of this ethnic alliance lies in the next following lines in King's speech, in which he mentions that both parties know that they cannot walk alone in their march for freedom. King realizes that the white men that march with the civil rights movement are some sort of validation to the movement, wherein they represent the majority in America. Indeed, if you can get the majority to validate your cause, then it is not just a dream anymore.

4. *"There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality"* para. (11).

King highlights the hostile relationship between the African Americans and the police. This animosity is not restricted to the police though, rather to all state devices. He mentions in the following lines that even airports and public schools have these policies of segregation. By listing all the instances in which a black man can be subjected to racism and segregation, King achieves his goal to destroy this relationship by shaming it.

5. *"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brother-hood"* para. (16).

It is equally important to connect to the African Americans, as well as to the white citizens of America. This line builds a relationship of friendship and brotherhood between the African Americans and the whites. It is also important for King that both parties remember who they were, and that the African Americans embrace their history. He tries to enable the whole community to access the image of slaves and slave owners, as long as this image will encourage them to build friendships and brotherhoods with those of the other race.

### 5.4.3. Politics

1. *"This note was a promise that all men-yes, black men as well as white men-would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"* para. (3).

Gee [1] states that "we use language to build and destroy social goods" (31), and that is exactly what King aspires to achieve with this speech. Clearly, the white citizens of America at that time have had privilege or what we can call social goods, in contrast to the African

American community who has been suffering from discrimination even after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. On another note, King refers indeed to the proclamation several times and intends to stand before Lincoln's statue to further endorse his speech.

Moreover, King tries to resolve existing segregation and discrimination that has been there prior to his time as well as during, by building the social goods for the African Americans and destroying the privilege that the white citizens have over their fellow black citizens.

It is important to note that the ideology of freedom and equality to all is deeply rooted in the idea of "America", but whether it is actually applied or not is another issue. This ideology helps King to reach out to all Americans, even those who do not stand in his audience during this speech. He presents this social good and expects them to follow through and actually grants it to every American, no matter what his race might be.

2. *"We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating "For Whites Only"'"* para. (13).

Even the children of the African Americans are subjected to the disgusting segregation and prejudice of the whites, to the point where even in schools black kids are taught that they are less by the signs that state "For Whites Only". This is an issue that King attempts to destroy with his speech. The privilege that those white kids have over their fellow black mates is a social good that King tries to invoke in order to create a social good that fits and satisfies all, that is equality.

3. *"And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"* para. (24).

A spectacular way to conclude a speech full of imagery. King presents the ultimate social good that he wants to achieve for every American, i.e. freedom. With his words, King recognizes the struggle of every American and does not exclude anyone. The inclusivity of this paragraph can reach out to all races, religions, and classes. This shared struggle is what makes it easier for the other races and classes to relate to African Americans.

King builds an image of unity amongst the American community and urges all to march in defense of their freedom. He wants to present them with the ultimate social good and the basic human right that is freedom. Naturally, when this privilege is given to all, and when it is truly guaranteed for every citizen, the destruction of segregation and discrimination will shortly follow.

This ideology that King presents to the Americans is essential to the civil rights movement, in which he offers an ideology of unity and freedom as a vital condition to coexist in peace.

## 6. Conclusion

It is found in the analysis that Martin Luther King's speech is constructed carefully and not just haphazardly,

which agrees with Spira and Rashid's [3] suggestion that it has been syntactically structured to serve King's ideologies and purpose.

King builds several identities for himself, a leader, a rational, a parent, and an American, to name a few. The interesting thing about King, in particular, is that he is an honest man in the sense that when he advocates for peace, he does indeed what he says; he urges his people as well as the other party not to be violent or hateful.

In terms of relationships, Spira and Rashid [3] states that "Luther king very impressively and successfully with the help of metaphors and other devices identifies the relationship between the powerful and oppressed" (32), and this is what we conclude from the analysis. We find King capable of building unity and harmony between the Americans by using his words. He builds a relationship of dominance and power between the African Americans and the state devices in case they take their movement for granted. Furthermore, King seeks to establish a relationship of brotherhood and friendship amongst the African Americans and the white citizens of America. Last but not least, King attempts to highlight the relationship between the African Americans and the brutal police in order to speak for the struggles of the black man and destroy this brutal relationship to build a peaceful one instead.

King plays a decent game with politics in his concluding paragraph, in which he includes every spectrum of society and mentions all races, religions, and classes. Destroying every aspect of prejudice and intolerance in the American society, King provides them with social goods that fits all to fill the gap. He tries to present them a new ideology of America, a country where everyone is free, safe, and dignified.

Martin Luther King's speech is an attempt to push the American society into instant peaceful change, and whether it succeeds or not is a different issue. Moreover, King's speech is linguistically rich, and the limitation of this paper is that it does not exceed building tasks or critical discourse analysis. It is recommended that a

further study is conducted on the speech using all the building tasks of discourse analysis, as well as a study to decode the speech into its basic ideologies and concepts.

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