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DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF COLLECTIVE POWER AND POLITICAL LEGITIMACY: A FAIRCLOUGHIAN CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF ZOHRAN MAMDANI'S VICTORY SPEECH

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Abstract

This study examines the construction of power, ideology, and political legitimacy in Zohran Mamdani's victory speech using Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The study uses a qualitative research approach and Fairclough's framework to evaluate speech at three levels: text, discursive practice, and social practice. The research demonstrates the deliberate use of inclusive pronouns, repetition, modality, evaluative language, and ideological metaphors to advance collectivism, social justice, and democratic legitimacy. The speech makes intertextual connections to grassroots action, democratic socialism, and historical battles for justice, situating Mamdani within larger traditions of resistance and participatory politics. At the social level, the speech criticizes neoliberal urban government, socioeconomic inequality, and elite dominance, while arguing for inclusive and people-centered governance. The results indicate that the speech serves as a discursive instrument for rethinking leadership, power, and democracy as social processes. This study contributes to Critical Discourse Analysis and political discourse studies by illustrating how political speeches alter public perception, legitimize power, and promote sociopolitical change.

Introduction

Political speeches specifically speaking victory addresses signify pivotal instances in democratic processes where leaders symbolically claim power, express ideological principles, and reshape the dynamics between the rulers and the ruled. These speeches serve not only as joyful expressions but also as strategic discursive events that establish political legitimacy and negotiate power relations (Fairclough, 1995). Fairclough (1992) considers speech as a complex discursive practice. The paradigm facilitates a comprehensive examination of linguistic characteristics, discursive

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creation, and socio-political environment, rendering it especially apt for revealing the ideology and power-related aspects inherent in speeches (Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough, 1995).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emerged in reaction to the increasing acknowledgment that language is fundamental in constructing social realities. CDA perceives discourse not as a neutral medium, but as a social practice that generates and perpetuates power, ideology, and inequality. Originating in the late twentieth century, Critical speech Analysis amalgamates perspectives from linguistics, sociology, philosophy, and critical theory to examine the operation of spoken and written speeches within larger social frameworks.

The early theoretical roots of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) can be attributed to scholars like Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and Pierre Bourdieu, who highlighted the intrinsic connection between discourse and power dynamics. Foucault emphasized the role of speech in regulating knowledge and social control, whereas Gramsci's notion of hegemony elucidated how dominant groups sustain authority via ideological consent. Bourdieu contended that quotidian discourse mirrors symbolic authority and social stratifications, perpetuating inequitable connections via language practices.

CDA emphasizes the significance of speech and verbal engagement, acknowledging dialogue as a potent arena for ideological impact. Van Dijk (1998) emphasizes that quotidian discourse, political discussions, and institutional communication are critical domains where power dynamics are manifested and institutionalized. Utilizing speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) investigates how utterances execute social activities, including persuading, commanding, legitimizing, or excluding. This underscores how spoken discourse actively shapes social meanings instead of only presenting reality.

Fairclough and Wodak (1997) contend that Critical speech Analysis seeks to elucidate how speech, whether in texts, conversations, or media narratives, perpetuates inequality and dominance. Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework (1992) offers a systematic approach for examining discourse across three interrelated levels: textual characteristics, discursive behaviors (creation and interpretation), and sociocultural practices. This model illustrates that speech and language should consistently be understood within their institutional and societal settings.

Over time, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been extensively utilized for the examination of political speeches, media discourse, organizational communication, and audiovisual media, including films and television (Chilton & Schäffner, 2002; van Leeuwen, 2008). This methodology enables researchers to investigate the transmission of authority, hierarchy, and prevailing ideas via spoken and mediated language. By emphasizing power and ideology, Critical Discourse Analysis provides a critical framework for comprehending how speech and media discourse influence social attitudes, legitimize dominance, and perpetuate existing worldviews.

Zohran Mamdani's victory address after his election as Mayor of New York City exemplifies a notable example of modern progressive political rhetoric. The speech emphasizes working-class experiences, immigrant identities, and marginalized communities while directly confronting established political elites, neoliberal governance, and oligarchic power systems. Mamdani portrays politics as a collective endeavor via using inclusive pronouns, emotive storylines, and intertextual connections to socialist, anti-colonial, and democratic traditions, rather than as a

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process dominated by elites. The discussion reframes governance as an ethical obligation rooted in solidarity, hope, and participatory democracy.

Rationale of the Study

Political triumph speeches represent significant discursive instances where authority, ideology, and group identity are established and validated. Zohran Mamdani's victory speech is notable for its direct challenge to elite-driven governance and its focus on solidarity, inclusiveness, and participatory democracy. Nevertheless, current research has insufficiently investigated the interaction between linguistic traits, discursive practices, and overarching socio-political systems within this discourse. This study utilizes Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis to systematically and integratively examine the construction of progressive political legitimacy and collective power through discourse.

Research Gap

Despite the expanding literature on political discourse and recent analyses of Zohran Mamdani's victory speech, there is a significant lack of study utilizing Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model in relation to this text. Current research emphasizes socio-cognitive or rhetorical viewpoints, neglecting the interactions among linguistic choices, discursive production, and social practices that legitimate power and contest neoliberal urban government. This study fills this gap by providing a thorough Faircloughian Critical Discourse Analysis that contextualizes the speech within larger frameworks of power, class dynamics, and democratic change.

Research Objectives

- To examine the discursive construction of collective power and political legitimacy in Zohran Mamdani's victory speech.
- To explore the relationship between linguistic strategies and broader socio-political structures within urban governance.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do Zohran Mamdani's victory speech construct collective power and political legitimacy through discourse?
2. How do linguistic strategies reflect and shape broader socio-political structures within urban governance?

Significance of the Study

This study enhances political discourse analysis by providing a comprehensive Faircloughian evaluation of a current progressive victory speech that has not been thoroughly examined using this framework. It improves theoretical comprehension of the functioning of political language as a social practice by connecting textual selections with wider socio-political frameworks. The research empirically illustrates how Mamdani's language emphasizes working-class and immigrant identities while contesting elite domination and neoliberal government. The results are significant for researchers in discourse, political communication, and urban studies, and also

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provide insights for political practitioners and activists regarding the role of language in mobilizing communities, legitimizing authority, and promoting democratic engagement.

Literature Review

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been extensively employed to explore the complex relationship between language, ideology, and power in political contexts. One of the most influential contributions to this field comes from Norman Fairclough (1995, 2001), who conceptualizes discourse as a form of social practice rather than a purely linguistic phenomenon. His Three-Dimensional Model comprising textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice has been widely applied in political discourse studies to demonstrate how linguistic choices both reflect and shape broader socio-political structures. Through this model, scholars have shown how political authority is legitimized, ideological assumptions are naturalized, and power relations are reproduced or contested through language.

Building on this foundation, Paul Chilton (2004) approaches political discourse as a form of strategic action. He emphasizes that political actors deliberately employ linguistic strategies such as metaphor, modality, evaluation, and framing to persuade audiences and justify political positions. Chilton's work highlights that political speeches do not merely describe reality but actively construct it by shaping how audiences understand political actors, policies, and social issues. This perspective is particularly relevant for analyzing victory speeches, which aim to consolidate legitimacy while projecting a future-oriented political vision.

Another influential strand of CDA is the socio-cognitive approach developed by Teun A. van Dijk (2006). Van Dijk foregrounds the role of shared mental models, ideologies, and social cognition in the production and interpretation of political discourse. He demonstrates how discursive strategies such as positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation are used to construct in-group solidarity and out-group exclusion. This framework has been widely applied to populist and progressive rhetoric, revealing how political actors mobilize collective identities and moral polarization to gain public support.

The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), associated with Ruth Wodak (2015), further enriches CDA by emphasizing the importance of historical context, intertextuality, and collective memory in political discourse. Wodak shows how political actors draw on narratives of hope, fear, crisis, and shared history to legitimize policies and construct national or communal identities. Her work is particularly useful for understanding how victory speeches link past struggles with present achievements and future aspirations, thereby strengthening political legitimacy.

Fairclough and Fairclough (2010) extend CDA into the domain of political argumentation by examining how discourse frames social problems and proposes policy solutions through moral and value-laden reasoning. They argue that political discourse often operates through implicit ethical assumptions about responsibility, justice, and the common good. This approach is especially relevant to victory speeches, which frequently combine celebratory rhetoric with commitments to governance and reform.

More directly related to the present study is the work of Ali et al.(2025), who conduct a socio-cognitive CDA of Zohran Mamdani's victory speech. Their analysis demonstrates that Mamdani discursively constructs democratic power by activating shared cognitive frames of solidarity,

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struggle, and hope, primarily through inclusive pronouns and ideological polarization between "the people" and elite power holders. While their study provides valuable insight into the ideological and cognitive dimensions of the speech, it remains largely focused on mental models and does not systematically explore the interaction between textual features, discursive practices, and broader socio-political structures.

Overall, the existing literature highlights the effectiveness of CDA in uncovering how political discourse constructs power, legitimacy, and identity. However, despite growing interest in progressive and urban political rhetoric, there remains a gap in studies that apply a comprehensive Faircloughian framework to contemporary victory speeches. This study addresses that gap by integrating textual analysis with discursive and socio-political contexts to provide a more holistic understanding of how Mamdani's victory speech functions as a form of social practice within progressive urban governance.

Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research paradigm. A qualitative approach is appropriate since the study investigates how power, ideology, and legitimacy are formed through language in Zohran Mamdani's victory speech. Rather than assessing data numerically, this design allows for a thorough examination of language choices, discursive techniques, and social meanings contained in the speech. The study uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to investigate how discourse functions as a social practice in the political setting of New York City governance

Data Collection

An official transcript of Zohran Mamdani's victory speech provided the study's primary data. To identify crucial linguistic components including pronoun usage, metaphors, repetition, modality, and intertextual references, the speech is read and analyzed multiple times. Fairclough's three-dimensional model is used to retrieve and systematically categorize these textual elements for examination. Secondary data sources include academic books, journal articles, and earlier research on Critical Discourse Analysis, political discourse, power, ideology, and urban government. These sources provide theoretical support as well as contextual understanding of the speech's sociopolitical backdrop.

Population and Sampling

The study's population includes all lines, phrases, and argumentative aspects from Zohran Mamdani's victory speech. The study used purposive sampling to identify key sections of the speech that clearly depict issues of communal authority, legitimacy, class, and governance. The analysis includes just the areas that are directly related to the research objectives and questions. This selection strategy assures that the data are relevant, rich, and appropriate for critical discourse analysis (CDA).

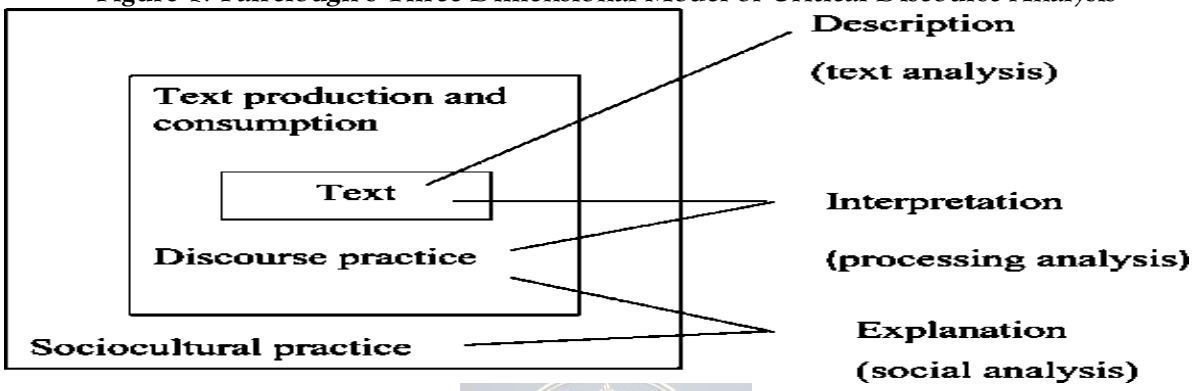
Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which understands language as a social practice that both reflects and shapes power relations and ideologies. CDA argues that discourse is never neutral; instead, it serves as a means through which social structures are

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maintained, challenged, or transformed (Fairclough, 1995). This perspective is especially suitable for political victory speeches, as such speeches are not only celebratory but also strategic tools used to construct legitimacy, mobilize public support, and negotiate authority. The main theoretical framework for this research is Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model (1992, 1995, 2001). According to Fairclough, discourse should be analyzed through three interconnected levels: text, discursive practice, and social practice. These dimensions allow a holistic examination of how language operates within social contexts and power structures.

Figure 1: *Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis*



The emphasis at the textual level is on the linguistic characteristics of the discourse, including vocabulary, metaphors, pronoun usage, repetition, and modality. These characteristics demonstrate how the speaker formulates meaning, cultivates collective identity, and delineates political legitimacy. In victory speeches, linguistic selections are essential for portraying the speaker as a spokesperson of the populace and for constructing a collective political vision (Fairclough, 1992).

The second level, discursive practice, analyzes the production, distribution, and interpretation of speech. This include the genre conventions of political oratory, the speaker's tactics for audience positioning, and the intertextual allusions employed to link the speech to historical or ideological legacies. Fairclough (1995) contends that discursive practice entails comprehending how texts are influenced by institutional norms and how they are perceived by audiences. Mamdani's speech illustrates how discursive practice elucidates his portrayal of victory as a communal accomplishment, his alignment with progressive traditions, and his challenge to elite political conventions.

The third level, social practice, contextualizes the discourse within extensive socio-political frameworks and power dynamics. This dimension examines how discourse mirrors, perpetuates, or challenges social disparities and ideological frameworks. Fairclough (2001) asserts that language is both influenced by and influences social realities, indicating that political speeches can either maintain or contest prevailing governance models, class systems, and power hierarchies. This study examines how Mamdani's discourse addresses neoliberal urban administration, economic disparity, and political marginalization, while advocating for solidarity, immigrant representation, and participatory democracy. Fairclough's paradigm offers a thorough framework for studying Mamdani's victory speech as a multifaceted discursive event. It facilitates the examination of language selections in relation to production and interpretation processes,

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linking them to broader socio-political frameworks, thus revealing the ideological and power-related aspects of discourse.

Data Analysis

The study aims to examine the discursive construction of collective power, political legitimacy and the relationship between linguistic strategies and broader socio-political structures within urban governance in Zohran Mamdani's victory speech. The data were analyzed using Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

Textual Analysis

Mamdani's victory speech exhibits intentional lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical selections that emphasize collectivism, democratic legitimacy, and ideological dissent. A notable characteristic is the continual employment of inclusive pronouns, including *we*, *our*, and *us* Mamdani asserts, *We didn't win this alone this victory belongs to every working family in this city.* The pronoun *we* eliminates the distinction between the speaker and the audience, framing political success as a communal accomplishment rather than a personal victory. Fairclough asserts that pronoun selections are ideologically charged, as they situate subjects within particular power dynamics and social identities (Fairclough, 1995).

The speech predominantly used value-laden terminology linked to democratic struggle and social justice, like *dignity, justice, working families, community,* and *solidarity.* These linguistic items serve as ideological signifiers, evoking common moral standards while indirectly opposing aristocratic governance. Mamdani's assertion, *This campaign was about dignity for tenants, dignity for workers, dignity for immigrants,* used the repetition of *dignity* as a rhetorical intensifier, so strengthening moral validity. Fairclough (2010) contends that repetition in political discourse functions to normalize ideological meanings, rendering them seemingly self-evident rather than subject to dispute.

The speech utilizes contrastive frameworks to delineate ideological conflict. Mamdani contends: *This city has been governed for the elite, not the majority; that will change tonight.* The binary opposition of *the few* and *the many* exemplifies what Fairclough describes as a discursive production of social antagonism, wherein power dynamics are reduced to morally polarized categories (Fairclough, 2001). The passive construction *has been run* obscures identifiable agents of inequity while emphasizing structural injustice, a tactic frequently employed in political discourse to condemn structures rather than people.

Modality is also of fundamental importance. The regular employment of high-certainty modal verbs like *will* and *must* expresses assurance and inevitability. Mamdani asserts, *We will build a city that works for everyone.* This assertive declaration establishes the speaker as both authoritative and visionary. Fairclough (1992) observes that robust modality in political discourse serves to legitimize authority by framing future actions as unequivocal obligations.

Discursive Practice

At the level of discursive practice, The speech utilizes and recontextualizes various established political discourses, notably those of progressive populism, grassroots action, and democratic socialism. Mamdani's mention of *working families*, *tenants*, and *immigrants* indicates

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interdiscursivity with labor rights and social justice organizations. The phrase, *This movement was powered by volunteers knocking on doors in every neighborhood,* reflects campaign language typical of grassroots mobilization, thereby establishing political legitimacy as arising from popular involvement rather than elite approval.The speech is produced in the context of an electoral triumph, a genre that conventionally highlights thankfulness and unity. Nonetheless, Mamdani reinterprets this genre by emphasizing struggle over celebration. Rather of concentrating exclusively on individual success, he asserts *Tonight is not the end of a campaign –it is the beginning of collective responsibility.* This redefining of victory corresponds with Fairclough's perspective that genres are dynamic and can be purposefully modified to promote ideological objectives (Fairclough, 2003).

The consumption of speech is likewise substantial. The discourse, aimed at a varied urban electorate, considers numerous audiences: supporters, political adversaries, and disenfranchised groups. Through the recurrent use of *this city* and *our neighborhoods*, Mamdani forges a collective urban identity that surpasses racial and social distinctions. Fairclough (1995) asserts that the anticipatory placement of audiences enables political speakers to manipulate interpretative frameworks, directing listeners towards favored interpretations.

Intertextuality is obvious in the implicit allusions to wider democratic conflicts. The term *people-powered change* aligns with international protest movements and progressive initiatives, utilizing a common vocabulary of resistance. Although no particular texts are referenced, the dialogue resonates with slogans from labor and civil rights organizations, so placing Mamdani's triumph within a historical continuum of democratic engagement. This intertextual approach enhances legitimacy by associating the speaker with recognized narratives of justice and transformation.

Social Practice

At the level of social practice, Mamdani's discourse should be contextualized within the extensive frameworks of urban disparity, neoliberal administration, and democratic struggle. The persistent focus on *working families* and *tenants* underscores the tangible challenges posed by housing crises and economic instability in metropolitan areas. Mamdani asserts, *No one should have to choose between rent and food in the richest city in the world,* thereby clearly linking discourse to underlying economic imbalances. Fairclough (2010) contends that Critical Discourse Analysis elucidates how language simultaneously mirrors and perpetuates social disparities, rendering these assertions politically consequential.

The speech ideologically contradicts prevailing neoliberal narratives that conceptualize governance through the lenses of efficiency and market logic. Mamdani's argument, *Government should work for people, not corporations,* directly challenges prevailing notions regarding the state's function. This adversarial framing corresponds with Fairclough's concept of counter-hegemonic discourse, which aims to undermine established power dynamics (Fairclough, 2001).

Power dynamics are additionally reshaped through the establishment of democratic authority. Mamdani consistently ascribes agency to the electorate instead of portraying himself as a sole leader: *You organized, you believed, and you made history.* The employment of second-person pronouns conveys symbolic authority to the audience, reinterpreting leadership as facilitative instead of hierarchical. Fairclough (1992) posits that these variations in agency signify wider ideological conflicts over the interpretation of democracy.

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The speech additionally serves an ideological function by normalizing redistribution and inclusion as essential democratic principles. References to *immigrants*, *working individuals*, and *every community* contest exclusionary political narratives that exclude specific groups. By presenting inclusion as a matter of common sense, the discourse aims to transform public awareness. Fairclough (1995) observes that ideology is powerful when it functions covertly, ingrained in quotidian language rather than explicit discourse.

The temporal frame of the speech situates the victory inside a continuous fight. Assertions such as *This is only the beginning and The work starts now* defy finality, highlighting process rather than result. This corresponds with Fairclough's perspective of speech as a kind of social action that simultaneously mirrors and shapes historical transformation (Fairclough, 2003).

Conclusion

This study analyzed Zohran Mamdani's victory speech using Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis, emphasizing the discursive construction of collective power and political legitimacy. The research indicated that the speech serves not just as a celebratory address but also as a purposeful political intervention that redefines governance, identity, and authority in the realm of urban democracy. Mamdani's language emphasizes working-class experiences, immigrant identities, and oppressed communities, thereby contesting entrenched elite power structures and neo-liberal governance, and framing political legitimacy as a consequence of social solidarity rather than individual leadership.

The speech employs inclusive pronouns, emotive narratives, metaphors of regeneration, and rhetorical repetition to create a cohesive political identity. These linguistic tactics foster a sense of communal ownership and collective accountability, reinforcing the notion that power resides with the populace. In terms of discursive practice, the speech's intertextual references and genre change associate Mamdani with progressive traditions of resistance and democratic renewal, whilst encouraging the audience to perceive the win as a collective accomplishment. The discourse directly challenges neo-liberal ideology and oligarchic authority, proposing an alternative governance model based on participatory democracy, social fairness, and ethical accountability.

This research enhances political discourse analysis with a thorough Faircloughian evaluation of a modern progressive victory speech. It illustrates the construction of political legitimacy through speech by linking linguistic selections to socio-political frameworks and ideological systems. The findings underscore the capacity of political discourse to both mirror social reality and challenge and alter them. Mamdani's victory speech serves as a rhetorical instrument for reinterpreting democratic government, highlighting common power, inclusivity, and the potential for political transformation.

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