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## Critical Discourse Analysis of Power and Resistance in Social Movements

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### Abstract

*This article investigates the role of discourse in shaping power relations and resistance in social movements, using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary analytical framework. Social movements, as collective endeavors aimed at social change, engage in complex negotiations of power through language. CDA provides the tools to understand how discourse reflects and reproduces power structures, as well as how it becomes a means of resistance. The paper explores the ways in which social movements employ language to challenge hegemonic systems, create alternative narratives, and mobilize collective identities. Through framing, metaphor, and strategic narrative-building, movements such as civil rights, feminist, and environmental movements use discourse to contest oppressive ideologies. In doing so, they construct the boundaries between "us" and "them" and promote resistance against the dominant social, political, and economic structures. This study also addresses how language is employed in the construction of collective identities, the formulation of resistance strategies, and the creation of counter-narratives. Finally, the article examines case studies like the Civil Rights Movement and the Arab Spring, where discourse played*

*a central role in both resistance and mobilization. By critically analyzing the discourse of social movements, this article illustrates how language functions as a tool for both domination and liberation, ultimately contributing to the transformation of societal power dynamics.*

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, Power, Resistance, Social Movements, Ideology, Language, Collective Identity, Discourse Strategies

## 1. Introduction

Social movements are a powerful means through which individuals and groups challenge established power structures, question social injustices, and demand change (Tyler and Smith 1995). These movements are not only marked by physical protests, demonstrations, and activism, but are also shaped by the discourses through which they express their grievances, frame issues, and mobilize supporters. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a nuanced lens through which to understand how language serves as both a tool for maintaining power and a vehicle for resistance (Khan and Review 2024). Through the analysis of social movements' discourse, CDA reveals the intricate relationship between language and power, offering insights into how words and narratives shape, reinforce, or challenge social realities. CDA, as a methodological approach, draws on the works of scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Teun A. van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak. It emphasizes the need to examine discourse not just as an abstract system of communication, but as a form of social practice that both reflects and constructs power (Van Dijk 2012). In the context of social movements, discourse becomes a site where power is negotiated, contested, and reconfigured. Language is used to define who is included and excluded, to articulate the values and objectives of the movement, and to create a sense of unity among participants. Discourse also plays a crucial role in the construction of the "enemy" or the "oppressor," and in the portrayal of the movement's goals as legitimate and morally justified (Haj Omar 2016).

This paper seeks to explore the multifaceted role of discourse in social movements, examining how it contributes to the construction of power, the negotiation of collective identities, and the formulation of resistance strategies (Ashforth, Mael et al. 1998). The study focuses on various discursive practices, such as framing, metaphor, narrative-building, and identity construction, and how these practices influence the dynamics of power within society. Additionally, by analyzing case studies of social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Arab Spring, this article will demonstrate how language is a central factor in social change (Lafi 2017). Through these case studies, we will see how social movements strategically use discourse to resist oppression and challenge dominant power structures. As social movements evolve, their discourses adapt to new challenges, technologies, and modes of communication. The digital age has added new dimensions to the discourse of social movements, allowing for global mobilization through social media and online platforms (Castells 2015). However, the basic principles of power and resistance through language remain central to understanding how movements operate and what they aim to achieve.



**Fig 1.** Critical Discourse in Global Protest Movements

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides the foundation for analyzing how language reflects and constructs power relationships within society (Fairclough 2013). At its core, CDA posits that discourse is inherently connected to power; it is not merely a neutral form of communication, but a social practice that both shapes and is shaped by power dynamics (Watson 2016). The theoretical underpinnings of CDA are rooted in critical theory, which challenges traditional notions of neutrality in language and highlights the ways in which language reinforces social hierarchies and inequality. Norman Fairclough, one of the pioneers of CDA, argues that language is a medium through which power relations are exercised and contested (Fairclough 2013). He describes discourse as a form of social practice that is embedded in specific historical and social contexts. According to Fairclough, understanding discourse requires analyzing the relationship between text, interaction, and social structures. This approach allows for the identification of how discursive practices not only reflect social realities but also contribute to their production and transformation. Another key figure in CDA, Teun A. van Dijk, introduces the concept of "discourse and power," which examines the ways in which elite groups use language to maintain social dominance (Van Dijk 2015). Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach emphasizes how individuals internalize and reproduce dominant ideologies through discourse. He suggests that discourse serves as a cognitive tool for shaping social beliefs, ideologies, and attitudes, which in turn sustain power imbalances in society. CDA also draws on the work of Ruth Wodak, who focuses on the concept of "discourse-historical analysis." This method involves examining discourse in its historical and socio-political context, allowing researchers to uncover the ways in which discourses evolve over time and reflect changing power structures. Wodak's approach highlights the importance of understanding the specific historical and political circumstances in which social movements emerge and how their discourse interacts with the broader socio-political



environment. In the context of social movements, CDA provides the tools to analyze how movements use discourse to challenge or reinforce dominant power structures (Farhadytooli and Studies 2025). By focusing on the relationship between language and power, CDA allows researchers to examine how movements create alternative discourses, frame issues, and construct collective identities. Through this theoretical framework, CDA also offers a way to understand how social movements resist hegemonic ideologies and promote social change (Shirazi and People 2013).

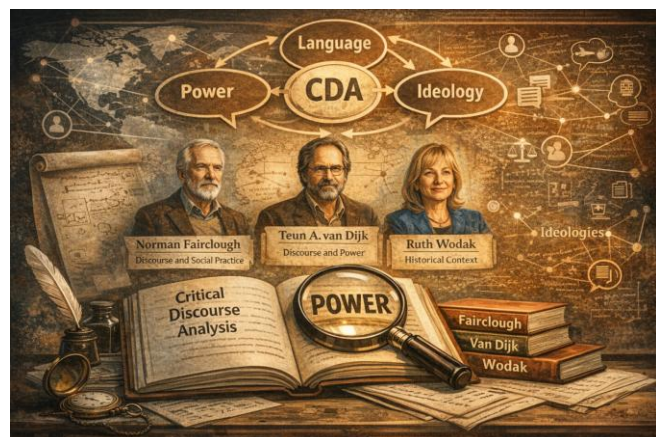


Fig 2. Critical Discourse Analysis: Theoretical Framework

### 3. Language of Power in Social Movements:

Language plays a crucial role in shaping and contesting power within social movements (Mason 1996). The way in which movements articulate their grievances, frame their issues, and represent their goals is central to their success or failure. Through the strategic use of discourse, social movements can challenge dominant power structures and mobilize public support. One of the most important aspects of this process is framing, which involves defining an issue in a particular way to influence public perception. Framing is a central discursive practice in social movements. It is through framing that movements define their struggles, identify their targets, and craft their messages. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States, for example, reframed the issue of racial segregation as a moral and human rights issue (Nawaz, Ehsan et al. 2024). By framing the struggle for equality as a fundamental moral imperative, the movement was able to garner broad public support and legitimize its goals. Similarly, environmental movements have framed climate change as a global crisis that requires urgent action, drawing attention to the immediate and long-term threats posed by environmental degradation.

Metaphors are another powerful tool used by social movements to construct meaning and influence public perception. Metaphors help simplify complex issues, evoke emotions, and create a sense of shared identity. The metaphor of the "war on terror," used by the U.S. government, constructed terrorism as a clear enemy, justifying aggressive policies and military intervention. On the other hand, movements like Black Lives Matter have used the metaphor "I can't breathe" to convey the systemic violence and oppression faced by Black communities, evoking a sense of urgency and moral outrage. In addition to framing and metaphor, movements use narrative strategies to construct alternative views of history and society. By creating counter-narratives, social movements challenge dominant discourses and offer new interpretations of social reality (Nawaz, Nasia et al. 2024). These counter-narratives

can disrupt the legitimacy of existing power structures by highlighting the contradictions within the prevailing system and offering a vision for a more just and equitable society (Nawaz, Munir et al. 2024).

#### 3.1 Framing and Reframing:

One of the key strategies in social movements is the act of framing—defining an issue in a particular way that resonates with supporters and the general public. For instance, the civil rights movement in the U.S. reframed the issue of racial inequality as a moral issue, invoking principles of justice and equality. Similarly, environmental movements frame climate change as an urgent global crisis, calling for collective action.

#### 3.2 Metaphor and Symbolism:

Metaphors are powerful tools for social movements to express complex ideas and mobilize people emotionally. The metaphor of the "war on terror" used by the U.S. government, for example, constructs a clear enemy and justifies aggressive policies. In contrast, movements such as Black Lives Matter use metaphors like "I can't breathe" to highlight systemic violence against marginalized groups.

#### 3.3 Discursive Strategies in Resistance:

Social movements employ resistance strategies through language by challenging dominant narratives and creating alternative discourses. These movements aim to expose contradictions in the prevailing system, making visible the hidden power structures. Resistance discourse may take the form of counter-narratives, parody, or reclaiming derogatory terms, as seen in movements like LGBTQ+ rights, where terms like "queer" have been reappropriated as symbols of pride and empowerment.



Fig 3. Language of power in social movements

### 4. Discourse and Collective Identity:

One of the key functions of discourse in social movements is the construction of collective identities. Social movements are built on the shared identities and values of their participants, and language plays a crucial role in defining who is part of the movement and who is not. Discourse serves to bind individuals together, creating a sense of unity and common purpose. Through the strategic use of language, movements can foster solidarity among diverse groups of people, even in the face of significant social, political, or cultural differences. The construction of collective identity is closely tied to the creation of an "us" versus "them" dichotomy. Social movements often define themselves in opposition to the dominant social, political, or economic structures they seek to challenge. This binary opposition helps to clarify the movement's goals and objectives while simultaneously creating a clear

distinction between the movement's supporters and its opponents. For example, feminist movements frame the "patriarchy" as the oppressor, constructing women's identities as those of resistance and empowerment. Similarly, anti-colonial movements define the colonizers as the "other" and position the colonized as the victims and agents of resistance. In addition to defining collective identity in opposition to the "other," social movements use discourse to construct positive identities. Movements like the LGBTQ+ rights movement have worked to reclaim marginalized identities, transforming terms that were once used as insults into symbols of pride and empowerment. The word "queer," for example, has been reappropriated by LGBTQ+ activists as a term of self-affirmation and resistance to heteronormative standards. Language is also used to negotiate membership within social movements. Through discourse, movements define the criteria for participation and establish who belongs to the movement and who does not. This can involve the construction of specific symbols, rituals, or narratives that signify membership. The discourse of social movements is therefore instrumental in shaping the boundaries of collective identity, determining who is included and excluded from the movement.

#### **4.1 Us vs. Them Dichotomy:**

Many social movements construct identities in opposition to the dominant or "oppressor" group. For instance, feminist movements have framed the "patriarchy" as the "enemy" and constructed women's identity as that of a marginalized group. Similarly, anti-colonial movements frame colonizers as the "other" and create an identity of resistance among colonized people.

#### **4.2 Reclaiming Identity:**

Movements often reclaim and reshape identities that have been historically oppressed or misrepresented. The Chicano movement in the U.S., for instance, reclaimed Mexican-American identity, and the LGBTQ+ movement has sought to de-stigmatize non-heteronormative sexualities through positive discourse around "queerness" and pride.

## **5. Resistance through Language: Strategies and Tactics**

Social movements are inherently confrontational in nature, often seeking to challenge and disrupt established power structures that perpetuate inequality and injustice. Language plays a critical role in this process, serving not only as a medium for expressing grievances but also as a tool for shaping collective action, framing social issues, and mobilizing public support. Through strategic use of language, movements resist dominant ideologies, expose systemic contradictions, and articulate alternative visions for a more just society. Several key strategies and tactics of resistance emerge in this context: challenging legitimacy, reframing social norms, and creating new narratives. Each of these strategies involves specific discursive practices that have the potential to reshape societal attitudes, norms, and power relations.

#### **5.1 Challenging Legitimacy**

One of the most significant discursive tactics used by social movements is the challenge to the legitimacy of dominant ideologies and power structures. The legitimacy of a prevailing social order is often rooted in widely accepted ideologies, norms, and practices that are considered "natural" or "just." By questioning the moral, ethical, and legal foundations of these ideologies, movements aim to expose the contradictions that uphold them and encourage a reconsideration of their validity. In doing so,

movements challenge the power structures that benefit from their maintenance. The MeToo Movement, for example, effectively challenged the legitimacy of patriarchal systems that enable and normalize sexual harassment and assault. The movement brought to light the widespread prevalence of sexual violence in workplaces, schools, and other public spheres, exposing the double standards, systemic neglect, and silence that protected perpetrators. By providing a platform for survivors to share their experiences, the movement revealed the hypocrisy and injustice embedded in societal attitudes toward women and marginalized groups. The widespread support for the movement—manifested in social media campaigns and public demonstrations—demonstrated the collective rejection of these oppressive norms, framing the issue not as a series of isolated incidents, but as part of a systemic problem that needed to be dismantled.

Similarly, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement challenges the legitimacy of racial injustice and police brutality by exposing the deep-seated racism in the criminal justice system. The movement's powerful slogan, "Black Lives Matter," directly confronts the devaluation of Black lives in the face of police violence and discriminatory practices. Through protests, public statements, and online activism, BLM has systematically called into question the moral legitimacy of policing practices that disproportionately target Black communities. By challenging these practices, the movement exposes the inequity at the core of contemporary law enforcement and seeks to reimagine policing as a more just and equitable institution.

#### **5.2 Reframing Social Norms**

Another crucial strategy employed by social movements is reframing existing social norms. Reframing involves redefining an issue or problem in a way that highlights its moral and ethical dimensions, compelling society to view the issue from a different perspective. This technique can be incredibly powerful, as it challenges dominant narratives and forces a reevaluation of long-held beliefs and practices. Social movements use reframing to elevate the stakes of an issue, turning it into a matter of fundamental human rights, justice, and dignity. For instance, the Black Lives Matter movement reframes the issue of police brutality from a legal or procedural issue into a matter of moral and ethical urgency. While earlier civil rights movements framed racial inequality in terms of legal reform, BLM emphasizes the broader implications of systemic racism that permeates various aspects of society. By focusing on the moral imperative of equality and justice, the movement reframes the question of racial justice as a universal human concern. The narrative is not simply about ensuring that Black people are treated equally in the eyes of the law, but about rethinking the entire social contract and challenging the structures that perpetuate racial oppression.

Similarly, the LGBTQ+ Rights Movement has reframed issues surrounding gender and sexuality. The debate around marriage equality, for example, was not only framed as a legal issue but as a human rights issue, with marriage seen as a fundamental right that should be accessible to all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation. This reframing shifted the discourse from a religious or moral debate about the "sanctity of marriage" to a legal and social justice debate about equality. In this way, the LGBTQ+ movement has redefined the very notion of what it means to be human, advocating for the acceptance of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities as part of the broader human experience.

#### **5.3 Creating New Narratives**

At the heart of resistance is the creation of new narratives that counter the dominant stories told by those in power. Narratives are powerful because they shape the way people understand the world, themselves, and others. Social movements often seek to create counter-narratives that challenge the prevailing stories told by governments, corporations, and the media. These counter-narratives aim to bring marginalized voices to the forefront, to question historical assumptions, and to present alternative visions of society and justice.

For example, the Feminist Movement has worked tirelessly to create counter-narratives that challenge patriarchal understandings of gender roles, family structures, and women's rights. The dominant narrative in many societies has long placed women in subservient roles, emphasizing their duties as wives, mothers, and caregivers. Feminists have used discourse to challenge this narrative, offering alternative stories of women as autonomous individuals with their own desires, ambitions, and agency. By reframing historical events, challenging traditional roles, and questioning the representation of women in media and literature, feminists have created new narratives that empower women to define their own identities and challenge gender-based oppression. Similarly, the Environmental Movement has created new narratives around climate change and environmental justice. The dominant narrative in the global economy has often prioritized industrial growth and profit over the well-being of the planet. Environmentalists have countered this narrative by telling stories about the devastating effects of climate change, the loss of biodiversity, and the exploitation of natural resources. Movements like Fridays for Future, led by young activists such as Greta Thunberg, offer a counter-narrative of ecological sustainability and the moral imperative to protect the planet for future generations. These new narratives not only highlight the environmental crisis but also advocate for systemic change in the way societies approach development, consumption, and resource distribution.

Counter-narratives also play an essential role in movements for Indigenous Rights. Historically, Indigenous peoples have been portrayed as backward or primitive by colonial powers. Through language, Indigenous groups challenge these derogatory narratives, presenting themselves as stewards of the land with unique knowledge systems, cultural practices, and governance structures. By reclaiming their narratives, they resist the colonial framing that has historically justified their displacement and marginalization. Movements like the Standing Rock Sioux's protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline demonstrate the power of counter-narratives to disrupt colonial discourses and bring Indigenous perspectives into the global conversation about environmental and social justice.

## 6. Case Studies

### 6.1 The Civil Rights Movement:

The discourse of the civil rights movement in the United States relied heavily on moral framing, metaphors of justice, and collective identity-building. The slogan "We Shall Overcome" encapsulated a vision of solidarity, while the famous "I Have a Dream" speech by Martin Luther King Jr. reframed the issue of racial segregation as a moral struggle for the dignity and equality of all people.

### 6.2 The Arab Spring:

The discourse of the Arab Spring revolutions, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, involved the collective rallying cry of "bread,

freedom, and social justice." The language used by protesters framed the political regime as oppressive and illegitimate, while positioning the masses as the rightful holders of power.

## 7. Conclusion:

In conclusion, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a powerful framework for understanding how language functions in the negotiation of power and resistance within social movements. The role of discourse in these movements is multifaceted—it helps challenge dominant ideologies, construct collective identities, and articulate visions of social change. Through various discursive strategies such as framing, metaphors, and creating counter-narratives, social movements challenge the legitimacy of existing power structures, reframe social issues, and offer alternative perspectives on justice, equality, and freedom. By critically analyzing the language used by movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Arab Spring, it becomes clear that discourse plays a crucial role in shaping public perception, mobilizing collective action, and effecting societal transformation. These movements demonstrate that language is not just a tool for communication but a vehicle for resistance, capable of disrupting the status quo and promoting new social norms. As social movements continue to evolve in the digital age, the strategic use of language remains central to their success. The ability to craft compelling narratives, redefine social issues, and challenge hegemonic power through discourse will continue to shape the future of resistance. Ultimately, CDA reveals that language, far from being neutral, is a battleground where power is both contested and transformed. Through its critical examination, we can better understand the intricate relationship between discourse, power, and resistance in the ongoing struggle for social justice.

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