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A Critical Discourse Analysis on Martin Luther King's Speech "I Have a Dream"

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Abstract

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used in language study, it is a technique used to examine and analyse different speech patterns and dialects. CDA's approaches are thematic analysis, which focusses on categories and themes, oral analysis, which focusses on the spoken form's pitch and tone and the print test analysis, which is the analysis of cohesion of text. The present article focusses on applying CDA's techniques on the historical speech "I Have a Dream", delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, in order to examine how word power influences and contributes on common causes in a community. The application of CDA made it understand how the speech "I Have a Dream" ignited and inspired the black American freedom fight movement. Through examining the speech, it was identified that word power behind speech and how it was a great inspiration during the civil rights movement period. Further, it also supported the idea of the language, and its connection with the society.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Society and Language, Martin Luther King Jr "I Have a Dream"

INTRODUCTION

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used in language study, as a technique which is used to analyse different dialects, patterns of speech and statements (Sipra & Rashid, 2013). Discourse may take the form of speaking or writing. CDA involves analysing both written and spoken forms of communication. The development of CDA is dated back to the late 1980s where Norman Fairclough, Teun Dijk, Ruth Wodak and the team presented the phenomenon (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). It is stated that the initial objective of CDA was to analyse discrimination, dominance and power which was presented by use of language. Further, CDA was used

to examine the language's connectivity with society (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Although, majority of literature on CDA acknowledge that Fairclough and the team developed CDA, the phenomenon of discourse is stated to have first introduced in 1952 by Zellig Harris (Alsaraireh, 2021).

Mentioning on how CDA works, CDA uses 3 approaches which are namely, thematic analysis, print test analysis and oral test analysis. Thematic analysis identifies, themes and categories. Print test analysis is analysing the test on cohesion and thematic organisation. Oral test analysis identifies factors such as the tone,

pitch, pauses and loudness. These 3 forms are used to study, understand interactions and analyse meanings which underlie, and interpret how they relate to the social or political context (Mogashoa, 2014).

The present essay focusses on the speech delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Firstly, noting on the historical setting and the background of the event, it is widely known that between 1950 and 1965 was a period of conflict in American history (Bajri & Mariessel, 2019). With the up-rising of anti-slavery movement from the northern states, and the opposing southern states, paved way to the civil war in 1961, which eventually ended in 1965, where the anti-slavery movement marked their victory. During the aforesaid civil rights movement period, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King were recognised as the two most influential figures (Bajri & Othman, 2020). Both individuals were able to inspire and entice thousands of people due to their impressive language usage skill. Although the motive of the movement was the liberation of the black community from slavery and injustice created by the white community, it was recorded that people from both communities participated and supported the movement (Zheng, 2014).

Secondly, mentioning on King's 'I have a dream' speech, it is considered as one of the most influential and remarkable speeches ever made in the history of politics. The speech was delivered on the 28th of August 1963, in Washington at Lincoln memorial. It was mentioned that, over two hundred and fifty thousand Americans marched along with King (Zheng, 2014). King was able to establish a deep and a positive impression on people all around the world as a political leader and a great speaker.

Thirdly, examining on the King's speech, the manner of calling to stand against the inequality and unfairness, displayed firmness and confidence. However, the speaker did not instigate ideas of violence (Zheng, 2014). speaker's use of pronouns were identified useful in order to build a strong connection between the listener and the speaker (Saghir et al., 2021). It can be stated that the speaker's selection of words were focussed on many aspects. One word or sentence possessed the ability to influence many aspects or topics such as building and gaining trust, creating uncertainty, unity, inspire by means of evoking emotions, raise concerns and attention on unforeseen matters and resolving conflict through non violence. It is identified that behind the power of language use, micro level and macro level powers pre-exist. These powers, which are explained as personal possessions of the speaker and the collective or the group power are considered vital in language and power relationship (Ng & Deng, 2017). Focussing on the discussed speech, it can be suggested that the King used both micro and macro levels in order to establish himself as well as to highlight belongingness. As an example, the highlighting of equality and valuing holding on to the truth, hinted the speaker's qualities and personality. Further, by using a term as brotherhood, the speaker established power of collectivity. Throughout the speech, the speaker was engaged in building trust, evoking emotions, giving hope and building up courage. In between, it was noticed that creation of doubt and differentiating in-group and out-group was done. Speaker, time to time managed to point out the unfairness which the black community underwent.

"I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream" (King, 1963, p23). By using, "I say," followed by "today," created stability and firmness and by the use of "my friends", encouraged bonding and uniting.

The speaker attempted to highlight the troubled situation presently they were in, by using "frustration" and "difficulties" of that moment. By mentioning the "rooted dream," the speaker tried to connect their ambition to the nation's vision.

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal"" (King, 1963, p23). Speaker repeated the phrase, on having the dream, which aimed at drawing attention. Use of "one day" can be suggested as giving hope and belief to the audience. Stating that the rise of the nation which will happen someday, once again lead to build trust and hope. Speaker incorporated spirituality by stating about living up to the real meaning of the creed. "Holding on to the truth" can be taken as an attempt made to signify integrity, loyalty and honesty. The speaker followed stating on being "self-evident," which could be understood that the speaker meant there was acceptance due to equal creation of humans, regardless how they were marginalised by the oppressors. Herein, the creation of men took a religious context, as creation is connected to a divine power. The believed impartial attitude of divine powers were seen as an advantage by the speaker, which enabled the speaker to state that all men were equally created.

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood" (King, 1963, p23). The speaker commented especially on the "Georgia's reddish hills." Although, in reality, the soils in Georgia takes a reddish appearance due to the high percentage of soils such as Ultisols and Nitisols (Tielidze et al., 2019), the speaker used the pedological aspect in an inventive manner to describe the context related to the situation. As per the colour "red" was interpreted as "violence," "blood" or "aggression." A reason for using the name "Georgia" can be stated as it was a southern state, where oppression on the black community was heightened. By using the "children of slaves" and the "children of the owners of slaves," the speaker differentiated the two groups. Further, with the use of "former" the speaker intended to form a strong belief that their conflict would be over at some time in the future. The use of "will be able to" created hope on the minds of the listeners. "Sitting together" and "brotherhood" meant unity and equity as well as the positive outcome of their struggle for freedom.

"I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice" (King, 1963, p23). Speaker once again tried to establish hope and determination by beginning with "that one day." Another southern state was mentioned by the speaker, in this instance, the use of "even", before "Mississippi," implied that the state was the most oppressive regime, out of the southern states mentioned in the speech. Speaker used the "heat of a desert" to show the oppression and the injustice the black community underwent. The value of justice and freedom was highlighted by using "oasis," which is a treasure a person could find in a desert. Once again the speaker showed hope by mentioning on the expected transformation.

"I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character" (King, 1963, p23). Speaker evoked emotions by speaking about the children. Although, use of 'my' made the statement personal to the speaker, it can also act as an influencing word, where it lead the listeners to think and feel of

their own children as well. Especially, as the sentence mentioned “children” followed by “one day,” there is always a possibility for the listeners to develop not only hope but also determination, as they understand the value of the struggle to secure a better tomorrow. Hope is again seen as the speaker wished that their children will not be judged by the skin colour. Speaking about judgement on skin colour denotes the discrimination the black community underwent. Another important fact is that, the speaker stated about the content of the character a person possessed. It can be assumed that the speaker very cleverly conveyed the message that, there are individuals with rich values among the black community. Further, it can be even interpreted as, that not every white individual possessed rich values.

“I have a dream today” (King, 1963, p23). Repetition used by the speaker in order to gain attention and cease the monotony.

I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor’s lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers. (King, 1963, p23)

The speaker directed accusation in a harmless, nonetheless in a firm manner by mentioning the “governor’s” attitude towards the black community. Stating the name of “Alabama,” once again indicated another state where suppression and discrimination towards the black community was severe. The speaker’s use of “will be” and “transformed” implied hope. The speaker used “black” and “white” joined by “boys” and “girls,” where differentiating the two groups were shown. It further indicated that at present, the unity or that peace among the two communities did not exist. The use of “joining hands” implied the speaker’s hope for unity and peace.

“I have a dream today” (King, 1963, p23). The repetition here not only broke the monotony, but also indicated the steady status of the speaker. Confidence placed, the eagerness to pursue the dream was embodied in the statement made.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. (King, 1963, p24)

The speaker used a biblical quote, which once again evoked hope through divine faith. Viewing the statement in the perspectives of religious communities or individuals, a divine word signified an assurance which will be upheld regardless time, situation or person. Therefore, the speaker intended to inculcate belief, hope and ambition into the minds of the listeners by means of religion which is successful, as religion is a factor which can bond or separate individuals, communities and nations most of the time. Afterwards, the speaker used topographic denotations such as “valleys,” “hills” and “mountains” in order to describe the indifference of the society. Herein, “valley” meant the low and inferior status which was directed towards the black community and the words “hills” and “mountains” represented the superior status of the white community. Exalting of “valleys” and the lowering of “hills” and “mountains” indicated establishing equity. The sentence also denoted the speaker’s motive of gaining equal

status and social identity for the black community which were deprived, and was only a privilege of the white community. Use of “crooked” and “rough” denoted the present difficult situation, which the suppressed black community faced. However, the speaker followed using “plain” and “straight” which again implied hope and the vision behind the speaker’s mission. Religious faith was once again brought in by the speaker mentioning on the “lord’s glory.” Once again hope was given by using “revealed.” Use of “flesh” meant humans and the speaker implied unity and common vision by stating that, “all beings” will witness the glory together.

Finally, discussing on the literary devices used by the speaker, repetition was recognised as one of the most frequent and powerful feature which was present in the King’s speech (Sipra & Rashid, 2013). The technique was employed to highlight details which were considered valuable and to convince the listener (Nasir et al.,2022). Throughout the discussed section of the speech, it was noticed that the speaker used the word “dream” 11 times, which included “I have a dream” which was repeated 7 times. Further, “one day” was used 5 times, “I” 10 times and “will” 8 times. The speaker used anaphora, where a phrase or a word is repeated at the start of a sentence or a phrase, in order to stress on a certain point in particular (Bajri & Othman, 2020). As an example, it was noticeable that “will be able to” was used in 2 places and “will be” was used in 4 places. Connections between ideas and tangible items are done by the use of metaphors (Nasir et al.,2022). The speaker used the technique to link impressions such as “injustice” and “oppression” to a tactile entity like “desert state”. Further, “freedom” and “justice” was linked to a visible entity as an oasis.

Another feature of the speech was the continual use of symbolism. Symbols are used in language to represent a person, entity, concept or a situation. Use of symbols could be used in the form of a word or a phrase (Fadaee, 2011). The speaker used the “Georgia’s red hills” as a symbol to indicate the turmoil and the tension. It can be said that “Oasis” was used to symbolise freedom and liberation. The speaker used “rough places” which symbolised complicated issues and “making plain” symbolised simplification. The “crookedness of places” symbolised unfairness while “making strait” symbolised impartiality. Further, it could be suggested that the speaker used “hills” and “mountains” to symbolise inaccessibility or difficulty and “making low” symbolised attainability. The speaker used alliteration which is done by repeating the identical consonant sound in the primary position of the word (Zheng, 2014). Notable alliterations used in the discussed section were, “Sons” followed by “slaves,” “state” followed by “sweltering” and “content” followed by “character”. Further, “black boys” and “black girls” as well as “white boys” and “white girls,” can also be given as examples for alliteration. Apart from commonly used literary devices in the discussed section, the speaker used personification in order to highlight the governor. Further, a constant use of pronouns were evident, as the speaker used “I” 10 times, “my” 1 time and “we” 1 time.

In conclusion, it is almost certain that the speech delivered by King contributed immensely towards the liberation of the black community by empowering thousands of black Americans to fight for freedom. The speech captured the attention of people all around the world. It can be said that the usage of language techniques was commendable which enabled the speaker to inculcate the vision of the movement into the minds of the listeners. King, was assassinated in Memphis, on the 4th of April in 1968 (Whitlinger &

Fretwell, 2019). Six decades later, the value bestowed on the speech and the speaker still remains. Unarguably, it can be stated that the King's words resonated the hearts and minds of thousands of listeners, as the speaker's legacy lives on.

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