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## A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING'S SPEECH "I HAVE A DREAM": A SOCIO-POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

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This study examines the transformative effects of Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic "I Have a Dream" speech on societal changes. The analysis delves into how the speech catalyzed the civil rights movement by scrutinizing its key rhetorical strategies and King's adept use of ethos, pathos, and logos to engage and persuade his audience. Delivered during the 1963 March on Washington, the speech stands as a significant moment in American history, encapsulating King's vision of racial equality and justice in the United States. Employing a critical discourse analysis, this study explores the speech's immediate impact on listeners, its role in spurring action, and its enduring influence on modern social justice movements both in the USA and globally. The results highlight the powerful role language plays in societal change and affirm the continuing relevance of King's messages of hope and equality.

#### Keywords:

Rhetoric, Ethos, Pathos, Logos, Equality

## Introduction

Martin Luther King Jr., a distinguished advocate for civil rights, was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. Garnered widespread recognition for his prominent role in spearheading the [Montgomery Bus Boycott \(1955-1956\)](#) and played a pivotal role in establishing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957, to combat racial segregation via peaceful demonstrations. On August 28, 1963, during the March on Washington, King delivered his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech, where he pleaded for racial equality. [Van Dijk \(1998\)](#) states that public discourse is one of the most important resources that elites like politicians, writers, intellectuals, and others share with the public to influence them, either through text or speech. This discourse can be found in parliamentary debates, news stories, articles, TV shows, political speeches, interviews, advertisements, and other forms. One way that power is passed on in society is through public discourse ([Van Dijk, 1998](#)). This means that leaders can use public discourse to both exercise and maintain their political power. To put it another way, political speech needs to have a message for the people listening to it. This means that political speech is not just about the structure of political texts; it is also about the context of those texts ([Van Dijk, 2006](#)).

## Research Questions

1. What role did Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech play in the civil rights movement?
2. What are the major rhetorical devices used in speech?
3. How does the use of ethos, pathos, and logos in the speech persuade and mobilize the audience for the civil rights movement?

## Literature Review

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is conducted to investigate how language exerts influence inside a culture. CDA primarily focuses on the analysis of discourse and its

impact on society. It is essential to understand the process of identifying individuals and their behaviors, thoughts, and speech patterns ([Taiwo, 2007](#)). CDA encompasses the methodologies used to interpret and comprehend the social realm as outlined by critical theory. [Van Dijk \(2009\)](#) posits that CDA elucidates the mechanisms by which discursive sources are preserved and perpetuated within the framework of social, political, and historical circumstances. According to [Fairclough \(1993\)](#), CDA is a method of analyzing language that reveals unusual connections between various socioeconomic and ethnic groups. Fairclough concentrates on textual and sequential occurrences and then connects them to a wider socio-cultural context, revealing the uneven and ideology-driven power dynamics among individuals. The primary objective of CDA is to examine the text through the framework of social language theory and how it works in political and ideological processes ([Fairclough, 1992](#)). According to [Corson \(2000\)](#), CDA utilizes specific methodologies, such as analyzing textual and stylistic elements, to identify social relations and identities from a linguistic standpoint. [Chilton \(2004\) & Lakoff \(1993\)](#) maintain that metaphors have a substantial impact on CDA. Metaphors in a discourse embody an ideology that shapes the understanding of reality within a specific context, as perceived by an individual. Similarly, [Mariam et al. \(2021\) & Rehman et al. \(2024\)](#) highlighted the penetrated social inequality through the depiction of power and dominance in Pakistani society.

## Methodology

[Fairclough's \(1995\)](#) three-dimensional model was used in this study. Fairclough introduced this model in 1989, which sees language as a form of social practice and emphasizes how discourse is used to exercise power over society. Furthermore, the three-dimensional model emphasizes the

procedures involved in the creation and understanding of a "discourse fragment" within a specific setting. The first dimension is the discourse fragment, which denotes a "Text"—this can be any form of analysis, including verbal, visual, or a combination of both. The second facet of "discursive practices" can be delineated as the formulation and decipherment of a "text" within a particular "context". This context is dual-faceted, encompassing both situational and intertextual dimensions. Situational context refers to the precise temporal and spatial coordinates at which a text is generated, while intertextual context pertains to the participants engaged in the discourse, including both creators and receivers. The third element of discourse is best understood as the "power dynamics embedded within discourse" or the "socio-cultural practices" that underlie the entire communicative process and govern the power relations that pervade interactions.

**Analysis and Findings**

The analysis helps in understanding the role Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech played in the civil rights movement. King's speech demonstrates his skilful use of rhetorical devices to convey his message effectively, advocating equality and justice.

Here are some illustrations:

No	Devices	Excerpts	Analysis
1	Ethos (Credibility)	"Five scores... Emancipation Proclamation"	King built his credibility and moral integrity by invoking the historical context of America and the principles upheld by the founding fathers, particularly Abraham Lincoln, hence linking his cause with the fundamental ideals of the nation.
2	Pathos (Emotional Appeal)	"I have a dream that my four little children ... their character". "Let us not ... my friends".	King elicits powerful emotions by employing vivid imagery and making emotional appeals to the audience's sense of justice and empathy.

3	Logos (Logical Appeal)	"But one hundred years ... the chains of discrimination".	King makes his case for civil rights and equality with facts and logical arguments.
4	Repetition	"I have a dream" is repeated multiple times to emphasize his vision for the future. "Now is the time" is repeated to convey urgency.	He used the same words over and over to make his point stronger and easier to remember.
5	Metaphor	"This momentous ... of withering injustice". "America has given ... insufficient funds".	King uses metaphors to paint detailed pictures that help people understand what he is saying.
6	Allusion	"We hold these ... created equal". (Allusion to the Declaration of Independence).	He uses historical records and cultural references to show how his points are similar and to support them.
7	Anaphora	" <b>One hundred years later</b> ... the chains of discrimination".	When you use the same word or phrase at the start of each new section.
8	Antithesis	"I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama ... as sisters and brothers".	Juxtaposing contrasting ideas to show differences or create a dramatic effect.
9	Parallelism	" <b>We cannot</b> walk ... We cannot turn back".	The use of parts of a sentence that are the same or similar in how they are put together, how they sound, what they mean, or how they are meter.
10	Imagery	"I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, ... will be made straight".	Language that describes and calls to the senses so that readers can see clear pictures in their minds.
11	Alliteration	"I am not unmindful ... great trials and tribulations".	When the same consonant sounds are used at the beginning of words very close to each other.
12	Personification	"I have a dream ... nation <b>will rise</b> ... true meaning of its creed".	Admitting that non-human beings or abstract ideas have human traits.
13	Passivization /Hyperbole	"We can never be satisfied ... police brutality".	One of the main ideas of this passage is the act of being unhappy. This passage talks about how white people feel about

			African Americans based on their race.
14	Simile	"No, no, we ... <b>like a mighty stream</b> ".	A comparison between one item to another by utilizing the words "like" or "as".
15	Juxtaposition	"With this faith, ... <b>despair</b> a stone of <b>hope</b> ".	Comparing and contrasting two or more concepts, places, characters, and their behaviors.
16	Rhetorical Question	" <b>When will you be satisfied?</b> "	A question is asked for effect or to emphasize a point, rather than expecting an actual answer.
17	Symbolism	"The <b>whirlwinds of ... day of justice emerge</b> ".	Using symbols to represent ideas and traits, gives them symbolic interpretations other than their literal meaning.
18	Epistrophe	"With this faith, ... we will be free one day".	These Are words that are often repeated at the end of consecutive clauses or phrases.
19	Transactivity	"The whirlwinds of revolt ... day of justice emerges".	Martin Luther King Jr. motivates people to start fighting for justice to get rid of racism.
20	Modality	"Again and again, ... physical force with soul force".	When you want to show the most commitment, you use the modal word must.
21	Irony	"We must forever conduct ... physical violence".	Meaning something different from or even the opposite of what they mean, usually to make a point or be funny.
22	Metonymy	"This sweltering <b>summer</b> ... <b>autumn</b> of freedom and equality".	This refers to replacing the name of one object with the name of another that is closely associated with it.
23	Presupposition	"But we refuse ... <b>bank of justice</b> is bankrupt".	The word phrase: There is an assumption trigger at the bank of justice.
24	Speech Acts	"America has given ... <b>insufficient funds</b> ".	This type of talking act makes a statement.

## Vocabulary

In his speech, King uses vocabulary strategically to convey his thought-provoking message that evokes emotions and creates a compelling vision of a just and equal society. Here is a detailed look at how vocabulary is employed in speech:

### Emotive and descriptive language

King employs expressive and descriptive language to establish a deep emotional connection with his audience. For example, phrases like "manacles of segregation" and "chains of discrimination" are locked up and tied down. "Lonely Island of Poverty" and "Vast Ocean of Material Prosperity": These opposing images emphasize the economic differences between African Americans and the rest of American society.

### Aspirational and inspirational terms

The words "Dream", "Freedom", "Justice", and "Equality" are the key resonant terms of King's message that are used to highlight the progress they epitomize for civil rights.

### Religious and historical references

King also draws on religious and historical texts to lend authority to his words: "Five score years ago, all men are created equal", later in the speech we hear him say: "Let freedom ring" which he repeats until it resonates with an audience while invoking patriotic songs (or hymns), such as 'My Country', 'Tis of Thee', connecting civil rights to orchestrate a larger movement towards equality across American society. The words "will be able to" imply that this is just dreaming on the part of King. King's well-crafted words communicate his aims and principles, but they also move the hearts and minds of those who listen. It gives his speech a dramatic and lasting sense of urgency around social change and resistance to inequality.

### Inclusive and unifying language

King uses language that is open to everyone to reach a wide audience and bring people together. "All of God's children": This phrase emphasizes that his word is for everyone and draws on the fact that everyone is human and equal. His frequent use of "we" and "our" gives his listeners a sense of a shared identity and purpose.

### Contrasts and juxtapositions

King uses words that show how his vision for the future is different from the crimes that are happening now: "The fierce urgency of

now" vs. "the tranquillizing drug of gradualism": This difference shows how important it is to act right away versus being comfortable with slow change. "This nation will rise and live out the true meaning of its creed": This phrase highlights the contrast between the reality of the world and the Declaration of Independence's ideal of equality.

### **Symbolic and metaphorical language**

King uses figures of speech and metaphors to paint strong pictures. For example, "the sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent" and "an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality" are seasonal metaphors that show the change from a time of intense struggle to a time of hope and renewal. "The solid rock of brotherhood" and "the quicksands of racial injustice" are metaphors that show how stable and strong unity is compared to how unstable and dangerous racism is.

### **Hopeful and forward-looking vocabulary**

A lot of the words in King's speech reflect an optimistic view of the future. Using "one day" repeatedly creates images of a time when race equality is real. The phrase "will be able to" denotes that King might be able to make his dream come true. King's carefully chosen words not only get his message across about his goals and values, but they also stir up the feelings and minds of the people listening to them. This makes his speech a powerful and long-lasting call to action for civil rights and social justice.

### **Grammar**

King uses grammar in an effective way that elevates the power of rhetoric to better get its message across with the help of several applications for using grammar.

### **Parallelism**

Parallelism is setting up a rhythmical pattern and using that same structure in the next clause or sentence to stress certain ideas so that the speech becomes more easily remembered. The repetition of "I have a

dream" in phrases like "I Have A Dream that my four little children", and (allusions) to the great valley will be exalted, introduces one aspiration after another reinforcing this central value as well-contained collectively.

### **Anaphora**

Anaphora refers to the repeated use of a word or phrase at the start of successive phrases or clauses that have a powerful emotional impact and strengthen critical arguments. For example, "Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy", and "This is the time to rise from a deep and dark valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice".

### **Varied sentence lengths**

King employs a combination of short, effective sentences and lengthy, complicated ones. This variant keeps the audience's attention and emphasizes essential themes: "*We cannot walk alone*": This short but strong line stands out among the longer ones. "*With this faith, ... the stone of hope*": King uses long and complicated sentences which give his picture more depth and detail.

### **Imperative sentences**

Imperative sentences are employed to give directives or prompt action, generating a feeling of urgency and guidance. For example, "*Let freedom ... Alleghenies of Pennsylvania*".

### **Use of future tense**

King often uses the future tense to portray his vision and instil hope. This grammatical selection highlights the capacity for alteration and advancement. For example, "*This will be ... will be able to ... meaning ...*".

### **Conditional sentences**

Conditional sentences are utilized to articulate hypothetical circumstances and their potential consequences and to delineate the potential outcomes of his aspirations come to fruition. For example, "And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true".

### **Complex sentences**

Complex sentences, comprising an independent clause and at least one

dependent clause, serve to expound concepts and establish connections between various components of his argument. For example, "When we let freedom ring, ... God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, ... old Negro spiritual: ... we are free at last!"

#### **Passive voice**

King selectively employs the passive voice to highlight the actions and experiences of African Americans, rather than focusing on the individuals responsible for perpetrating injustice. For example, *"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"*. In an adept manoeuvre, King shifts the grammar to help bolster his argument and improve his convincing speech.

#### **Use of pronouns**

The pronoun application in King's speech is used as part of uniting the human community and making everyone feel responsible for creating change together. A closer examination of the speech reveals just how great a role pronouns play.

#### **Inclusive pronouns**

King uses words such as "we" and "our", to create a sense of collectivism, and shared responsibilities for improvement. For example, *"We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality"*.

#### **Personal pronouns**

Use of "I" and "My": While the speech centres on a collective struggle, King also uses personal pronouns to convey his commitment to the civil rights movement and his hopes for a better future. For instance, *"I have a dream that my four little 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"*.

#### **Pronouns for emphasis**

Use of "You": King occasionally uses the pronoun "you" to directly address the audience, engaging them and highlighting

their role in the movement. For example, "You have been the veterans of creative suffering".

#### **Pronouns for contrast**

Use of "They" and "Them": Rarer, but pronouns such as "they" and "them" are used by King to differentiate those who were oppressed from those who were oppressed, for instance, "They have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom".

#### **Pronouns for unity and brotherhood**

Use of "Every" and "All": King uses these pronouns to make his message all-encompassing and show the need for sameness. For instance, "All men are created equal" and "Every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain made low", meaning his dream embraces all. King was being quite deliberate in his strategic use of pronouns – trying to create a sense where "they" were also "you" and "me". King uses both inclusive pronouns and personal pronouns for emphasis and to use the "We shall" language of unity, sometimes alternating with contrasting "us" from "them" which makes his audience more interested in getting on board than they otherwise would be.

#### **Rhetorical Analysis**

Rhetoric refers to the three key elements of rhetoric, namely ethos, pathos and logos. King's speech masterfully combines ethos, pathos, and logos.

#### **Ethos**

King began his speech by saying, "I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation". His joy is in being a man of many people and thus empowered stands over it. After these lines, he starts talking about the past of America and how the country was built. "The Emancipation Proclamation was signed by a great American five years ago". He then says: "We stand in his metaphorical shadow today". Millions of African American slaves who had been burned by cruel unfairness saw this important order as

a sign of hope. To build trust, he talks about the American past with Lincoln in the speech's main idea. He also talks about what happened in history when Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and how that movie brought people together.

### **Pathos**

King says: Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice, now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood, so now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children. And yet, King was a peaceful leader who spoke with a lot of emotion. He wanted his words to make people feel passionate about the long-held dream of equality and believe that they could make it come true. African Americans are taking a big step toward freedom from racial unfairness when they ask for it. He then says: "And 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". These words are very strong, and King is not trying to get people to hurt or destroy others. Instead, he is talking about how determined African Americans are and how they never give up, which makes them unbeatable. He wants everyone in the country to pay attention to the problem of racial equality. Any African American will feel these words right through their heart. In his speech, King uses pathos in this way to get people excited and make them feel things. The speech is full of "pathos" from the beginning to the end. Some lines are only meant to make people feel hopeful and connect with their feelings. For example, "I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice".

### **Logos**

King presents his argument effectively and reinforces it multiple times. He says: I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations, some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells and some of you have come from areas where your quest — quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. His audience is predominantly composed of African Americans who have endured the system's ills, and his underlying philosophy is rooted in the concept of racial equality. The speech envisions a future where young black boys and girls in Alabama can come together as sisters and brothers. King employs logos by clearly presenting his arguments, using real-life examples, and skillfully repeating key points. His carefully crafted argument emphasizes that the pledges of freedom and equality outlined in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence have not been fulfilled for African Americans. By using these important documents as examples, King gives a good reason for his claims that the country has broken its promises. He uses the image of a "bad check" to show how the promise of equality has not been kept. This makes a complicated problem easier to understand. King also gives specific examples of the wrongs African Americans have had to deal with, like segregation and police abuse. These examples show that what he is saying is true and emphasize how important and urgent the cause is. With phrases like "We cannot be satisfied" and "I have a dream", King also uses repetition to make his points clear and to appeal to people's emotions. This repetition strengthens his points and helps people remember the speech, which does an excellent job of getting across the need for change.

### **Conclusion**

This study has conducted a thorough examination of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech, with particular stress on three primary aspects

of CDA: The role played by Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech in the civil rights movement, the utilization of rhetorical techniques; and King's use of ethos, pathos, and logos to influence his listeners. The analysis was comprehensively undertaken by utilizing the instrument of Critical Discourse Analysis to unveil and scrutinize the speech more profoundly. The ongoing relevance and influence of King's words reflect the perpetual fight for justice and liberation while reminding us to always adhere to King's commitment to fostering peace, love, and harmony. His eloquent use of language and imagery addressed not only the immediate injustices faced by African Americans but also broader issues of freedom and human rights that resonate universally. He was so good at using language that his message will always be relevant and will encourage people to keep fighting for justice and equality. The findings show that King's speech went beyond its historical setting and became a key part of social action and a source of hope for people who want to make society fairer. Due to limitations, the study of the speech segment could not be thoroughly examined and comprehended. It can be inferred that this speech employs numerous textual and stylistic strategies with great frequency to accomplish a particular objective. Some other aspects, like social reasoning, can be found in this speech that can be studied further in future studies. If the same patterns are kept in mind, future research can use other methods in CDA on this speech as well. It is possible to use the models presented by van Dijk and Wodak too.

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