Making Sense of Leadership Language: An Analysis of Mr. Imran Khan’s Spoken Political Discourse

Kashmalah Ashraf, Durr-e-Nayab, Sana Tahir

Visiting Lecturer, Department of English, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Pakistan
Assistant Professor, Department of English, The Women University Multan, Pakistan
Lecturer, Center for English Language, Iqra University, Main Campus Karachi, Pakistan

Language has variety of roles in the lives of human beings. It speaks volumes about how someone uses language and makes it distinct from one culturally diverse person to another. Language in this sense plays a crucial role in determining how and what individuals say and, in turn, such language use in the political discourse will be reflected upon by others, positively or negatively. Politicians within any system, often depends on the language to assert power, persuade and convince people of their ideologies. This paper considers the language used by the Former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Imran Khan as demonstrated in his spoken political discourse. More specifically, it attempted to analyse the language as used by a well-known politician and leader. The study holds qualitative analysis of Mr. Imran Khan’s spoken political discourse to interpret Imran Khan’s word choices to reflect his intention in a political realm. For sure, it can convince and persuade people in believing particular desire, ideology or even action. For this purpose, Imran Khan during his leadership locally and internationally were analysed based on the theoretical framework of Fairclough’s three-dimensional model. The study reveals several findings including Mr. Imran’s linguistic and rhetorical strategies in demonstrating his leadership in Pakistan and abroad.

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Corresponding author’s email address: durrenayab@wum.edu.pk

1. Introduction
Language plays an important role in shaping ideologies. It has been thought that language is a neutral and passive phenomenon whose sole purpose is to communicate and represent what is happening in a society. This value-free view of language was challenged by Hymes (1972), who drew attention towards another important aspect of language which is ‘communicative competence’. This idea negated the value-free aspect of language and highlighted its ‘social aspect’. As (Siddiqui, 2014, p.5) quoted Sapir and Whorf (1929) hypothesis, ‘language is a constitutive force that performs a major role
in building and perpetuating the social validity'.

“Ideologies are closely linked to languages because using language is the commonest form of social behavior and the form of social behavior where we rely on ‘common-sense’ assumptions.” – Norman Fairclough (2001, p.19)

The language is thus not passive rather it has been observed that words or their combination always plays a crucial role politically, socially, economically, ugly, and racially (Khalil et. al., 2013). Fairclough (2001, p.5), introduced two useful terms, Langue and Parole, which further describe the aspects of language. The term ‘langue’ refers to the rules and regulations while ‘parole’ refers to the actual use of language. The understanding of usage and use demonstrates that language has a strong relation with its speaker. No language in its essence is strong or weak but the way any group of speakers particularly use language decides its strength and power (Siddiqui, 2014, p.9). Fairclough (2001) analyses this relation between power and discourse from political point of view. In this paper, following Fairclough’s three-dimensional (3D) model of CDA, the researcher seeks to analyze the deliberate use of leadership language and rhetoric strategies used by Imran Khan in the selected political spoken discourse (which is Imran Khan’s two international speeches) to persuade and convince people about the socio-economic growth as well as peace foundation in Pakistan.

It is commonly understood that politics is all about power. The ability of decision making, the potential of controlling resources, the idea of controlling other people’s behavior and even controlling their values is associated with politics. Almost within every type of political system politics and political leaders play an undoubtedly crucial role in the development of both national and international politics. This authority usually comes on account of their position and thus to fulfill this major responsibility, politicians often rely on “spoken words” that they use to influence as well as assure target audience of the benefits they can provide from their leadership (ALO, 2012). As Tarigan (2014) explained, ‘Politicians in politics ensure the intentional use of language to highlight certain ideas and messages, develop promises, represent beliefs and present their political ideologies’. Thus there is no denying that political leaders often utilize language in a way to propagate their ideologies. As Jones and Peccei (2004) said, politicians are successful because of their “ability to use rhetoric”; by the right use of elegant and persuasive language leadership language they fulfill the aim to persuade their audience in regard of the validity of their views (Bayram, 2010). As Burns (1978, p.18) explained,

“Leadership over human beings is exercised when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilize, in competition or conflict with others, institutional, political, and psychological and other resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers.”

The present study specifically seeks to interpret how Mr. Imran by virtue of his position utilized language as a leader to influence and convince people about the ‘New Era’ of socio-economic development and peace foundation in Pakistan.

Leadership Discourse or communication is what leaders use to convey their ideology, culture, core values or any other crucial messages so that they can build trust and encourage target audience. Language has always played an important role in the leadership process. Leaders often manipulate language in terms of discourse to achieve desirable results. As Tarigan (2017) explained, there are three leadership qualities i.e. decision maker, advisor and mention. This paper discusses how leadership discourse has been produced and used in given Imran Khan’s speeches and interviews to attain specific
goals. While ‘rhetoric’ is “the art of using language so as to persuade or influence others; the body of rules to be observed by a speaker or writer in order that he may express himself with eloquence”. In other words, rhetoric is the art and science of using words to fulfill the purpose of persuasion (Wilkin, 200). Both leadership language and other rhetoric strategies are often deliberately used by politicians in their political discourses to present specific ideologies. They use specific linguistic strategies to influence and encourage people so that they can follow their hidden motives and ideology. In this paper, the researcher seeks to qualitatively analyse the modals and rhetoric strategies used in Mr. Imran Khan’s selected political discourse to interpret his use of leadership language to persuade people. The selected data for analysis include four political discourses (two Imran Khan’s international speeches) to interpret the skillful use of language by politicians to assert power as well as to persuade people. The researcher will employ Fairclough’s 3-d model (description, interpretation and explanation) of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

The reason for choosing this theoretical framework to interpret and analyze Imran Khan’s speeches and interviews is that CDA offers the best analytical tools for analysing the veiled motive carried by language. It has become a well-known and important academic discipline all over the world as it helps to analyse as well as interpret the establishment of new realities. When it comes to Critical discourse analysis, Fairclough’s 3-dimensional model is mostly used to analyse any kind of text. According to Fairclough (1989), “language is kind of a social practice where discourse refers to the whole process of social interaction of which a text is just a part.” He insisted that in order to analyse any language, analysts should not only focus on texts, the process of its production and interpretation. Rather s/he should also focus on investigating the interrelationship among texts, production process and their social context (Fairclough, 1989).

This study is followed by the given objectives;
1. To analyse rhetorical strategies and leadership language used by Imran Khan in spoken text.

The given study is focused on the following questions;
1. What are the rhetorical strategies and leadership language used by Imran Khan in spoken text?
2. How does Mr. Imran Khan articulate his leadership through spoken text?

2. Literature Review

Language plays an important role in politics, from our childhood; language has played a crucial part in our society as well as cognitive development and our identity formation. Language that we use illustrates so much about ourselves including who we are, and where we are coming from. The way we use language can be utilized to influence people around us just like the way we are impacted by our surrounding. Such as, people (host) fulfill the goal of entertaining guests by displaying polite and respectful language, either in the hospitality industry or even at ones’ own homes (Blue & Harun, 2003). Similarly, in politics politicians also use language to fulfill their desired goals.

The paper (Sung, 2013), thus attempted to examine the issues related to language, gender and leadership through the first season of a US reality TV show. The researcher particularly examined leadership discourses of two male and two female project managers in a single-sex interaction. The paper also identified the role of media in shaping the gendered stereotypes. The research concluded that the project managers represented leadership style according to the set gendered norms and expectations. But the leadership style of men and women are not taken entirely positive. The male managers received both kinds of comments (positive as well as negative) while the female managers ‘doing leadership’ are just negatively perceived. Thus the researcher observed gendered stereotypical
speech styles of ‘doing leadership’.

Similarly, (Bayram, 2010) also observed the leadership discourse of politicians. According to the researcher, politicians skillfully use language to assert power and persuade their audience (Bayram, 2010). The research entitled ‘Ideology and Political Discourse: A critical discourse analysis of Erdogan’s political speech’ (Bayram, 2010), aims to analyse the politicians’ skillful use of language to persuade or influence others. For this purpose, the researcher has qualitatively analysed ‘Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s speech’ using Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis. Bayran (2010) concluded that Turkish Prime Minister utilized language as a powerful tool to illustrate his ideologies. The researcher (Amernic & Craig, 2012) also attempted to analyse ‘Leadership Discourse’ in reference to culture and corporate ethics.

Similarly, Khalil et al. (2013) also attempted to interpret ‘Imran Khan’s speech’ using Fairclough’s 3-dimensional model of CDA. The purpose was to explore and identify how political leaders can represent ideology through mindful use of language (Khalil et. al., 2013). The study concluded that political leaders use certain linguistic and rhetoric strategies so that they can influence people to follow their hidden agendas and ideologies (Khalil et al, 2013). Another study analysed the first part of ‘Martin Luther King’, “When I Have a Dream” based on Fairclough’s 3d model of Critical Discourse Analysis (Sipra & Rashid, 2013). The research attempted to analyze “Martin Luther King’s speech” in a socio-political context. The researchers concluded that certain stylistic, as well as textual devices, have been used during a speech to fulfill specific purposes (Sipra & Rashid, 2013). The researchers (Rahman et al, 2021), used Norman Fairclough’s discourse analysis model to qualitatively investigate ‘Bintang Emon’s’ discourse humorous video entitle “Accidently (Ga Sengaja)”. The idea was to analyze this text using Fairclough’s 3-dimensional model of CDA to investigate either Bintang Emon used rhetorical figures or not. The researchers concluded that Bintang Emon skillfully used rhetoric figures to present his thought in a humorous style (Rahman et al, 2021).

Political leaders often use rhetorical and persuasive strategies to influence and convince people about their ideologies (ALO, 2012). The article (ALO, 2012) attempted to analyze sixteen selected political speeches of prominent contemporary African political leaders, to interpret their use of persuasive and rhetoric language. For this purpose, the researcher employed the framework of Aristotelian rhetoric with an adaptation of “Fairclough’s socio-semiotic model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)”. ALO (2012), concluded that African leaders utilized persuasive strategies. The article (Tarigan, 2017), refers to the local wisdom of Karonese by analyzing some of their proverbs that indicates ‘Leadership Model’. The researcher attempted to analyze these selected proverbs using qualitative descriptive design to interpret the ‘leadership' reflected in the proverbs. The researcher concluded that there are three leadership qualities (decision maker, advisor and mentor) that are reflected in the given proverbs (Tarigan, 2017).

The paper (Ehineni, 2014), aims to critically analyze the ideological modals by Nigerian Politicians in their political manifestos. For this the researcher employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), to pinpoint the ideological use of modals by politicians. The study concluded from the given data analysis that politicians utilize modals not just as linguistic elements but as ideological tools for persuasion (Ehineni, 2014). Another study (Michira, 2014), applied Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyse the hidden linguistic persuasive strategies, concealed meaning and ideologies in the political discourse of Kenya’s leading politicians. The authors used primary as well as secondary data to critically analyze the rhetorical strategies used by main contenders of Kenya Presidential Campaign. The study concluded that language is a powerful tool that politicians use to manipulate and influence voters to
gain advantage over opponents (Michira, 2014).

The study (Dehkordi et al. 2017), has critically analysed ‘Imran Khan’s first Speech in Parliament’. In this research, the researcher has applied the three dimensional model of Fairclough on Imran Khan’s speech, in order to determine how Imran Khan has used language to indicate his social and political group and to express his attitudes towards politics. He also used many Islamic references during his speech to convey his vision towards his country as a Prime Minister (Dehkordi et al. 2017). Another study done on this subject includes, ‘A Critical Discourse Analysis of Barak Obama’s Speech’ (Wang, 2010). In this study the researcher has chosen the framework of critical discourse analysis along with systemic functional linguistics in order to examine the processes used in Barak Obama’s speech. The main concern of studying political discourse is to have a better insight of political purposes of these speeches.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Fairclough’s 3-Dimensional Model of CDA

As mentioned before, CDA offers the best analytical tools for analyzing the hidden motive carried by language, it views language as a form of “social practice”. CDA was primarily introduced by the Lancaster School of Linguists of which Norman Fairclough was considered as the most prominent figure. According to Fairclough (1999), language should be analysed as a “social phenomenon” through the lens of discourse in both speaking and writing. He introduced the three-dimensional model of CDA. According to Fairclough (1989), every communicative event has three dimensions that should be focused in order to completely understand the hidden meaning that reside in that text or discourse and to discover the ideological and rhetorical structures that are concealed in the language or discourse within a social, cultural or political context.

This 3-dimensional model has three levels of CDA i.e. descriptive stage, discursive practice, and social practice. Firstly, the description stage (text) focuses on linguistic features such as the choice of vocabulary (us or them), grammar, text structure, and thematic choices. In this stage, the text is the object and the analysts should systematically analyse these linguistic features. The given text can be in any form such as speech, writing, visual images, or it can be a combination of these. Secondly, the discursive stage also known as the interpretation stage, which mainly focuses on the text and its relation with the process of production, and as a resource in the process of interpretation (Fairclough, 1989). In other words, it is focused on how the discourse is produced, who produces it, the process of production and who are the consumers of the discourse and how are they consuming it. This is an in-depth interpretation and analysis of the text. Thirdly, the social practice which is also known as the explanation stage is all about the relationship between discourse and its society. In this stage, we analyse discourse in the light of the social context.

4. Research Design and Methodology

This research aims to analyse two political discourses articulated by Imran Khan at different occasions. Thus, the research is qualitative in nature. The researcher will follow the theoretical framework of Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). With the help of analytical tools offered by Fairclough’s 3d model, “description, interpretation and explanation and a variety of other tools that are offered by CDA”, such as the choice of diction as well as the number of their repetition and the way they assert power, persuasive and referential strategies including the positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. The researcher attempts to unveil the hidden ideologies and meanings that are deliberately used in the given text by focusing various linguistic and rhetoric strategies that Imran Khan used and the leadership language to persuade and
encourage people for believing into his leadership quality and political ideology.

These two spoken texts include; “Imran Khan’s speech at opening ceremony belt and road forum in Beijing, 2019” (Text 1) and “Imran Khan’s speech at 76th session of United Nations General Assembly, 2021” (Text 2)

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

Text 1 – “Imran Khan’s speech at opening ceremony belt and road forum in Beijing, 2019.”

A. Background and Description of the Text

As mentioned earlier, the first text for analysis refers to “Imran Khan’s speech at the second opening ceremony of Belt and Road Forum in Beijing”, 2019. This forum also known as “Belt and Road initiative” is a global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to invest in different countries and international organizations. Pakistan is a one lucky partner of this global infrastructure organization. Imran Khan being the present president of Pakistan gave speech at its opening ceremony to express gratitude towards China and leadership qualities by carefully using language. In the given speech Imran Khan's skillful choice of words can clearly represent his positive attitude; he also explained the achievements that Pakistan made to represent his leadership qualities.

B. Interpretation and Explanation

I. Main Themes

Following are the main themes of Imran Khan’s Speech

Socio-economic Growth

“The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, one of BRI’s major components and one of its earliest manifestations, has made substantial progress.”

“Gwadar, once a small fishing village, is transforming rapidly into a commercial hub. The Gwadar Airport will be the largest in the country.”

“Together, Pakistan and China are entering the next phase of CPEC, with greater emphasis on socioeconomic uplift, poverty alleviation, agricultural cooperation and industrial development.”

a) Climate Change

“To undertake joint efforts to mitigate climate change. In our Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, we successfully planted a billion trees.”

b) Gratitude towards China

“I want to thank China and its leadership for their unwavering support for Pakistan.”

“China’s marvelous civilization has given the world wisdom, harmony and prosperity.”

With careful use of language as a leader, Imran Khan expressed these themes throughout his speech. After employing Fairclough’s 3-d model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), it can be interpreted that the whole spoken text has variety of different persuasive strategies and techniques. Some of the linguistic choices and rhetorical strategies in Imran Khan’s spoken text are given below;

II. Rhetorical Strategies

a) Greetings

As explained by (ALO, 2012), “Greetings also function as a persuasive strategy to show solidarity, oneness and a sense of national belonging”. In the given text, Imran Khan used greetings to represent solidarity with other leaders. Such as;

Excellency President Xi Jinping,

“It is my privilege to speak at the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.

I congratulate President Xi Jinping and the Government”

Imran Khan initiated his speech with a great positive note by thanking the forum for giving him the privilege to speak. With his amazing choice of words/phrases like “vision into...
“reality”, “hope over despair” and “cooperation over confrontation” he thanked the whole organization for being here together. Imran Khan throughout the speech thanked China for investing in Pakistan. This positive start represents inclusive nature of Imran khan’s speech.

b) **Use of Pronouns ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’**

Imran Khan used the pronouns “we”, “us” and “our” a number of times in the given speech as a strategy of collectivization. Some examples from the text are as follows:

- “We have been among BRI’s earliest and most enthusiasts...”
- “We are changing Pakistan’s economic landscape...”
- “Our critical infrastructure gaps are being plugged.

In the given speech, Imran Khan used ‘We’ and ‘together’ a number of times as inclusive pronoun and adverb respectively to represent the relation of China and Pakistan. This represents a positive attitude towards Pakistan and China partnership. Imran Khan also quoted Chinese famous proverb “The Ocean is vast because it rejects no rivers” at the end of the speech to once again express the gratitude towards China. Thus from the 3-d analysis of Imran Khan’s speech we can interpret that Imran Khan deliberately used language to express his ideology and persuade people.

**Word Choices**


As mentioned before the second text refers to the “Imran Khan’s Speech at the 76th session of United Nations general Assembly (UNGA)”, 2021. Over 100 heads of states participated this mega event. Imran Khan with his amazing language skills influenced number of people through his speech at United Nations General Assembly. In this section, we will focus on the elements that he used to influence or persuade people with his ideology.

**Interpretation and Explanation of the Text**

I. **Main Themes**

Some of the main these that are used in “Imran Khan’s speech at 76th session of United Nations General Assembly” with reference to context are given below;

a) **World major crisis (Covid-19, economic and climate change) & Pakistan’s role**

One of the major themes that Imran Khan enlightens through his speech at the UNGA is major crisis of world. He explained that world is experiencing three major crisis i.e. Covid-19, Economic crisis and Climate change.

“The world is facing triple challenge of the Covid-19, the accompanying economic crisis, and the threats posed by climate change. The virus does not discriminate between nations and people. Nor do the catastrophes imposed by uncertain weather patterns.”

He then explained how Pakistan is playing his role in facing these challenges in a better way. With Pakistan comprehensive strategy, almost everyone everywhere is getting vaccinated. Ten billions trees will be planted to secure the natural habitat. Over 15 million people will be benefited from the Ehsas financial program, just to save them from economic crisis. Thus in the given speech, Imran Khan acknowledged the triple crisis; Covid-19, Economic crisis and climate change, that the world is facing.
He asserted that when it comes to global crisis, there is no discrimination among nations. He also explained how Pakistan successfully managed so the Covid-19 pandemic situation. He mentioned ‘Smart Lockdown’ as well as Ehsas or Feeling program by Pakistani government, to help over 15 million families during these hard times. He then mentioned that how Pakistan is participating to control climate change by planting 19 Billion trees and thus preserving the natural habitats. By mentioning all these achievements of Pakistan in handling covid-19 and climate change, Imran Khan gave the impression that Pakistan is doing his part when it comes to global crisis. He explained that the world is experiencing climate and economic crisis that must be fixed on time.

b) Islamophobia

“Islamophobia is another pernicious phenomenon that we all need to collectively combat. In the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist attacks, terrorism has been associated with Islam by some quarters. This has increased the tendency of right-wing, xenophobic and violent nationalists, extremists and terrorist groups to target Muslims.”

He later on shifted his focus towards ‘Islamophobia’. He boldly pointed out that after 9/11, terrorist’s attacks have been associated with Islam. He also mentioned the hate filled ‘Hindutva’ ideology that now rules in India. Imran Khan then presented various facts that explained that Muslims of world especially Indian Muslim community are devoid of basic human rights. Later on, he ended the speech by explaining Taliban situation in Afghanistan. In short Imran Khan’s skillful use of language expressed that he is aware of the facts and clearly presented his ideology in favor of Pakistan and Muslims community of the whole world. Thus, Imran Khan’s speech 76th UNGA was extremely persuasive as his utilized different linguistic features to establish his ideology. He used various leadership communication skills to assert power and persuade people in believing his perception about Muslim community.

II. Rhetorical Devices

a) Greeting

Greeting is also one of the persuasive rhetorical device used by leaders to represent solidarity with other people/leaders. Some references from the given context are as follows;

Mr. President, (used more than 5 times in the speech)
“I congratulate you on assuming the presidency of the 76th session of the General Assembly.”

b) Use of Pronouns ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’

Use of inclusive pronouns like “we”, “us” and “our” represents the strategy of collectiveness. This rhetorical devices is also used in Imran Khan’s speech for persuasion. Some examples from the text are as follows;

“Yet we are among the 10 most vulnerable countries to the effects of climate change in the world.”

“Being fully aware of our global responsibilities, we have embarked upon game-changing environmental programmes:”

“we need a comprehensive strategy that”
“we must adopt clear investment strategies”
c) Modal Auxiliary: “must”

“we must adopt clear investment strategies”

“adequate financing must be made available to developing countries”

The use of modal auxiliary above shows obligation and necessity.

6. Findings and Conclusion

The given study has presented the hidden motive used by politician (Mr. Imran Khan) in his spoken text. The research disclosed that Mr. Imran Khan just like any other politician has used hidden ideologies and perspective that can be unveiled by the deep analysis of the words and phrases in their political discourse. The researcher has analysed two spoken texts to unveil the hidden perspective as well as the leadership language the politicians use to assert power and influence other. These two spoken texts include; “Imran Khan’s speech at opening ceremony belt and road forum in Beijing, 2019” (Text 1) and “Imran Khan’s speech at 76th session of United Nations General Assembly, 2021” (Text 2). The researcher used Critical Discourse analysis to unveil the hidden meaning from these two spoken texts, the theoretical framework that was focused throughout analysis was; Fairclough’s three dimensional model. From the analysis, the researcher has observed that Khan’s International Speeches and Interviews presented Pakistan good image in front of the whole world. The careful use of diction and boldly expressed ideas showed that Imran Khan has great leadership qualities and can express his ideology when it comes to his nation. Imran Khan used ideologically loaded leadership language so that he could change the way people think about Pakistan. Most of his discourse was about the ‘New Era’ of Pakistan in which Pakistan will achieve higher levels of economic growth. He also explained that Pakistan will do anything to create good and prosperous relationship with other countries. The deliberate choice of words made by Imran Khan clearly represent that he knows how to utilize language as a leader to influence and encourage others. The analysis overall made sense of his leadership language that he used in given two spoken texts.

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