

Constructing Legitimacy through Language: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Zambian Parliamentary Debates

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ABSTRACT

Original research paper

Parliamentary debates in Zambia represent a critical arena where language functions as a primary tool for constructing power, shaping political legitimacy, and negotiating collective identity. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study examines how Members of Parliament (MPs) strategically deploy linguistic resources to frame political realities within a highly polarised environment. Utilising a qualitative design, the research analyses official parliamentary records from the 2023/24 sessions through thematic analysis. The findings reveal that MPs use pronouns, metaphors, modality, evidential appeals, and procedural language as key discursive strategies to assert authority, perform accountability, and challenge opposing positions. Moral and religious metaphors are shown to frame political conduct as an ethical obligation, while populist and nationalist rhetoric fosters solidarity by simplifying complex socio-economic issues into accessible binaries. Procedural language, invoked by the Speaker, serves both to discipline debate and reinforce institutional authority, whereas opposition MPs craft counter-narratives to contest dominant framings and reclaim legitimacy. This study demonstrates how parliamentary discourse simultaneously reflects and reproduces broader ideological struggles over governance, morality, and national identity. By situating these debates within the CDA framework, the analysis illuminates the discursive mechanisms through which power relations are enacted, contested, and sustained within Zambia's multiparty democracy.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Ideology, Legitimacy, Parliamentary Language, Political Rhetoric, Zambia.

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1. Introduction

Language is critical to this process since it prepares, accompanies, influences, and plays a part in every political action (Fairclough, 1995). This paper examines an essential discourse analysis (CDA) of the language used in Zambian parliamentary debates. Understanding the ideological characteristics of Zambian politics, which are reflected in the

arguments made during parliamentary debates, is crucial, given the legislature's function.

Parliamentary proceedings, with their pivotal role in the establishment and flourishing of democracy, play a crucial part in reflecting the essence of a "government by the people". These proceedings are widely acknowledged as the bedrock and driving force behind the intricate mechanisms that govern our day-to-day affairs. Impassioned champions

who staunchly uphold and embody the social and political ideologies that eventually prevail on a given issue often characterise the debates that unfold within the hallowed halls of Parliament. It is fair to say that if these debates fail to generate outcomes that align with the proclaimed principles of responsible government, the executive branch becomes accountable to the legislative institutions from which it derives its power. However, should these institutions lose sight of their legitimising elements, they risk devolving into mere machinery of governance, devoid of inherent validity.

To understand the relationship between social structures and social events, social theorists (Bhaskar, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) suggest that we need mediating categories. The term 'social practices' refers to relatively stable and enduring forms of social activities that come together to create social fields, institutions, and organisations. At every level, there is a semiotic dimension. Languages are a specific kind of social organisation, as are other semiotic systems. The semiotic aspect of connected networks of social behaviours is referred to as the "order of discourse" (Fairclough, 2010; Foucault, 1984). Semiosis is one of the many social components that are expressed through social behaviours and, on a more concrete level, social events.

Given the declining but not dissolved trust level, the theoretical outlook on parliamentary debates as opportunities for balancing talk and action, and the rationale of our distinctions of public and private, Members of Parliament's (MPs) voices and public spirit warrant an interrogation (Fairclough, 2010). The state of disengagement, either with the role of parliamentary debates or MPs by Zambia's extra-parliamentary groups, is reflected in multiple forms (Kamba, 2018). Presence in parliament ought to reflect the service delivery expectations of a normal citizen and, considering the degree of multipurpose representation, hold particular expectations for intervention in the debate on assorted nationalities (National Assembly of Zambia, 2007).

Parliamentary debates, therefore, should attract uninterrupted and considerate reflection essential for enriched debate (Mwanza, 2015). The Zambian Parliament, as widely believed, is a space instrumental for the enactment of democratic governance attributes as well as transforming the citizens it represents into the moving force of nation-building. One way this can be realised is through dialogue, where ideas are shared and decisions are taken. It is believed that this is what the publicly spirited MPs desire. It is these expectations that provoke attention to parliamentary debates. Unfortunately, in Zambia, the zeal appears to be short-lived as attention shifts from parliamentary discourses to the executive discretion meant to move the nation forward (Wakumelo, 2011).

With an emphasis on upholding decorum and decency throughout discussions, the language used in the Zambian Parliament is distinguished by a blend of official and colloquial terms (National Assembly of Zambia, n.d.). Furthermore, some linguists have argued in favour of the use of vernacular languages in Parliament, stressing the need for

increased diversity and representation of many linguistic and cultural origins (Kamba, 2018). According to Mwanza (2015), the country's colonial past and the impact of British legislative traditions are reflected in the fact that English continues to be the primary language spoken in Parliament.

The language used in Zambian parliamentary debates is a crucial aspect of the democratic process, as it reflects the values, beliefs, and ideologies of the members of parliament (MPs) and the public they represent (National Assembly of Zambia, 2007). The Zambian parliament is a bicameral legislature, consisting of the National Assembly and the National Council of Chiefs, with the National Assembly being the lower house (National Assembly of Zambia, n.d.). The language used in parliamentary debates is a key aspect of the legislative process, as it enables MPs to express their opinions, debate issues, and shape policy decisions (Fairclough, 2010). The only thing left to determine is how far our MPs separate their personal opinions from representing the public expectations they represent in parliament, supporting arguments for the dichotomy of public and private personae (National Assembly of Zambia, n.d.).

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Role of Power and Ideology in Parliamentary Debates

Power in parliamentary debates is multifaceted, encompassing institutional power, rhetorical power, and the power of framing. Institutional power refers to the authority vested in individuals by virtue of their positions within the parliamentary structure. This type of power is evident in how speakers, often those in government or opposition leaders, dominate the discourse. Their institutional roles grant them more speaking time and greater influence over the debate's direction (Van Dijk, 1997). For instance, in the British House of Commons, the Prime Minister and leading opposition figures have significant institutional power, allowing them to set the agenda and shape the narrative. Power dynamic is reflected in the ability to dominate floor time and control the flow of debate, often sidelining less powerful members (Chilton, 2004).

Rhetorical power involves the use of language to persuade and influence others. In parliamentary debates, this is manifested through various rhetorical strategies, including the use of metaphors, analogies, and emotional appeals. These strategies are employed to frame issues in a way that aligns with the speaker's ideological stance (Chilton & Schaffner, 1997). An example of rhetorical power is evident in debates on immigration, where metaphors such as "flood" or "invasion" are used to evoke fear and urgency, thereby swaying public opinion and justifying restrictive policies (Charteris-Black, 2006).

The Power of Framing is a powerful tool in parliamentary debates, as it shapes how issues are perceived and understood by the public. Through framing, politicians can highlight

certain aspects of a problem while downplaying others, thereby guiding the interpretation of events (Entman, 1993). For example, during economic debates, framing the narrative around "austerity" versus "investment" can lead to vastly different policy outcomes. By framing economic policies as necessary austerity measures, politicians can justify cuts to public spending, whereas framing them as investments in the future can support arguments for increased spending (Krzyżanowski, 2010).

Ideology in parliamentary debates is the set of beliefs, values, and ideas that underpin the discourse and guide political actions. CDA reveals how these ideologies are constructed, reinforced, and contested through language. Politicians use parliamentary debates to construct and disseminate ideologies that resonate with their constituencies. This construction involves selective representation of facts, strategic use of language, and appeals to shared values (Van Dijk, 2001). For instance, right-wing politicians might construct an ideology of nationalism by emphasising sovereignty, security, and cultural homogeneity. In contrast, left-wing politicians might build an ideology of social justice by focusing on equality, diversity, and human rights (Wodak, 2015).

While parliamentary debates often reinforce dominant ideologies, they also provide a platform for contesting and challenging these ideologies. Opposition parties and minority groups utilise debates to question and critique prevailing power structures, proposing alternative viewpoints (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). For example, debates on climate change often feature competing ideologies, with some politicians advocating for immediate and drastic action based on scientific consensus. In contrast, others question the severity of the issue or propose market-based solutions (Dryzek, 2013).

Power in parliamentary debates manifests through the control of discourse, agenda-setting, and the ability to influence public opinion and policy outcomes. In African parliaments, power dynamics often reflect broader socio-political hierarchies and historical contexts, including colonial legacies and contemporary political structures.

In Zimbabwe, the ruling party's MPs often frame economic challenges in terms that absolve the government of blame and attribute failures to external factors such as sanctions or historical injustices (Chari, 2010). During debates on land reform, ZANU-PF MPs frame the issue as a continuation of the liberation struggle, thus marginalising opposition voices and alternative viewpoints (Moyo, 2011). This framing effectively limits the scope of debate and steers public perception.

In Zambia, several key ideological constructs are prevalent in parliamentary discourse. Economic policy debates in Zambia often reveal the interplay of power and ideology. Ruling party MPs typically frame their monetary policies as necessary for national development and poverty reduction, using language

that emphasises progress and stability. Opposition MPs, on the other hand, may frame these policies as detrimental to the poor, using language that highlights social injustice and inequality. This ideological battle is evident in debates on issues such as taxation, public spending, and foreign investment (Simutanyi, 2018). Debates on corruption provide another example of how power and ideology are articulated in Zambian parliamentary discourse. Opposition MPs frequently use anti-corruption rhetoric to delegitimise the ruling party, framing it as corrupt and unaccountable. Ruling party MPs, in response, may use language that emphasises their efforts to combat corruption and portray the opposition's accusations as politically motivated. This dynamic illustrates how language is used to construct competing narratives of legitimacy and integrity (Fraser, 2018).

2.2 The Role of Identity Construction in Parliamentary Debates

The role of identity construction in the Critical Discourse Analysis of parliamentary debates is central to understanding how language shapes social realities. Using pronouns, metaphors, narratives, and other linguistic strategies, politicians construct and negotiate identities that reflect and influence broader societal dynamics.

Pronouns are powerful tools for identity construction in parliamentary debates. The use of first-person plural pronouns ("we," "us") can create a sense of collective identity, aligning the speaker with certain groups or ideologies (Bramley, 2001). Conversely, third-person pronouns ("they," "them") can be used to delineate and distance opposing groups. For example, in debates on national security, a politician might use "we" to foster a sense of unity and shared purpose among citizens. At the same time, "they" could be employed to refer to perceived external threats, thus constructing a national identity in opposition to an external 'other' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). The use of polite forms of address and manipulation of pronouns in parliamentary debates highlights the role of language in establishing political identities and hierarchies. This linguistic strategy serves to reinforce the legitimacy of political actors and their positions within the debate (Modrijan, 2024).

Metaphors and analogies are rhetorical devices that shape how identities are constructed and perceived. By likening one concept to another, politicians can evoke specific associations and emotions, thereby influencing how identities are understood (Charteris-Black, 2006). In parliamentary debates on immigration, metaphors such as "fortress" versus "melting pot" frame national identity in radically different ways. A "fortress" metaphor emphasises protection and exclusion, constructing a national identity based on security and homogeneity. In contrast, a "melting pot" metaphor highlights inclusion and diversity, portraying national identity as dynamic and multicultural (Musolff, 2016).

Narrative and storytelling are central to the construction of identity in parliamentary debates. By telling stories,

politicians can create and reinforce collective memories and identities. These narratives often include heroes, villains, and moral lessons that resonate with the audience's values and experiences (Gabriel, 2000). For instance, in debates on national history, politicians might recount historical events in ways that construct a collective identity grounded in shared heritage and achievements. These narratives can be inclusive, celebrating diverse contributions to national history, or exclusive, emphasising the dominance of a particular group (Smith, 2003).

In the European context, the CDA of parliamentary debates has revealed how identities are constructed about the European Union. Debates in the European Parliament often involve the construction of a collective European identity that transcends national boundaries while also negotiating the tensions between national and supranational identities (Krzyżanowski, 2010). For example, Wodak (2011) examines how European identity is constructed through discourse that emphasises common values such as democracy, human rights, and economic cooperation. At the same time, national identities are maintained and sometimes emphasised to address Euroscepticism and protect national interests. In the context of EU migration policies, language was crucial in legitimating controversial agreements, such as the EU-Turkey Refugee Deal. The discourse employed various argumentation strategies to frame migration policies as necessary and justified, reflecting broader political narratives (Tekin, 2022).

In North America, particularly in the United States, the CDA of congressional debates highlights the construction of American identity regarding issues like immigration, race, and national security. Van Dijk (2000) discusses how debates on immigration often construct national identity by contrasting "us" (citizens) with "them" (immigrants), reinforcing a sense of national cohesion and sometimes exclusion. Debates on race and civil rights further illustrate how American identity is constructed and contested. Through discourse, politicians can either challenge or reinforce racial stereotypes and hierarchies, shaping the national conversation on identity and inclusion (Hill, 2008).

Many African countries are characterised by linguistic diversity, and parliamentary debates often reflect this multilingualism. MPs may switch between languages or dialects to connect with different audiences, assert their identity, or convey particular nuances. In Kenya, for instance, MPs frequently switch between English, Swahili, and local languages, using code-switching as a rhetorical device to appeal to both urban and rural constituencies (Wafula, 2014). Identity construction in parliamentary debates involves the use of language to define and represent social groups and individuals in specific ways. This process is crucial for legitimising policies, mobilising support, and shaping public perceptions. In African parliaments, identity construction often intersects with issues of ethnicity, nationality, gender, and historical narratives. Debates on political identity in Zambia often involve the use of party slogans, ideological

rhetoric, and critiques of opposing parties. MPs use language to align themselves with their political parties and to differentiate themselves from their opponents. This can be seen in debates on economic policy, where ruling party MPs may emphasise the success of their development programs and frame their policies as essential for national progress. In contrast, opposition MPs critique these policies as insufficient or biased towards certain groups (Fraser, 2018).

Ethnic identity is a significant factor in many African countries, influencing political dynamics and voter behaviour. MPs often invoke ethnic identities to solidify their political base and appeal to specific constituencies. In Nigeria, for example, parliamentary debates frequently reflect ethnic divisions, with MPs emphasising their ethnic group's interests and historical grievances (Agbiboa, 2013). The construction of ethnic identities can both foster unity and exacerbate divisions. In Rwanda, post-genocide parliamentary debates have focused on constructing a national identity that transcends ethnic divisions, promoting a unified Rwandan identity over Hutu and Tutsi identities (Clark, 2010). This construction is essential for national reconciliation and cohesion. Debates on ethnic identity in Zambia often involve discussions about decentralisation and regional development. MPs use language that emphasises the need for equitable distribution of resources and representation among different ethnic groups. This can affect the use of local languages and cultural references to connect with constituencies and to advocate for policies that address ethnic inequalities. For example, debates on the allocation of development funds often involve arguments about the need to ensure that all ethnic groups benefit from national resources (Simutanyi, 2018).

National identity is another prominent theme in African parliamentary debates. MPs often construct national identity to promote patriotism and legitimise their policies. In South Africa, debates around economic policies, such as land reform, are usually framed within the context of addressing historical injustices and fulfilling the promises of the liberation struggle (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). For example, in South African parliamentary debates, the construction of national identity involves reconciling the country's diverse cultural heritage with its democratic aspirations. Discourse is used to promote a unified national identity while acknowledging the distinct identities of various ethnic groups (Banda, 2008). Debates on national identity in Zambia often involve the use of nationalist rhetoric that emphasises unity, independence, and resistance to foreign influence. For example, debates on land ownership and natural resource management frequently involve language that frames these issues as central to national sovereignty and identity. MPs invoke historical narratives of the independence struggle and symbols of national pride to legitimise their positions and to mobilise support for policies that prioritise national interests over international cooperation or foreign investment (Larmer, 2010).

2.3 The Role of Populism and Rhetoric in Parliamentary Debates

Populism is a political approach that seeks to appeal to the interests and concerns of the general population, often contrasting "the people" against a perceived elite or establishment. Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017) describe populism as a "thin-centred ideology" that can be attached to various other ideologies, including left-wing and right-wing politics. Populist rhetoric often emphasises simplicity, directness, and emotional appeal, contrasting with the more technical and nuanced language typically associated with traditional political discourse (Moffitt, 2016). A core characteristic of populist rhetoric is its anti-elitist stance. Populist politicians frequently frame their discourse around the dichotomy between "the people" and "the elite," portraying the elite as corrupt, out of touch, and self-serving (Laclau, 2005). This rhetoric aims to mobilise support by tapping into widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo and political institutions. Populist rhetoric often involves the simplification of complex issues and direct communication with the electorate. This approach contrasts with the more nuanced and technical language used by traditional politicians, making populist messages more accessible and resonant with a broader audience (Taggart, 2000). Emotion plays a significant role in populist rhetoric. Populist politicians often use emotionally charged language to evoke strong feelings of anger, fear, and hope among their supporters. This emotional appeal helps to galvanise support and create a sense of urgency and collective identity among "the people" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Populist politicians bring their distinctive rhetorical strategies into parliamentary debates, influencing both the style and substance of parliamentary discourse (Amoakohene et al, 2024; Kasozwe et al, 2025). Populist leaders often personalise political debates, focusing on individual personalities rather than policies or ideologies. This personalisation can shift the focus from collective decision-making to individual leadership, undermining the deliberative nature of parliamentary debates (Wodak, 2015). The "us vs. them" dichotomy is a hallmark of populist rhetoric. In parliamentary debates, populist politicians use this dichotomy to frame discussions in terms of the people versus the elite, insiders versus outsiders, or citizens versus immigrants. This framing can polarise debates and hinder constructive dialogue (Charteris-Black, 2021). Populist rhetoric is rich in symbolic language and metaphors. For instance, metaphors of purity and contamination are often used to describe the people and the elite, respectively. Such language can evoke strong emotional responses and shape perceptions of political issues (Rooduijn, 2014). Political discourse surrounding public-sector accounting reforms demonstrates the use of moralization and authorisation strategies. Politicians framed their actions as necessary for the public interest, thereby legitimising reforms while masking shifts in power dynamics,

particularly towards the European Union (Liguori & Steccolini, 2017).

The Brexit debates in the UK Parliament provide another example of populist rhetoric in parliamentary debates. Pro-Brexit politicians, such as Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson, employed populist rhetoric to frame the European Union as an undemocratic elite imposing its will on the British people. Phrases like "take back control" and "the will of the people" emphasised sovereignty and democratic self-determination, mobilising support for Brexit (Charteris-Black, 2021). In Latin America, populist rhetoric has been a prominent feature of parliamentary debates in countries like Venezuela and Brazil. Leaders like Hugo Chávez and Jair Bolsonaro have used populist discourse to challenge established political institutions and appeal directly to the people. Chávez's rhetoric emphasised social justice and anti-imperialism, while Bolsonaro's rhetoric focused on law and order, national sovereignty, and opposition to political correctness (De la Torre, 2017).

Populist rhetoric poses significant challenges to democratic deliberation in parliamentary debates. The emphasis on emotional appeal, simplicity, and dichotomous thinking can undermine the complexity and nuance required for effective policy discussions. By framing issues in stark "us vs. them" terms, populist rhetoric can polarise political discourse and reduce the space for compromise and consensus-building (Mouffe, 2005). The use of populist rhetoric in parliamentary debates can also influence political legitimacy. On one hand, populist rhetoric can enhance legitimacy by giving voice to the concerns of marginalised and disaffected groups. On the other hand, it can undermine legitimacy by fostering distrust in political institutions and eroding the norms of respectful and rational debate (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Populist rhetoric can have both positive and negative effects on social cohesion. While it can create a sense of solidarity and collective identity among supporters, it can also deepen societal divisions by demonising perceived enemies and excluding certain groups from "the people." This dual effect can lead to increased social polarisation and conflict (Inglehart & Norris, 2016).

In African parliaments, populist rhetoric is frequently employed to address socioeconomic inequalities, corruption, and national identity issues. It constructs the identity of "the people" as a homogeneous, virtuous group that is opposed to the corrupt and out-of-touch elite. This construction often involves idealising the common people and portraying their values and interests as fundamentally good and just. In Nigeria, populist rhetoric in parliamentary debates frequently emphasises the plight of the common people, particularly in discussions about corruption and resource allocation (Agbibo, 2013).

Populist rhetoric typically presents a clear division between "the people" and "the elite." This binary framing is used to mobilise support and to portray the speaker as a champion of the common people against corrupt or out-of-touch elites. For instance, in South Africa, populist rhetoric often frames

economic debates in terms of the wealthy elite versus the impoverished masses, particularly in discussions about land reform and economic redistribution (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). On the other hand, populist rhetoric constructs the identity of "the elite" as a small, privileged group that is disconnected from the realities and needs of the general populace. This construction serves to delegitimise the elite and to position the speaker as an advocate for the common people. In South Africa, for example, MPs may use populist rhetoric to criticise wealthy business owners and political figures, framing them as obstacles to social and economic justice (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). In South Africa, populist rhetoric is often used in parliamentary debates to address issues of economic inequality and social justice. MPs from the African National Congress (ANC) and other parties use language that frames economic debates in terms of the struggle between the impoverished masses and the wealthy elite. This rhetoric is instrumental in legitimising policies aimed at redressing historical inequalities and promoting economic redistribution (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005).

In Zambia, this is often seen in debates where MPs criticise the government or the wealthy elite for not addressing the needs of the poor and marginalised (Fraser, 2018). According to Simutanyi (2018), MPs often use straightforward language and local dialects to engage with constituents, presenting themselves as relatable and authentic representatives of the people. In Zambia, populist rhetoric in parliamentary debates frequently emphasises the plight of the poor and marginalised, particularly in discussions about economic policies and social services (Fraser, 2018). This construction often involves idealising the common people and portraying their values and interests as fundamentally good and just. In Zambia, parliamentary debates on economic inequality and corruption often feature populist rhetoric. MPs use language that criticises the government for failing to address poverty and for being complicit in corrupt practices. This rhetoric serves to position the speaker as a defender of the people's interests and to mobilise support for anti-corruption measures (Simutanyi, 2018). Additionally, Populist rhetoric in Zambia often addresses issues of national identity and sovereignty. MPs invoke historical narratives of independence and the struggle against colonialism to construct a national identity that emphasises self-reliance and resistance to foreign influence. This rhetoric is used to justify policies that prioritise national interests over international cooperation or foreign investment (Larmer, 2010).

3. Theoretical Framework

Grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this theory is a multidisciplinary approach that combines linguistic and social analysis to understand how language reflects, reinforces, and challenges power structures and ideologies in society. This analytical method, developed by scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Teun A. Van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak, has become indispensable for examining political discourse,

media texts, and everyday communication. CDA focuses on how social contexts and power relations construct discourse.

The concept of discourse refers to the use of language in social contexts, encompassing both texts and the social practices and power relations that shape and are shaped by these texts (Fairclough, 1995). The analysis of power investigates how language exerts control and influence, often revealing the dominance of certain social groups and the marginalisation of others (Van Dijk, 1993). Ideology focuses on how language conveys and perpetuates ideological beliefs, legitimising the interests of dominant groups (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Intertextuality examines how texts reference and build upon one another, underscoring the interconnectedness of discourses and their historical context (Fairclough, 2010). Methodologically, CDA involves textual analysis to examine linguistic features, discursive practice analysis to investigate the production, distribution, and consumption of texts, and social practice analysis to situate discursive practices within broader social and cultural contexts. By integrating these approaches, CDA enables researchers to uncover how discourse shapes and is shaped by social structures and power dynamics. This background establishes a basis for the proposed research, which will apply CDA to explore the role of language in constructing and challenging power relations in a specific context.

Applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to the language used in Zambian parliamentary debates offers significant insights into the intricate relationship between language, power, and ideology. This study's primary aim is to elucidate how language in parliamentary discourse reflects and shapes social and political power dynamics within Zambia. The application of CDA in this context produced impactful outcomes in several areas, including the understanding of power dynamics and ideologies, the enhancement of democratic practices, policy, and legislative reforms, contributions to academic knowledge, and the promotion of social change. CDA is particularly effective in uncovering the power dynamics and ideologies embedded in parliamentary discourse. Language in parliamentary debates often reflects the dominance of particular social groups and the marginalisation of others. By analysing linguistic features such as lexical choices, metaphors, and rhetorical strategies, this study will reveal how Zambian politicians use language to construct and maintain power relations (Fairclough, 1989; Van Dijk, 1993). The findings from this CDA study can significantly enhance democratic practices in Zambia. By providing a detailed analysis of how politicians use language, the study will promote greater transparency and accountability in political discourse. It can identify instances where language is used manipulatively or deceptively, thereby obscuring the true intentions behind political actions (Van Dijk, 2008). Another significant impact of applying CDA to Zambian parliamentary debates is its potential to inform policy and legislative reforms. By highlighting how language influences policy discussions and legislative outcomes, this study can offer policymakers and legislators

valuable insights. For instance, if the analysis reveals that certain issues are consistently framed in a biased or one-sided manner, it may prompt efforts to address these biases and ensure a more balanced representation of diverse perspectives (Fairclough, 2010).

From an academic perspective, applying CDA to Zambian parliamentary debates extends the application of CDA to a relatively understudied context, thereby contributing to the broader field of discourse analysis and political communication. This study can serve as a valuable case study for researchers interested in the intersections of language, power, and politics in African contexts (Van Dijk, 2008). Moreover, the study contributes to the development of CDA methodologies by adapting and refining CDA techniques to suit the specific characteristics of Zambian parliamentary debates. These methodological innovations can be applied to other contexts and settings, enhancing the overall utility and versatility of CDA as a research tool.

The application of CDA in this study has the potential to promote social change by highlighting issues of social justice and advocating for more inclusive and equitable language practices. By revealing how language can perpetuate social inequalities and power imbalances, the study can raise awareness of these issues and inspire efforts to address them (Fairclough, 1995). For example, suppose the analysis shows that certain social groups are consistently marginalised or stereotyped in parliamentary discourse. In that case, it can prompt initiatives to promote more inclusive language practices within the parliament. This contributes to broader efforts to achieve social justice and equality in Zambia, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

4. Methodology

The Study employed a qualitative descriptive design to provide a clear, accurate account of proceedings during Zambian parliamentary debates. This approach allowed the researchers to document experiences, events, and processes in their practical context without introducing complex interpretative layers (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Muleya et al., 2025). Data consisted of verbatim transcripts of parliamentary discussions, and the non-experimental descriptive-analytical strategy enabled recording and scrutiny of events as they naturally occurred, avoiding manipulation of variables (Babbie, 2020). Combined with description, the study integrated analytical techniques to identify patterns, relationships, and ideological and linguistic trends within the discourse. By combining descriptive and analytical methods, the research delivered a comprehensive examination of parliamentary language use and its connections to ideology and power, providing meaningful insights while maintaining an emphasis on faithful representation of what was said.

To maintain the study's qualitative nature and research objectives, the sample size was carefully chosen. Sample size considerations centred on choosing data-rich examples that

matched the objectives of the study because qualitative research prioritises depth over breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Eight parliamentary discussions were first purposefully chosen from Zambia's 2023–2024 parliamentary sessions. These talks ensured a broad representation of discourse themes by addressing important national concerns such as national security, policy reforms, and fiscal deliberations. The study finally focused on two debate sessions out of the eight for an in-depth analysis. Key political leaders' participation, the session's high level of public and media interest, and its depth of linguistic and ideological substance all played a role in its selection. A thorough analysis of language use, rhetorical devices, and the formation of ideologies in the Zambian parliamentary setting was made possible by the focused session, which provided a thorough portrayal of the study's goals.

Purposive sampling was used to select debates that provided rich linguistic content and matched the objectives of the study in order to enhance the dataset. Discussions on important national concerns like national security, legislative reforms, and financial strategies were among the selection criteria. High-profile sessions with substantial participation from influential political figures and publicly heated disputes were given priority. This method made sure that the data represented a range of rhetorical devices and ideologies employed in parliamentary debate. To find patterns and themes pertinent to the study's focus on language, power, and ideology, the recorded arguments were first categorised. A greater comprehension of the socio-political notions used in the discourse was made possible by this preliminary analysis, which also helped to streamline the data.

This study's data-collecting procedure was carefully planned to guarantee that accurate and comprehensive data relevant to the objective of the study were obtained. Official transcripts of Zambian parliamentary debates from the 2023–2024 session served as the main source of data. These transcripts served as verbatim records of discussions and served as the foundation for a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of how language was used in parliamentary contexts. The official archives of the Zambian Parliament provided access to the transcripts. The data was accessed from the official National Assembly of Zambia website's online repository. To minimise the possibility of errors and guarantee the dependability of the data, every transcript was carefully examined to guarantee accuracy and completeness.

Ethical considerations, such as commitment to academic integrity and respect for the privacy and dignity of parliamentary participants, were observed throughout the data collection process. Parliamentary records were referenced with the appropriate attributions and citations. The integrity and soundness of the research findings were guaranteed by this meticulous and methodical data collection process, which also provided insightful information about how language in Zambian legislative debates reflects and shapes societal power structures and ideologies.

This study employed document analysis of official Zambian parliamentary transcripts (2023–2024) to examine how language shapes ideology and power (Bowen, 2009; Muleya et al., 2025). Through thematic analysis combined with Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model, the research explored rhetorical devices, argumentation patterns, and their socio-political implications (Charteris-Black, 2021; Fairclough, 2013). An iterative coding process refined emergent themes, as Van Dijk (2008) emphasized that covert power dynamics enriched interpretation. Together, these approaches offered a critical understanding of how parliamentary discourse constructs ideological narratives, influences public opinion, and reinforces or contests power relations in Zambia.

5. Results and Discussion

The construction of legitimacy through language in parliamentary debates is a multifaceted process that involves various rhetorical strategies and discourse practices. This analysis reveals how language not only reflects but also shapes political realities, influencing public perception and policy outcomes. The following sections explore key aspects of this phenomenon.

5.1 Political Tensions and Moral Polarisation in Parliamentary Debates

Political polarisation in Zambian parliamentary discourse extends beyond party rivalries to encompass moral dichotomies that frame national challenges in ethical terms. During the March 1, 2023, debate, MPs constructed opposing identities centred on responsibility and moral accountability, positioning political conduct within a framework of virtue and repentance (National Assembly of Zambia, 2023a). For instance, one MP stated:

There is repentance before forgiveness...When we repent and realise that what we are doing is wrong, we will be able to see forgiveness and national unity...(National Assembly of Zambia, 2023a).

This statement illustrates how political accountability becomes a moral imperative, articulated through religious metaphor and the language of obligation. By invoking "repentance" and "forgiveness," the MP implicitly divides actors into morally upright figures and those requiring redemption, thereby creating an "us versus them" binary grounded in ethics. The use of epistemic modality "we will be able to see" intensifies this moral framing, signalling hope contingent upon self-correction and amplifying critique of opposition behaviour while affirming virtuous self-positioning. Thus, morality becomes a powerful rhetorical resource for performing ideological boundaries within Parliament, reinforcing legitimation or contestation of political authority. These findings resonate with scholarship emphasising how moral narratives in political discourse

function to naturalise power relations and mobilise support through ethical evaluations (Fairclough, 2010; Wodak, 2006).

5.2 Political Accountability and Justification of Actions

Accountability discourse dominated the June 27, 2023, debate, where evidential and procedural norms were at the centre to validate political claims and regulate parliamentary conduct (National Assembly of Zambia, 2023b). The Speaker, Ms. Chimuka, invoked Standing Order No. 65 to caution against unsubstantiated statements, declaring:

Hon. Members, the point of order raises the issue of an hon. Member's duty to ensure that the information he or she provides to the House is factual and verifiable...(National Assembly of Zambia, 2023b).

The finding reveals that such procedural enforcement not only controls the debate's quality but also serves as an institutional discourse mechanism that symbolically asserts parliamentary authority and governance discipline. It functions as a mechanism of legitimation by asserting rules of evidence as essential for parliamentary authority. Simultaneously, MPs appealed to constitutional mandates to comment on government practices, as illustrated by a citation of Article 259 on gender parity in appointments:

According to Article 259 of the Constitution of Zambia, when the President is making appointments, he should consider 50 per cent of each gender (National Assembly of Zambia, 2023b).

Such references anchor political critique within a framework of legal and normative obligation, positioning speakers as guardians of constitutional principles. The discourse here is both normative, emphasising duty and correctness, and deontic, expressing necessity, reflecting the dual deliberative and regulatory role of parliamentary language. These findings align with existing literature on parliamentary discourse, which underscores evidential and procedural adherence as key strategies sustaining institutional legitimacy and democratic accountability (Fairclough, 2010; Ilie, 2010).

5.3 Nationalist and Populist Appeals in Parliamentary Rhetoric

Populist and nationalist rhetorical strategies simultaneously unify and simplify political discourse, facilitating consensus-building while hiding underlying social divisions. They perform both symbolic and strategic functions, consolidating political authority through emotional tone and the promise of equitable development across constituencies. Nationalist rhetoric in Zambian parliamentary debates often invokes sovereignty and self-reliance, especially in discussions concerning foreign influence and economic management. MPs frame national identity in opposition to external threats, using metaphors of ownership and control to legitimise policy positions. For example, during a debate on land policy, an MP argued:

We must protect our land from foreign exploitation...Our sovereignty depends on it (National Assembly of Zambia, 2023c).

This statement constructs a collective identity ("we," "our") and frames land policy as a matter of national survival, thereby elevating the issue beyond mere economic consideration to one of patriotic duty. Such discourse resonates with Mudde & Kaltwasser's (2017) conceptualisation of populism as a thin-centred ideology that juxtaposes "the pure people" against "a corrupt elite," often extending to foreign entities perceived as threatening national interests.

Populist appeals frequently surface in debates addressing socio-economic inequalities, where MPs position themselves as champions of the marginalised. By employing direct, emotive language and simplifying complex issues into accessible narratives, politicians mobilise public sentiment and reinforce their representative legitimacy. An opposition MP's critique of fiscal policy illustrates this:

The people are suffering...while a few enjoy the riches of this nation. It is time to stand with the common Zambian (National Assembly of Zambia, 2023d).

This rhetoric constructs a clear dichotomy between "the people" and "a few," employing emotional appeal ("suffering") to foster solidarity and demand accountability. Such discourse aligns with Laclau's (2005) theory of populism as a discursive strategy that constructs a popular identity against an oppressive power bloc. The strategic use of simplicity and emotional resonance enhances the accessibility and persuasive power of parliamentary discourse, though it may also oversimplify policy complexities and polarise debate.

5.4 The Role of the Speaker in Regulating Debate and Upholding Authority

The Speaker's role extends beyond procedural oversight to actively shaping the ideological and rhetorical contours of parliamentary discourse. Through interventions, rulings, and disciplinary actions, the Speaker reinforces institutional norms and mediates power relations among MPs. Analysis of Speaker interventions reveals a consistent emphasis on decorum, accuracy, and adherence to standing orders. For instance, during a heated exchange, the Speaker reminded members:

Hon. Members, let us maintain decorum. This House is a place of reasoned debate, not personal attacks (National Assembly of Zambia, 2023e).

Such interventions serve to discipline discourse, upholding parliamentary dignity while implicitly reinforcing the authority of the chair. The Speaker's language often carries a performative dimension, enacting authority through directives that define acceptable speech and behaviour. This regulatory function aligns with Foucault's (1984) concept of discourse as a site of power where norms are enforced and subjectivities are shaped. By controlling the terms of debate, the Speaker

influences which perspectives are legitimised and which are marginalised, thereby playing a crucial role in the construction of political reality within the House.

Moreover, the Speaker's rulings frequently invoke precedent and procedure to justify decisions, grounding authority in tradition and institutional continuity. For example, in resolving a point of order, the Speaker stated:

In accordance with Standing Order No. 88, the Member's remarks will be withdrawn (National Assembly of Zambia, 2023f).

This appeal to established rules reinforces the impersonality and legitimacy of the Speaker's authority, presenting decisions as neutral applications of procedure rather than subjective judgments. Such discursive strategies enhance the perceived fairness and integrity of parliamentary proceedings, contributing to institutional legitimacy.

5.5 Opposition Discourse: Contestation and Counter Narratives

Opposition MPs employ a range of discursive strategies to challenge government narratives, assert alternative viewpoints, and hold the ruling party accountable. Their discourse often functions as a counter-hegemonic force, contesting the dominant framing of issues and proposing different interpretations of political reality. A common opposition strategy involves questioning the evidential basis of government claims, demanding transparency and proof. For example, an opposition MP challenged a ministerial statement by asserting:

The Hon. Minister has provided no evidence to support these figures. We need facts, not fiction (National Assembly of Zambia, 2023g).

This statement not only disputes the government's information but also implicitly questions its integrity, using epistemic modality ("need") to emphasise the necessity of factual accuracy in democratic governance. By positioning themselves as defenders of truth and accountability, opposition MPs construct a legitimising identity grounded in rational discourse and democratic principles.

Opposition discourse also frequently employs irony, sarcasm, and rhetorical questions to undermine government positions and expose perceived contradictions. During a debate on economic management, an opposition MP remarked:

Is this what they call 'sound economic management'? The people are hungry, and the economy is in shambles (National Assembly of Zambia, 2023h).

This rhetorical question challenges the government's self-characterisation, using vivid language ("hungry," "shambles") to highlight the disparity between official rhetoric and lived experience. Such strategies serve to dramatise critique, enhance memorability, and rally public sentiment against the ruling party.

Furthermore, opposition MPs often frame their arguments in terms of constitutionalism and the rule of law, invoking legal

norms to validate their critiques. For instance, in debating electoral reforms, an opposition member stated:

The Constitution clearly guarantees equal representation. The current system violates this principle (National Assembly of Zambia, 2023i).

By anchoring their discourse in constitutional authority, opposition members elevate their criticisms above partisan politics, presenting them as matters of fundamental rights and democratic integrity. This strategy enhances the legitimacy of their contestation and appeals to broader societal values beyond immediate political interests.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that language in Zambian parliamentary debates is a potent instrument for constructing political legitimacy, negotiating power, and shaping ideological narratives. Through the strategic deployment of rhetorical devices, including moral and religious metaphors, nationalist and populist appeals, procedural invocations, and evidentiary challenges, MPs actively engage in the continuous process of legitimising or de-legitimising political authority. The analysis reveals that parliamentary discourse is not merely a reflection of pre-existing power relations but a dynamic site where these relations are produced, contested, and transformed.

The findings underscore the centrality of discourse in performing accountability, fostering solidarity, and regulating political conduct within the institution. The Speaker's role in enforcing procedural norms highlights the institutional mechanisms that maintain order and authority, while opposition counter-narratives illustrate the vibrant contestation inherent in democratic deliberation. Moreover, the use of moral and populist rhetoric demonstrates how MPs connect parliamentary discourse to broader societal values and emotions, enhancing their representative appeal and persuasive power.

These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the discursive foundations of political legitimacy in Zambia's multiparty democracy. They highlight the importance of linguistic analysis in unpacking the complex interplay between language, power, and ideology in political institutions. Future research could extend this analysis to examine the reception and interpretation of parliamentary discourse by the media and the public, exploring how these narratives travel beyond the House to shape public opinion and political culture. Additionally, comparative studies across different parliamentary sessions or with other national legislatures could further illuminate the distinctive features and common patterns of political discourse in Africa and beyond.

Ultimately, this study affirms that parliamentary debates are crucial arenas where the nation's political identity is continually debated and defined. By critically examining the language of these debates, we gain valuable insights into the

ongoing struggle over meaning, power, and legitimacy that lies at the heart of democratic politics.

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