



A Discourse Analysis of Power, Austerity, and Deliverables: Examining the 2026 Budget Hearings Speech by the Zambian Secretary to the Cabinet

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ABSTRACT

Original Research Article

This article presents a linguistic analysis of the opening remarks delivered by Mr Patrick K. Kangwa, Secretary to the Cabinet of the Republic of Zambia, at the 2026 Budget Hearings Meeting in August 2025. Using the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, the study examines how language constructs authority, communicates fiscal constraint, and mobilises action among government officials. The analysis reveals strategic use of institutional pronouns, imperative structures, religious framing, and the rhetorical device of ‘deliver, deliver, deliver’ as a performative speech act. The speech demonstrates how political discourse navigates the tension between celebrating achievements and announcing budget cuts, ultimately constructing a narrative where reduced resources are framed not as failure but as an opportunity for greater efficiency and patriotic service. The article also attends to discursive silences – what the speech omits – and situates the analysis within Zambia’s specific political and religious context.

Keywords: Political Discourse Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, Budget Speech, Zambia, Austerity Discourse, Performative Language.

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Introduction

Political speeches delivered at critical junctures of national planning offer rich material for linguistic inquiry. They represent moments where language performs multiple functions simultaneously: informing audiences, constructing institutional identities, justifying decisions, and mobilising action. The budget hearing process in Zambia, occurring ahead of the 2026 national budget presentation, represents one such juncture where controlling officers gather to align sectoral priorities with national development goals.

The speech under examination was delivered by Mr Patrick K. Kangwa, Secretary to the Cabinet, in Lusaka during

August 2025. The transcript was obtained from the Cabinet Office, Republic of Zambia, as an official public record. It comprises approximately 850 words across six pages and was delivered in English, the official language of government business in Zambia. Its significance lies in the timing – marking the conclusion of the ‘New Dawn Government’s’ first term – and the content, which announces budget ceiling reductions while demanding increased performance. This paradoxical message of ‘do more with less’ provides fertile ground for examining how language negotiates competing demands.

Contextual note: Zambia is constitutionally declared a Christian nation, with approximately 95% of the population

identifying as Christian. Religious language in political discourse is therefore not exceptional but expected. The ‘New Dawn Government’, led by President Hakainde Hichilema, came to power in 2021 on a platform of economic recovery and anti-corruption. As the 2026 general elections approach, civil service morale is mixed, with some officials expressing concern that budget cuts may undermine service delivery ahead of the vote.

This article addresses the following research questions:

1. How does the speaker establish authority and institutional positioning through linguistic choices?
2. What discursive strategies are employed to frame budget reductions as necessary and even desirable?
3. How does the speech construct the relationship between government officials and the citizens they serve?
4. What role does religious language play in legitimising political authority?

Literature Review

Political Discourse Analysis

Political discourse analysis has emerged as a significant subfield within linguistics, examining how language functions in political contexts. Van Dijk (1997) argues that political discourse is not merely about politics but is constitutive of political processes themselves. Fairclough (2000) extends this by demonstrating how political language in the context of governance shapes and is shaped by institutional power relations.

Studies of budget speeches specifically have identified recurring features: the use of ‘we’ to create solidarity, technical language to establish expertise, and narrative structures that present fiscal decisions as inevitable responses to external circumstances (Kelsey, 2016).

Austerity Discourse

The linguistic framing of austerity has received increasing attention following the 2008 financial crisis. Charteris-Black (2014) analyses how metaphors of ‘sacrifice’ and ‘belt-tightening’ are deployed to make spending cuts palatable. Similarly, Jessop (2015) examines how austerity is discursively constructed as common-sense economic management rather than ideological choice.

African Political Rhetoric

Research on political discourse in African contexts has highlighted distinctive features, including the integration of religious language, the construction of developmental states, and the negotiation of post-colonial governance identities (Blommaert, 2005; Ndhlovu, 2018). The Zambian context specifically has seen analysis of inaugural addresses and budget statements, though limited attention has been paid to administrative speeches directed at civil servants. More recent work (Mudenda, 2022; Phiri, 2023) has examined how

Zambian politicians deploy religious framing as a routine legitimating strategy rather than an exceptional one.

Speech Act Theory

Austin’s (1962) speech act theory, later developed by Searle (1969), provides tools for understanding how utterances perform actions. In political speeches, declarations, directives, and commissives perform institutional work – announcing policies, directing behaviour, and committing to future action.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary theoretical framework, specifically drawing on Fairclough’s (1995) three-dimensional model. This model examines discourse at three levels:

1. Textual analysis: Examination of linguistic features including vocabulary, grammar, and textual structure
2. Discursive practice: Analysis of text production, distribution, and consumption
3. Social practice: Consideration of the broader institutional and societal context

Within this framework, the speech is understood not as a neutral transmission of information but as a site where power relations are enacted and legitimated. The analysis also draws on van Leeuwen’s (2008) work on legitimation, examining how authority is constructed through authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoiesis.

Additionally, Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994) informs the analysis of mood, modality, and transitivity – grammatical systems through which speakers position themselves and construct reality.

A key CDA concern is also what is *not* said. Discursive silences – topics avoided, alternatives not considered, affected parties not named – are as significant as explicit statements. This article therefore attends to omissions alongside direct speech.

Methodology

Data

The data comprise the complete text of the opening remarks delivered by Mr Patrick K. Kangwa, Secretary to the Cabinet, at the 2026 Budget Hearings Meeting held in Lusaka in August 2025. The transcript, obtained from the Zambian Cabinet Office, spans six pages and includes greetings, policy announcements, directives, and a ceremonial declaration opening the meeting. The speech was delivered in English; no code-switching or bilingual elements appear in the transcript.

Analytical Approach

The analysis proceeds through the following stages:

1. Structural analysis: Identification of the speech’s macrostructure and generic stages

2. Lexical analysis: Examination of word choices, including institutional terminology and evaluative language
3. Grammatical analysis: Investigation of pronoun usage, mood structures, and modality
4. Rhetorical analysis: Identification of persuasive devices, including metaphors, repetition, and appeals
5. Intertextual analysis: Tracing connections to other texts and discourses, including religious scripture and development policy
6. Analysis of silences: Identifying what the speech omits or avoids

Procedure

The text was subjected to close reading with systematic coding of linguistic features. Passages were categorised according to their primary function (greeting, informing, directing, legitimating). Instances of key phenomena – first-person pronouns, imperative verbs, religious references – were identified and analysed for their discursive work.

Findings and Discussion

The Architecture of Authority: Greetings and Institutional Mapping

The speech opens with an extensive roll-call of attendees:

'DEPUTY SECRETARY TO THE CABINET (FED); DEPUTY SECRETARY TO THE CABINET (A); SECRETARY TO THE TREASURY; HEAD PRESIDENTIAL DELIVERY UNIT; SMART ZAMBIA INSTITUTE NATIONAL COORDINATOR; PERMANENT SECRETARIES; ALL SENIOR GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS PRESENT; MEMBERS OF THE PRESS; LADIES AND GENTLEMEN.'

This listing performs significant discursive work. First, it publicly performs the speaker's knowledge of and authority over the institutional hierarchy – by naming positions, the speaker demonstrates mastery of the bureaucratic landscape. Second, it constructs the audience as a specific kind of institutional actor: controlling officers with budgetary responsibility. Third, the progression from specific titles to 'ALL SENIOR GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS' to 'MEMBERS OF THE PRESS' to the general 'LADIES AND GENTLEMEN' creates concentric circles of address, moving from the most directly implicated to the broader public represented by media. (Note: 'FED' and 'A' are portfolio abbreviations used within the Zambian Cabinet Office, though not defined in the transcript.)

The greeting 'GOOD MORNING' following this list functions as what Firth (1972) terms a 'phatic communion' – establishing social connection before the serious business begins.

The Inclusive 'We': Constructing Collective Responsibility

Analysis of pronoun usage reveals strategic deployment of inclusive 'we' throughout the speech. Consider:

*'WE STAND AT A PIVOTAL MOMENT'
'WE HAVE ACHIEVED SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS'
'WE SECURED AN EXTENDED CREDIT FACILITY'
'WE HAVE ALSO ACHIEVED SUSTAINED POSITIVE ECONOMIC GROWTH'*

This 'we' performs multiple functions. It associates the audience with the government's achievements, constructing shared ownership of successes. It positions the bureaucracy as partners in governance rather than mere implementers. Crucially, it also prepares the ground for the difficult message to come – when announcing budget cuts, the inclusive 'we' distributes responsibility across the entire government apparatus rather than locating it solely with the Treasury or Cabinet.

The pronoun work shifts in the directive sections:

*'YOU ARE DIRECTED TO BE STRATEGIC'
'LET THIS YEAR'S BUDGET HEARINGS FOCUS ON EXPLAINING WHAT WE SHALL ACHIEVE'*

Here, 'you' creates distance and hierarchy, positioning the speaker as authorised to direct. The shift from 'we' to 'you' marks boundaries of responsibility – the Cabinet directs, controlling officers implement.

Framing Achievements: The Narrative of Progress

The speech constructs a narrative of government accomplishment structured around economic and social achievements:

Economic achievements:

- Secured Extended Credit Facility with the IMF
- Debt restructuring 'currently at 92 per cent complete'
- 'Sustained positive economic growth and fiscal discipline' despite severe drought

Social achievements:

- 'Social cash transfer and free education'
- 'Cash-for-Work Programme'
- Enhanced Constituency Development Fund
- School Feeding Programme
- Food Security Pack
- 'Massive recruitments in the health and education sectors'

This listing serves as what Aristotle termed *epideictic* rhetoric – ceremonial discourse praising achievement. Its placement before the announcement of budget cuts is strategic: it establishes credibility and goodwill, making the subsequent announcement of constraints more acceptable. The achievements are presented as evidence of effective

governance despite ‘limited resources’, establishing a precedent that will be invoked when further constraints are announced.

The Paradox of Austerity: ‘Do More With Less’

The central discursive challenge of the speech is to announce budget reductions while maintaining morale and motivation. The speaker addresses this through several linguistic strategies:

Acknowledgement of constraint:

‘THE SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS MADE ON THE DEBT RESTRUCTURING FRONT ENTAILS HIGHER DEBT SERVICE, FURTHER CONSTRAINING THE RESOURCE ENVELOPE’

Legitimation through external forces:

‘THE REDUCTION IN YOUR 2026 BUDGET CEILINGS ... REFLECTS THE GENERAL RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS, MORE SO WITH THE HUGE CONSTITUTIONAL EXPENDITURE IN THE 2026 GENERAL ELECTIONS’

Reframing cuts as strategic:

‘THE CLARION CALL TO ALL CONTROLLING OFFICERS ... IS VERY CLEAR: “ACHIEVE MORE WITH LESS.”’

The phrase ‘do more with less’ (varied as ‘achieve more with less’) functions as a ‘rhetorical directive’ – an imperative that is practically impossible to fulfil literally but which serves to reposition expectations. It constructs a discourse where reduced resources become an opportunity for innovation rather than a cause for complaint.

The traditional targets of budget expansion are explicitly named and delegitimised:

‘THE TRADITIONAL FOCUS OF EXAGGERATED GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS, WORKSHOPS AND TRAVEL MUST COME TO AN END.’

This naming of ‘workshops and travel’ as sites of ‘exaggerated’ expenditure creates a discourse of waste that justifies cuts. The implication is that previous budgets contained fat that can now be trimmed without affecting core service delivery.

The Performative Imperative: ‘Deliver, Deliver, Deliver’

Perhaps the most striking linguistic feature is the triadic repetition:

‘THE THREE KEY WORDS IN 2026 ARE: “DELIVER,DELIVER,AND DELIVER!”’

This structure – technically known as epizeuxis (repetition for emphasis) – creates a powerful performative moment. The repetition transforms ‘deliver’ from a simple verb into a slogan, a mantra, almost an incantation. The dramatic delivery suggested by the punctuation (multiple ellipses and

exclamation marks) indicates that this is the rhetorical climax of the speech.

Triadic repetition is a well-established device in political rhetoric (Atkinson, 1984). Its functions here include: (1) creating rhythm and memorability – political slogans often come in threes; (2) simulating urgency – repetition as verbal intensification; and (3) analogical resonance with liturgical chanting, which ties back to the religious framing that follows. Compare the secular echo of Tony Blair’s ‘Education, education, education’ – a deliberate parallel that signals the speaker’s awareness of global political rhetoric.

As a speech act, this utterance functions as both directive (commanding delivery) and commissive (committing to delivery). It constructs 2026 as the ‘year of delivery’, creating a benchmark against which performance will be measured. The personalisation that follows intensifies this:

‘THE CITIZENS ARE EXPECTANT OF YOUR DELIVERABLES, THE NEW DAWN GOVERNMENT IS EXPECTANT OF YOUR DELIVERABLES, ESPECIALLY IN 2026, AND THIS SECRETARY TO THE CABINET IS ALSO EXPECTANT OF YOUR DELIVERABLES.’

The layering of expectant audiences – citizens, government, and personally the Secretary – creates a web of accountability that is difficult to escape.

Religious Framing: Providence and Purpose

The conclusion introduces religious discourse that transforms the bureaucratic meeting into something approaching sacred service:

‘GOD HIMSELF HAS ALLOWED US TO SERVE HIS PEOPLE AT SUCH A TIME AS THIS. IT IS NOT A COINCIDENCE, IT IS PROVIDENCE.’

This framing performs several functions. It elevates civil service from mundane administration to divine calling. It constructs citizens as ‘HIS PEOPLE’, sacralising the relationship between government and governed. It provides ultimate legitimation – if service is providential, then questioning authority becomes questioning God’s plan.

The phrase ‘AT SUCH A TIME AS THIS’ carries intertextual resonance with the biblical story of Esther, who was positioned as queen ‘for such a time as this’ to save her people. This allusion would likely be recognised by the overwhelmingly Christian Zambian audience, positioning the officials as Esther-like figures placed in their positions by divine design for a moment of national significance. However, as a discursive strategy, it also silently excludes any non-Christian officials or citizens, assuming a shared religious framework that may not be universal.

The religious framing concludes with a blessing:

‘GOD BLESS US ALL.’

This transforms the political meeting into a community receiving divine favour, softening the earlier directives with spiritual solidarity.

Given Zambia's constitutional status as a Christian nation, this religious language is best understood not as an exceptional legitimating strategy but as an expected and conventional feature of political discourse. Its power derives not from surprise but from familiarity – it invokes a shared moral universe that the speaker and audience are presumed to inhabit.

Discursive Silences: What the Speech Does Not Say

A critical discourse analysis must also attend to omissions. This speech notably does not:

1. Name any potential negative consequences of budget cuts – No mention is made of which services might be reduced, which staff might be affected, or which citizens might receive less support. The cuts are presented as entirely painless.
2. Acknowledge past wasteful spending as a possible cause of constraints – Waste is attributed to 'exaggerated government operations' in general, but no specific past budgets, ministries, or officials are held accountable. This avoids political blame.
3. Discuss alternative fiscal strategies – The speech presents revenue increases and expenditure cuts as the only two options, without considering borrowing (already constrained by debt restructuring) or reallocation from protected areas such as constitutional expenditure.
4. Identify any trade-offs – The classic language of austerity ('do more with less') denies the economic reality of trade-offs. Something will not be done, but the speech never says what.
5. Mention the President by name except in the closing – The President is invoked only once ('that is the expectation from the President himself'). This is striking: the Secretary speaks with institutional authority rather than personal loyalty, perhaps to preserve the bureaucracy's professional distance from electoral politics.

These silences are not accidental. They are strategic omissions that make the difficult message of cuts more palatable by refusing to specify who might lose.

Institutional Closure: The Performative Declaration

The speech ends with a classic performative utterance:

'I NOW OFFICIALLY DECLARE THIS MEETING OPEN.'

As Austin (1962) noted, such declarations perform the action they describe. The speaker, by virtue of his institutional position, has the authority to transform the gathering from a mere assembly into an officially constituted meeting. This

performative closure bookends the speech, returning from the heights of religious rhetoric to the bureaucratic business at hand.

The final words – 'I THANK YOU' – perform one last function: acknowledging the audience's attention and submission, closing the discursive encounter on a note of reciprocal recognition.

Conclusion

This analysis has revealed the sophisticated linguistic strategies employed by the Zambian Secretary to the Cabinet in addressing controlling officers ahead of the 2026 budget. The speech negotiates the fundamental tension of announcing resource reductions while demanding increased performance through a carefully constructed discursive architecture.

Key findings include:

1. Pronoun work that shifts between inclusive 'we' for achievements and directive 'you' for implementation, managing the relationship between central authority and line ministries.
2. Strategic sequencing that presents achievements before constraints, building credibility before delivering difficult messages.
3. Reframing of cuts as opportunities for efficiency and strategic focus, delegitimising traditional expenditure categories like workshops and travel.
4. Performative repetition of 'deliver' that creates a memorable slogan and establishes accountability, drawing on the rhetorical power of triadic structures.
5. Religious framing that elevates bureaucratic work to providential service, understood within Zambia's constitutional Christian identity as expected rather than exceptional.
6. Institutional performatives that enact the official opening and close of the meeting.
7. Discursive silences that omit any mention of negative consequences, trade-offs, or specific accountability for past waste, making cuts appear painless and inevitable.

The speech demonstrates how political discourse in administrative contexts must simultaneously perform multiple functions: inform, direct, motivate, legitimate, and inspire. It reveals the linguistic resources available to those in authority to frame constraint as opportunity and to mobilise action when material resources are reduced.

For linguistic scholars, the speech offers rich material for understanding how power is enacted through language in contemporary African governance contexts. For practitioners, it illustrates the possibilities and limits of discourse in shaping institutional response to fiscal constraint.

This analysis contributes to CDA by showing how administrative speeches in non-Western democratic contexts blend bureaucratic authority, routine religious legitimation, and performative urgency. Future research could compare

budget hearing speeches across multiple Zambian ministries or across different African countries (e.g., Kenya, Ghana, South Africa) to identify shared and distinctive discursive strategies. Comparative work might also examine whether austerity is framed differently in polities with different religious compositions or different colonial legacies of public administration.

In the final thanks – ‘I THANK YOU’ – the entire elaborate structure of authority, achievement, constraint, and demand finds its ceremonial completion.

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