

## “Nobody’s Free Until Everybody’s Free”: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Obama’s COVID-19 Speech

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### Abstract

*Language is used as a means of communication which reveals the identity, ideology and individual traits of the user. With this as background, the present study aims at analysing the speech of former US President Barack H. Obama focusing primarily on the implicit practices behind discourse. Using qualitative approach, we took Obama’s speech on COVID-19 as a sample. Data was analysed with the help of Fairclough’s three-dimensional model where first the text was linguistically analysed before explanation of the discursive process and social process. Findings of the present study show that Obama used linguistic devices such as historical references, use of inclusive pronouns and repetition of the phrases etc. very skilfully to reach at the heart of the audience. Moreover, he laid stress on the need of unity, love and peace as a solution to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the other prevailing issues. Furthermore, we also highlight how social position can change social perspective of the people.*

**Key Words:** Critical Discourse Analysis, Fairclough 3D Model, Obama’s Speech, Political Discourse

### Introduction

Language is a medium used to convey thoughts, beliefs and motives which vary from person to person depending upon their experiences and social identities. These identities are constructed by the society when the social actors interact with each other to meet the needs and to complete the social process in a certain communicative context, leading to development of a discourse. Among various types of discourse, the political discourse is considered as the most effective way of the language used which shapes and influences the lives of people on a broader scale. Fairclough (1989, p. 24) considered discourse as the whole event where the social interaction takes place whereas the text is only the supporting part of that event.

### Political Discourse

According to Chilton and Schaffner, (1997), politics is an idea which comes into practice only through the use of language. This use of language further depends upon the situation and political demands like what vocabulary and structure is used for what purpose. The primary aim of the political discourse is the use of speech for influencing others’ thoughts, beliefs and ideologies. Moreover, Chimbarange, A., Takavarasha, P., & Kombe, F. (2013) suggest that politicians use speech as a medium of discourse to imply their implicit agendas. Their postures, gestures, body movement and delivery style also contribute to step them toward their intended targets. Using language, politicians want to exercise their power and achieve their goals such as achieving economic as well as social positions. However, sometimes, they want to

inform the public about follies and foibles of the ruling party using language. Recently, former US President Barack Obama delivered a speech at a graduate ceremony about the devastating pandemic COVID-19.

## **COVID-19**

Nowadays, the whole world is facing COVID-19, the devastating pandemic emanating from Corona virus. It spreads almost in every corner of the world like a fire in the forest which once if take initiative then become a challenge to stop its destruction. Covid-19 affected every sphere of life as it directly impacts on the way of living. According to Dickie, Ian, et al (2020) the only way to stop this devastating pandemic is to avoid all kind of social activities. First case of COVID-19 was registered in China. The official source of WHO informs that till now almost eight million have been affected by the Corona virus in the whole world whereas more than four lakh people so far died. Among them, more than two million people only belong to United State of America. So due to this pandemic scenario whole USA is also suffering badly with several type of crisis such as unemployment etc. Atkeson, A. (2020) asserted that the disease is there to stay almost for around 18 months. This calls for a massive investment on health, and it will result in disruption in the financial infrastructure. The United States has been affected the most due to this disease.

## **Literature Review**

Political leaders use speeches as a medium to inform and persuade the public. Barack H. Obama was the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the USA whose speeches have been analysed by many scholars using critical discourse analysis. Recently, Waheed (2020) conducted a study analysing Obama’s speech at Cairo in 2009. She used Van Dijk’s model to expose implicit ideologies, social values and the real construction of Muslim identity towards the western people. Findings of this study show that though, on the surface level, Obama was talking about the new beginning of the good relationship between the American and the Muslim world, the deep analysis of the discourse informs us about the negative representation of the Muslims by using the words like terrorist, terrorism and attack etc. More he used “us” for the Americans whereas he used “them” for the Muslims which is a clear indication of their separate identity and the mindsets.

Dastpak, and Taghinezhad (2015) investigated the ideological element and persuasive strategies used by Obama in his public speech. For evaluation, they used Fairclough’s three dimensional model of critical discourse analysis. They analysed the intended speech at three stages. Firstly, the text of the speech was analysed then interpreted and then it was explained with the help of social context. Findings of this study show that in Obama’s speech the ideological elements such as liberalism, unity of the whole Americans, religious affirmation and multiculturalism are abundantly found. Moreover, most of the time, he used “we” which shows that he considers all American on one platform by showing unity. Moreover, Abdelaal, Alisood, & Sase, A. S. (2015) also carried out a study to know about Obama’s ideology by evaluating his political speech given on ISIL in 2014. They took Fairclough’s 3D model to unveil his motives as well as to know about his use of rhetoric and manipulation markers to convince the audience. Analysis showed that Obama talked about America’s victories to leave a good impact, to grasp attention and to seek the favour of the audience.

Furthermore, he used rhetorical devices very skilfully to achieve the main aim of his address.

Another study was conducted by Listyani, L. (2018) who critically viewed Obama's remarks given on the death of Trayvon Martin. The researcher used the SFL approach of critical discourse analysis to proceed further but limited analysis only to the investigation of mode, tenor and field. In this speech, President Obama talked about the most problematic issues of America that are race, inequality and injustice. The text of this speech highlights Obama's ideology to spread awareness to the nation about the Racialism by pointing out its dangers. Moreover, the researchers also finds out that the speeches like this are very helpful for the students because here the speaker used a very comprehensive approach to wind up all the aspects from general to specific very skilfully.

One more study related to Obama's speech style was conducted by Rohmawati (2016). For analysis, she took inaugural speech given by 44th president of USA. She analysed this speech by dividing it first into small components, and then by finding out the attitude, affects, judgments and appreciations. The researcher concluded with the remarks that Obama used a positive attitude while presenting the current scenario of his nation so profoundly and skilfully which is a clear indication of his good leadership qualities.

Mohan (2014) analysed a speech of Obama given at South Carolina. The researcher used critical discourse analysis approach to evaluate the hidden strategies used by the speaker which helped him to achieve the audience's interest. Findings of this study show that Obama employed profound lexical choices and comprehensive and specific construction of the sentences. Moreover, he always presented himself as a layman and a part of them instead of showing status and explicitly exercising the power. He always addressed the common and favourable issues by giving them a strong hope for the future. Furthermore, he promoted a sense of nationalism by talking about unity and collectiveness.

Gadalla (2012) analysed a speech by President Obama given at Cairo during his official visit to Egypt. The speech was studied through Van Dijk's ideological square model that is about "us" vs "them". By using this model, the implicit ideologies behind Obama's speech were evaluated critically. The researcher finds out that Mr. Obama presented a good image of the United State of America where everyone is living a prosperous life, and everyone has equal rights. Moreover, America is the country where the women rights are fully protected, and everyone is viewed with the same lens. Furthermore, the Americans are presented like a blessed people who are united, care about each other, and talk about justice, security, democracy, and freedom. On the other hand, Muslims were viewed with the bad image of terrorism etc.

The above-mentioned studies analysed Obama's speeches by using critical discourse analysis. These speeches are related to different events and different issues. Each speech addresses different agendas behind its construction. These researches also inform us about the oratory styles, rhetoric devices and manipulation marker used by Obama on different occasions. These studies were conducted by using different

models of CDA such as Van Dijk’s ideological square model, Fairclough’s 3D model and SFL model etc. However, Obama’s most recent speech given about the current pandemic scenario has not been analysed yet. Moreover, the above-mentioned speeches were delivered by Obama when he was the US President. However, the present analysis is conducted on Obama’s speech which is delivered when he is not on the President position.

## **Material and Methods**

### **Theoretical Framework:**

Researcher used critical discourse approach to analyse the speech by employing Fairclough’s three-dimensional model (Fairclough, 1989). This three-dimensional model is considered as a versatile approach to analyse a discourse because it views “language as a form of social practice” (Fairclough 1989: 20). It mainly focuses on the point that how text and talk in discourse are used to exercise the social and political dominance. By critically evaluating the text of the discourse it informs how language is manipulated by the speakers for utilization of the hidden agendas that are behind the whole communicative event. CDA addresses the implicit values of the text through investigation of the explicit clues that are found in discourse and context. It also focuses on the whole process of uniting the text with the discourse and the socio-cultural practices that are already involved in the text and which are further reproduced and constructed because of this existing discourse (Fairclough 1995). This model of Fairclough involves three interrelated dimensions of the discourse which further for analysis depend on three interrelated processes of analysis. These dimensions of discourse are the object of analysis, the process of production and receiving of the object and the socio-historical setting that governs these processes. Each dimension is analysed with the help of different stages of analysis.

These stages of analysis are description, interpretation and explanation and are mentioned in detail in the figure below. In the present study in the first step, textual analysis was conducted to answer the first research question. After that process analysis was conducted to and then in the last step socio-cultural practices were investigated.

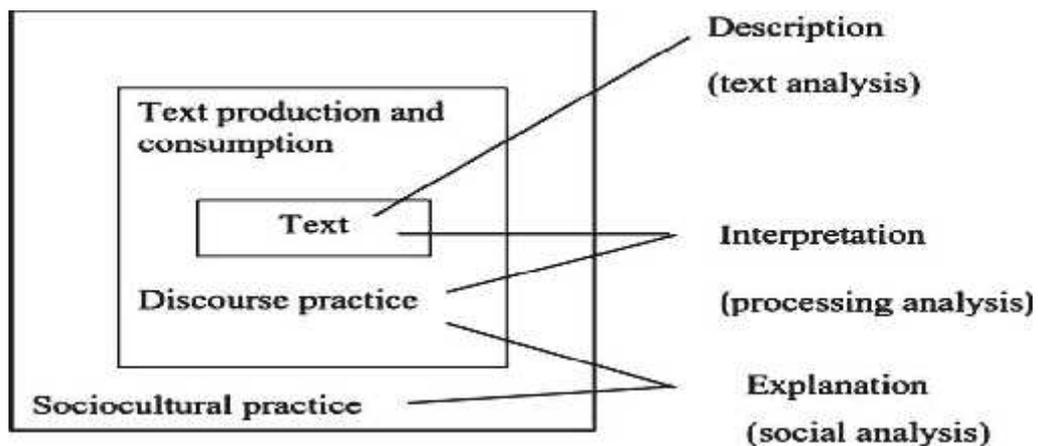


Figure 01 Fairclough’s Three Dimensional Model

## **Nature of the Study**

The present research is purely qualitative in nature as the Critical Discourse Analysis approach has been taken to analyse the data.

## **Selection of Speech**

The sample for the present study was selected through purposive sampling under its sub-type critical case sampling technique because it is critically concerned with the specific issue that is COVID-19 pandemic scenario which has affected every sphere of life. For sample Obama's speech related to COVID-19 given on the occasion of the virtual graduate commencement ceremony on 16 May 2020 has taken. This speech consists of 457 tokens and 25 sentences. Transcript of this speech was retrieved from the online source "YouTube". After retrieving the transcript, sentences were numbered for better understanding.

## **Data Procurement**

Obama's speech has taken from the YouTube. The transcript of the speech was written down manually and its link is mentioned below.

<https://youtu.be/e5JbLQVndYA>

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Data Analysis**

The data was analysed by using Fairclough's three dimensional model of critical discourse analysis. The analysis consisted of three steps that are: Description, Interpretation and Explanation.

### **Description of the Text**

The first layer of Fairclough's model deals with textual analysis. At this level of analysis linguistic features such as vocabulary, rhetorical devices and syntactic patterns used in the given text are discussed. In the present study, the researchers took a speech for analysis of a political icon named Barack Obama who was the first African-American President in American history. The textual analysis answers the first research question, which deals with the "linguistics features" used in the selected speech delivered by Barak Obama on the occasion of the virtual graduate commencement ceremony on 16 May 2020.

A detailed description of "linguistic features" in Barack Obama's speech is as follows:-

First of all, the researchers pinpoint that this speech consists of 457 token and 25 sentences. To analyse the text, the researchers made a brief outline of the selected speech. The salient features of Barack Obama's speech are the following:-

- An Overview of the current situation in the whole world.

- A review of the African-American history by giving references.
- An invitation to young generation to work for liberty.
- Representation of positive self-image through correct word choices.
- Hopes for the beautiful and prosperous future.

In the present study, the researchers’s noticed that to propagate his ideology Barak Obama has adopted different linguistic features while delivering his speech such as the use of personal pronouns, modality, historical references, word choices and repetition of phrases.

### **Use of Personal Pronouns**

A political leader is he whose language can develop a strong relationship with the public or at the same time to manipulate the strong bonding they share. Several studies have been conducted on the political speeches delivered in distinct situations and it is noticed by the researchers s that their text is replete with personal pronouns (we, our). The use of the personal pronoun is quite helpful for them to build up a close relationship with the audience. The first person pronoun "we" is used to minimize the distance between the speaker and the listener. In this study, the researchers’ finds out that Barack Obama often uses the first-person pronoun "we" while delivering this speech. For example, we see at the very start of his speech when he talks about the current pandemic devastation, he said:

“We see it in the disproportioned impact of Covid-19 on our communities”

His use of "we & our "in this sentence shows his inclusiveness, his ideology of being united and his positive intention. While delivering this speech he was not on the presidential seat rather he seemed to be a true representative of Black Community, and to make the audience understand their identity, he said:

“Just as we see it when a Black Man goes for a jog and some folks feel like they can stop and question and shoot him if he doesn't submit to their questions”.

### **Sentence Structure**

Sentence type plays a vital role to create a close relationship between the speaker and the listener. Mode of sentences helps the speakers to deliver their ideology more accurately. For example, in the selected speech the researchers s notices that Barack Obama uses short and easy sentences to make their audience understandable. The researcher also finds out interrogative sentences in his speech that are used by the speaker when they want to attract the audience towards something very serious. For example, He said:

“What in it for me” or “what in it for my community.”

These interrogative sentences make them attentive and curious and they listen to the speaker attentively. The use of imperative and declarative sentences is also

found in this speech by the researchers s . At the very beginning of the speech, Barak Obama said," Time is not ideal" and "let's be honest" are examples of above-mentioned sentences.

### **Repetition Of words and phrases**

Repetition of something in a text is used as a discursive tool to yield something's importance. Different researchers have pointed out that many speakers repeat words, phrases and pronouns just to have a strong relationship and also to make people aware of what is crucial and what is beneficial for them. As in the present speech, Barak Obama talks as a representative of Black Community because he is a Black African, so he used the words "injustice, inequality and discrimination" most repeatedly. These words clearly show his hidden notions as to what he has felt and what he wants to do to get rid of this unequal treatment. His speech is on a positive note, instead of criticizing others he invites the young generation to do something productive and use the word "struggle". He also uses different sentences that help the speaker to boost up and motivate the audience for example he said:

"If the world is going to get better, it's going to be up to you with everything suddenly feeling like it, up for grabs this, your time seize the initiative."

### **Historical References**

While doing textual references researcher notices that speaker give historical references to impress the audience that they are conscious of what has been happened in the past and what should be happened in the current situations. For example, in his speech he said:

"As African American, we are particularly attuned to injustice, inequality and struggle, but that also should make us more alive to the experience of others who have been left out and discriminated against."

Barak Obama Also give historical reference of Fannie Lou Homer. She was an African-American civil rights activist who fought for the equality for both the Black and the White. Barak Obama talks about injustice and unfair treatment which they have to face for centuries and quotes Fannie Hammer who said;

"Nobody's free until everybody is free."

Knowing Nation's history is the best weapon for a political icon to run a system. Here again, he propagates his: ideology positively. He quotes African - American activist and said that the only solution of all the problems is justice.

### **Interpretation of the Text**

Obamais the former twice elected Afro-American president of the USA and belongs to the Democratic Party. However, at the time of the speech, he is just a political leader of the United States. The speech was given at the time of virtual graduation ceremony where he was addressing the young generation of America. The whole world is suffering due to killer pandemic, COVID-19. In particular, the United

States is bearing the brunt of the pandemic since it has the most affected case in the world. Talking about the current situation the USA, he mentioned that it is very diverse timing. Life is fully scattered economically, socially and politically even. Every sphere of life is disturbed due to the rapid change because of this pandemic scenario.

“The timing is not ideal.”

Obama’s social position has changed since he left the White House. He is talking here as the representative of the Black Community by mentioning their rights again and again and talking about the violence that they are facing. In the below-mentioned line, he is talking about the most popular issue that the American people have since the day of creation. Here, Obama is only addressing the Black people by speaking about the terror that they are facing till now. He is talking about the problems that have magnified now due to the entry of the COVID-19.

“And let’s be honest, a disease like this just spotlights the underlying inequalities and extra burdens that black communities have historically had to deal with in this country.”

According to him, due to COVID-19 in America, the Black people are suffering more than the other communities. The life of Black people was already very tough but now it is worse than ever. He quoted the recent incident about the killing of an innocent black person Ahmaud Arbery by the white police officer who went for jogging only. He even doesn’t have any gun with him. He criticizes his killing by saying it is injustice but not a new thing. Many other blind examples are commonly found in America where the Black people become victims of them.

“Just as we see it when a Black man goes for a jog and some folks feel like they can stop and question and shoot him if he doesn’t submit to their questioning.”

Furthermore, he talks about the new generation who is in transitional process. Young generation has already taken the step towards novelty. They find that the concept of racism is just a curse, and nothing more than that. It is the biggest hurdle in the way of their success. Here, the speaker is not only talking about the Black people but about the whole American young generation who have decided to take initiative.

“How much money you make if everyone around you is hungry and sick, that our society.”

Here he is addressing the whole young generation who have changed their mindset about the devastating problem of racism. They get to know about its disadvantages. Moreover, he talked about the other existing problems of the country like immigrant’s problem, LGBT people, and gender discrimination and about the poor people who have very low income. After that, the speaker addresses the performance of the Trump’s administration. To him, they are not taking the appropriate steps against the destruction of Corona virus. Then he suggested a piece of advice for the whole nation that to fight with this pandemic scenario we need to be united first. Instead of indulging in the above-mentioned issues just get up and fight by own with the support of other people.

“If the world is going to get better it’s going to be up to you. With everything suddenly feeling like it’s up for grabs, this your time to seize the initiative.”

He united the whole text by discussing the different type of existing issues in view of the most recent problem. Furthermore, the speaker motivates the community by focusing again and again on the need to take stand against the devastating problem, not individually but as a whole.

“What in it for me” or “what in it for my community.”

In the first part of the speech Obama addresses the Black community only and then in the middle part he talked about the whole young generation of the USA. But in the last section, he implicitly addresses the whole American community as well as the whole. He provides the best way to fight against the COVID-19 that unites themselves on a single platform by quoting the words of Fannie Lou Homer.

“Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.”

### **Explanation of the Text**

The speaker discussed the current situation due to the COVID-19 in the United States by keeping in view the existing issues that are even more severe and diverse. At the time of the speech, the United States is gripped by the pandemic. People are not only suffering because of Coronavirus but also due to the economic issues. On the one hand, rich people can manage their hunger problems while, on the other hand, poor are hard pressed. The situation is going to be more serious day by day with the rapid increase of the cases. Meanwhile, the business community of the United States is also suffering because their businesses are seeing downward trends and they are facing financial crunch. Until the whole society is rescued from the pandemic, they will also in loss. The social practice that the speaker wants to discuss with the help of this discourse is not only the COVID-19 but also the other existing issue that are the more diverse than this.

On the other hand, Black people in the United States are already suffering from the issues like racism etc. Not all, but some white people are involved in the malpractices like hating and even killing the Black community. Moreover, the American society is also suffering from the issues like gender discrimination, immigration problems and LGBT people’s right etc. In addition to these problems, another issue was raised in the whole world, i.e. COVID-19 attack which is more rampant in the US than anywhere else. In the selected speech, the speaker points out all these problems of the US nation.

However, most of the time, he addresses the problems of the Black community. If we see on a larger level, we come to know that not only Black but white people are also facing many problems in the US. In present-day American society not only Black but the White females are also victims of gender discrimination. The immigration issues are not confined to the Black people; other communities such as Mexicans and Indians. are also suffering due to these.

With the help of current discourse, the speaker wants to inform us about the social struggle that Black people have in the American society. On the surface level, Obama is discussing the impact of COVID-19 but implicitly he is targeting the White community by addressing the racial issues of the Black community. The other dimension of this speech is that he establishes himself as a saviour for the audience while criticizing Trump’s administration by proving them wrong because they are unable to manage things reasonably. Moreover, his use of words like injustice, inequality and struggle with the Black people reveals his Black origin. Furthermore, Obama’s only pointing towards the Black people’s problems shows that he talks only in their favour. The speaker used Fannie Lou Homer’s quote to address the business community of the society to make them aware about the advantages of the unity to grow more. Moreover, he is implicitly giving warning to them as if the poor people will suffer in the country then you will also be suffered because your whole capital is because of the worker community.

### **Conclusion**

In the present study, the researchers’ main focus was on the language used in the speech. The study has discussed the utilization of linguistic features and devices to ascertain the implicit practices in the speech. The other important objective of this study was to know about identical issues that are discussed by the speaker in view of COVID-19. Obama used language skilfully and in a meaningful way to obtain his hidden agenda. He used simple sentences by giving past references which shows that he speaks for the common person to get his favour and sympathy. His use of the repetition of the words with the flowery phrase and the use of inclusive pronouns provides more beauty to his address. In the selected speech, the speaker talked about the COVID-19 scenario but, implicitly, he talked about the social struggle that the Black people have in the USA. Through this speech, he also wants to address the elite class of America by making them understand the impact of COVID-19 on Black people. Moreover, he asserted that the suffering of a poor person is also the suffering of the rich people because their economy is dependent on the working class. Hence, implicitly, he warns them to support the needy people of their surroundings. Furthermore, the researchers found that, on the surface level, he was talking about COVID-19 but intentionally he was also raising other identical issues such as race, gender discrimination and immigration problems that also need to be resolved. Researchers also found that his main focus was also on the solution of all the problems that is unity and to support others in a tough time which is the most significant theme of the study. The researchers also found that Obama gave a new vision to the whole world about unity which is the solution to every problem. The present discourse is likely to bring a new social practice that is to change the ideology of the young American generation as well as to the whole world about the peace and love which is the need of the hour. The new social practice can be very helpful to combat against COVID-19 and the other existing problems of the whole world.

In his Cairo speech Obama asserted, the Americans are the blessed people who are united, care about each other, and talk about justice, security, democracy lovers, and freedom supporters (Gadalla, H. 2012). At that time, he was the president of the USA. However, in his COVID-19 speech, when he is not the president, he

presented the Americans as very ill-mannered and involved in the malpractices like racism etc. This shows that the social position of a person can also change his social

The present study explores the hidden perspective of the political leaders in their discourse. They use language as a medium to propagate their agendas through which they can move the people into a new dimension. The analysis of speech shows that Obama used the linguistically enriched discourse quite profoundly to achieve his implicit agenda in order to change the perception of the young generation of USA. With the help of current speech, Obama gives a new direction to the people of the whole world, i.e. help others to live happy and prosperous. The life of the upper class is healthy, wealthy and splendid if the lower class people are living in comfort. All the human beings are socially related to each other because of their social nature. Moreover, he addresses the identical issues such as race, gender discrimination, and immigration problems in view of COVID-19 that also need to be resolved. It is only possible if we all change our perspective about the world and follow the policy of unity, love and peace. It can also be very helpful for constructing and shaping the socio-cultural ideologies of the people. Furthermore, this study also delineates that the social position of the people can shape their social perspective.

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