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# Discourses of Inclusion and Unity: A Peace Linguistic Reading of Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream*

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## ABSTRACT

Public discourse plays a significant role in shaping social relations, with the capacity to reinforce divisions or foster belonging, trust and collective purpose. This paper examines how Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream*, delivered during the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, employs inclusive language to construct a shared identity across racial boundaries and articulate a vision of peace and national renewal. Adopting a qualitative interpretive approach, the study analyses ten purposively selected excerpts through an integrated framework combining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), pragmatics, and peace linguistics. The findings reveal three major patterns. First, the use of inclusive deixis, collective pronouns and rhythmic repetition constructs a shared civic identity, positioning the audience within a common moral community. Second, economic and spatial metaphors reinterpret the nation's founding ideals, presenting inclusion as the fulfilment of an enduring but unredeemed national promise rather than an entirely new demand. Third, the speech advances a peace-oriented vision by combining the expression of historical grievances with appeals to nonviolence, moral restraint, and reconciliation. The study contributes an integrated analytical framework that connects CDA's textual and ideological concerns, context-sensitive pragmatic interpretation, and the normative orientation of peace linguistics. It further considers the implications of inclusive and peace-oriented political discourse for promoting social cohesion and democratic governance in plural and multilingual societies.

## Introduction

Public discourse shapes collective identities, mediates social tensions, and articulates visions of national cohesion. In divided societies, language functions beyond communication as a resource for negotiating belonging, legitimacy and shared futures. Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech, delivered in 1963 at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (King, 1963), shows how inclusive rhetoric can challenge injustice while constructing a national vision grounded in equality and hope. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) views discourse as a site where power, dominance, and inequality are enacted and contested (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998), while Pragmatics emphasizes context, speaker intention, audience interpretation, and shared assumptions (Levinson, 1983). Peace Linguistics complements these perspectives by examining language as a means of promoting harmony, reducing conflict, and fostering inclusion (Crystal, 1999; Friedrich, 2007; Curtis, 2022). King's speech provides a rich site for such analysis. Its inclusive pronouns, metaphors, biblical allusions and rhythmic repetition construct collective identity across racial and social boundaries. The recurring use of "we" and "our" promotes shared belonging, while its vision of

justice and equality encourages collective action (Charteris-Black, 2014; Bajri & Mariesel, 2020).

The speech also has relevance beyond its American historical context. In Nigeria, linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity significantly influences sociopolitical relations. Language may therefore either reinforce division or promote national integration, depending on discursive choices (Bamgbose, 1991; Odebunmi, 2006). Fairclough (2003) further notes that discourse helps shape social practices and institutional relations. This study consequently undertakes a peace linguistic reading of *I Have a Dream*, examining how its discursive strategies construct inclusion and unity as foundations of nation-building and contemporary governance.

## Literature Review: Discourse, Power and Inclusion

The relationship between language and social reality has become a central concern in linguistics, sociolinguistics and discourse studies. Rather than treating language as a neutral instrument for describing an already existing world, contemporary scholarship recognises discourse as an active force in constructing and maintaining social relations. Fairclough (1995) argues that discourse functions as a site through which social inequalities are reproduced or contested, while van Dijk (1998) explains how discursive structures influence public cognition and shape the social representations that inform political life. These perspectives establish that linguistic choices are never entirely neutral. How individuals and institutions construct inclusion and exclusion reflects underlying ideological positions and has significant consequences for social relations.

Political discourse provides a particularly important context for examining these processes because political leaders use language to construct collective identities, establish common ground, and secure public legitimacy. Metaphors, pronouns and narrative framing are among the recurring linguistic resources through which political speakers appeal to shared values and encourage a sense of belonging. Charteris-Black (2014) explains how political metaphors persuade audiences by connecting political arguments to particular moral visions, while Chilton (2004) examines how political actors employ language to legitimise authority and shape public perceptions. This communicative process is not restricted to any particular political culture. In their global study of political leaders' early addresses during the COVID-19 pandemic, Berrocal et al. (2021) found that leaders across different national contexts relied on similar rhetorical strategies, including inclusive pronouns, appeals to solidarity and expressions of collective identity, to foster unity among anxious populations. From this perspective, Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* can be understood as a significant example of political rhetoric that mobilises familiar linguistic resources to advance an inclusive vision of society.

While critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides a framework for examining the relationship between language, ideology and power, pragmatics offers insight into how meaning is produced and interpreted in particular communicative situations. Pragmatic interpretation recognises that meaning extends beyond the literal content of words to include speakers' intentions, contextual circumstances, and the inferences audiences draw. Levinson (1983) emphasises the role of intention and inference in understanding utterances, while Mey (2001), through the concept of the pragmeme, situates speech acts within their wider socio-cultural contexts. These perspectives are relevant to inclusive political discourse, in which linguistic devices such as deixis, implicature, and speech acts can position audiences within a shared collective identity. Odebunmi (2006) similarly shows that interpreting inclusiveness depends on the interaction between contextual cues and participants' shared beliefs, rather than on vocabulary alone. Consequently, the inclusive force of political language must be examined in relation to how utterances are produced, understood, and negotiated within particular contexts.

Peace linguistics adds a normative dimension to language analysis by examining how linguistic choices can promote cooperation, reduce hostility, and encourage mutual understanding. Unlike approaches primarily concerned with describing the relationship between language and social power, peace linguistics places particular emphasis on the ethical and social consequences of communication. Friedrich (2007) argues that language can either intensify or reduce conflict and advocates communicative practices grounded in cooperation and inclusivity. Extending this perspective, Curtis (2022) advances the idea of a new peace linguistics, encouraging closer examination of how specific texts contribute to or undermine peaceful relations. Within this framework, inclusive discourse extends beyond rhetorical persuasion to become a potential instrument of peacebuilding. By reducing social distance, fostering empathy and encouraging mutual recognition, language can create conditions for reconciliation and coexistence in societies characterised by historical and social divisions. This perspective provides an important basis for examining the peace-oriented dimensions of *I Have a Dream*.

The significance of inclusive language becomes particularly evident in plural societies, where linguistic practices can either strengthen national cohesion or deepen existing divisions. Bamgbose (1991) identifies language as a crucial factor in national integration within multilingual societies, arguing that linguistic diversity can serve as a source of unity or division depending on how it is managed. In a subsequent study, Bamgbose (1995) extends this concern to governance in Nigeria, observing that although English performs an important lingua franca function in public life, its dominance may also marginalise indigenous languages and restrict opportunities for broader participation. Research on Nigerian political communication further illustrates the relationship between language and democratic inclusion. Opeibi (2005) links effective political communication to citizen participation, while Taiwo (2007) shows how strategic linguistic choices in media discourse shape public opinion. These studies also draw attention to the divisive and coercive forms of political rhetoric that can undermine social cohesion. Beyond the Nigerian context, comparative political research indicates that solidarity in diverse societies depends on a shared sense of membership that must be actively cultivated rather than taken for granted (Harell et al., 2021). Fairclough (2003) likewise underscores the importance of discourse in shaping institutional practices and sustaining the public trust necessary for democratic governance.

These works establish language as a key resource through which societies negotiate identity, power, participation, and belonging. CDA and pragmatics offer complementary analytical approaches to how discourse constructs and communicates social meanings, while peace linguistics provides a normative framework for evaluating its contribution to inclusion and peaceful coexistence. Despite their relevance, the combined application of these perspectives to Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* remains underexplored. Previous linguistic studies have examined the speech from different perspectives, including stylistics (Rohaniyah, 2013), pragmatics and speech-act theory (Josiah & Oghenerho, 2015), critical discourse analysis (Bajri & Mariesel, 2020; Rafi et al., 2024), and its literary articulation of human rights (Alwaqaa, 2019). More recent scholarship has also renewed attention to King's rhetoric of freedom (Diop, 2024). However, there remains room for an integrated analysis that brings together the textual and ideological concerns of CDA, the context-dependent interpretation of pragmatics, and the ethical commitments of peace linguistics. Such an approach would not only deepen understanding of the linguistic strategies through which *I Have a Dream* constructs inclusion and unity but also provide a basis for considering the relevance of its communicative ideals to other plural societies. The present study addresses this gap by examining the speech through the combined perspectives of these three approaches.

## Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine how inclusive discourse functions as a resource for unity and nation-building in Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream*. The approach integrates methodological procedures with a multi-theoretical framework, drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Pragmatics, and Peace Linguistics to provide a comprehensive account of how language constructs inclusion, negotiates identity, and advances visions of equitable governance. The study is anchored in qualitative textual analysis, which allows for an in-depth exploration of linguistic features and their socio-political implications. The primary data consists of selected, verified excerpts from *I Have a Dream* (King, 1963). The speech is purposively selected due to its historical significance, rhetorical richness, and enduring relevance to discussions of inclusion, justice, and national identity; in keeping with copyright and fair-use conventions, it is not reproduced in full, and only the excerpts that are the direct objects of analysis are quoted.

The analysis is based on ten excerpts selected purposively from the speech. Each was chosen because it foregrounds one of the inclusive or peace-oriented strategies the study sets out to examine—inclusive deixis and pronouns, temporal framing, economic and spatial metaphor, directive appeals, nonviolent moral positioning, visionary repetition, and religious universalism, and the set was deliberately limited to ten so that each unit could be read closely rather than merely surveyed. These excerpts are analyzed for their linguistic and pragmatic features, including pronoun usage (e.g., inclusive "we"), deixis, metaphorical constructions, repetition and speech acts. The selection is guided by relevance to the study's objectives, particularly the construction of unity and collective identity. The analytical procedure is structured in three interrelated stages. First, a descriptive analysis identifies salient linguistic features within the text, focusing on patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Second, an interpretive analysis examines how these features function within their socio-historical context to construct meaning and influence audience perception. Third, an explanatory analysis links the findings to broader socio-political structures, including issues of nation-building and governance.

This tripartite analytical model aligns with Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework of discourse, which emphasizes the relationship between textual features, discursive practices, and social practices. By moving from description to interpretation and explanation, the study captures both the micro-level linguistic details and the macro-level social implications of the discourse. The study is theoretically grounded in an integrative framework that combines CDA, pragmatics, and peace linguistics, each contributing distinct but complementary insights. CDA provides the primary analytical lens for examining how discourse enacts and challenges power relations. According to Fairclough (1995), discourse is both shaped by and constitutes social structures, making it a key site for ideological contestation. Similarly, van Dijk (1998) emphasizes that discourse influences social cognition, thereby shaping collective beliefs and attitudes. Within this framework, inclusive discourse is understood as a strategic intervention that challenges exclusionary ideologies and promotes egalitarian social relations. Pragmatics complements CDA by focusing on how meaning is constructed in context. Levinson (1983) highlights that interpretation depends on shared assumptions and contextual cues, while Mey (2001) underscores the role of social context in shaping communicative acts. In this study, pragmatic analysis is employed to examine how King's use of deixis, implicature, and speech acts fosters a sense of shared identity and collective purpose among diverse audiences.

Peace linguistics provides the normative dimension of the framework, as it emphasises the role of language in promoting harmony and reducing conflict. Friedrich (2007) argues that linguistic choices can either escalate or de-escalate social tensions, advocating for discourse that prioritizes empathy, inclusivity, and cooperation. This perspective is particularly relevant to the study's focus on inclusive discourse as a tool for peacebuilding and nation-building. By foregrounding shared humanity and collective aspirations, the speech exemplifies the principles of peace linguistics in practice. While the primary analysis focuses on the American context in which the speech was produced, the study draws out the implications of its findings for plural, multilingual democracies, with Nigeria offered as a brief illustrative case rather than a second site of analysis. This is informed by sociolinguistic research that highlights the role of language in shaping national integration and democratic participation in multilingual societies (Bamgbose, 1991; Odebunmi, 2006). This is presented as an analytical implication rather than a full comparative study.

## Data and Excerpt Selection

The text analysed is Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream*, delivered at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (King, 1963). Since the speech remains under copyright held by the King Estate, it is not reproduced in full here; in keeping with fair-use and fair-dealing conventions for scholarly commentary, only the short excerpts that are the direct objects of analysis are quoted, each within the following section. All quoted excerpts were verified against an authoritative transcription of the speech and cross-checked with published analyses that reproduce the same passages (e.g., Bajri & Mariesel, 2020; Josiah & Oghenerho, 2015; Rohaniyah, 2013), so that the wording analysed is King's own and not an artefact of transcription. Ten excerpts are analysed. They were selected purposively to represent the speech's principal inclusive and peace-oriented strategies: (1) inclusive deixis that opens a shared communicative space; (2) historical framing and temporal contrast; (3) economic metaphor (the "promissory note"); (4) temporal deixis and urgency; (5) nonviolent moral positioning; (6) inclusive pronouns and intergroup solidarity; (7) anaphoric repetition; (8) visionary, future-oriented repetition ("I have a dream"); (9) religious and moral universalism; and (10) climactic repetition ("let freedom ring" / "free at last").

## Data Analysis: A Peace Linguistic, Pragmatic and CDA-Based Reading of Selected Utterances

This section presents a qualitative analysis of selected utterances from Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream*, guided by the integrated frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Pragmatics, and Peace Linguistics. The analysis focuses on how linguistic choices construct inclusion, negotiate power, and promote unity and peace.

### 1. Constructing Collective Identity through Inclusive Deixis

**Utterance:** *"I am happy to join with you today…"*

From a pragmatic perspective, the phrase "join with you" signals immediate alignment between speaker and audience. The use of inclusive deixis ("you," later extended to "we") functions to reduce social distance and construct a shared communicative space (Levinson, 1983). Within CDA, this utterance enacts solidarity by dissolving hierarchical distinctions between leader and followers, thereby democratizing participation. From a peace linguistic standpoint, it foregrounds cooperation and mutual recognition, key elements in fostering non-adversarial discourse (Friedrich, 2007).

**2. Historical Framing and Ideological Contrast**

**Utterance:** *"Five score years ago… But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free."*

This juxtaposition creates a temporal contrast that exposes the gap between ideological promises and social realities. CDA reveals this as a critique of institutional failure, highlighting systemic inequality (Fairclough, 1995). The repetition of "one hundred years later" functions rhetorically to emphasize the continuity of injustice. Pragmatically, the utterance relies on shared historical knowledge to generate implicature: that the freedom promised has not been realized. In peace linguistics, this strategy avoids incitement while still articulating injustice, maintaining a balance between critique and constructive engagement.

**3. Metaphor and Economic Imagery as Discursive Strategy**

**Utterance:** *"We've come to cash a check… a promissory note…"*

This extended metaphor reframes civil rights as a legitimate entitlement rather than a radical demand. CDA interprets this as a recontextualization of constitutional discourse, appropriating dominant ideological language to challenge exclusion (van Dijk, 1998). From a pragmatic angle, the metaphor simplifies complex socio-political realities into relatable economic terms, enhancing accessibility and persuasive force. Peace linguistics views this as a non-confrontational strategy that legitimizes claims without provoking hostility, thereby promoting dialogic engagement.

**4. Urgency and Temporal Deixis in Mobilizing Action**

**Utterance:** *"Now is the time…" (repeated)*

The repetition of "now" functions as temporal deixis that creates immediacy and urgency. Pragmatically, it acts as a directive speech act, urging immediate action. In CDA, this repetition challenges gradualism and delegitimizes delay as a political strategy. However, from a peace linguistic perspective, the urgency is framed constructively—calling for justice without endorsing violence. The discourse thus mobilizes action while maintaining ethical restraint.

**5. Nonviolence and Moral Positioning**

**Utterance:** *"Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred."*

This metaphor contrasts destructive and constructive responses to oppression. Pragmatically, it functions as a directive and cautionary speech act, guiding audience behaviour. CDA reveals this as moral positioning that legitimizes nonviolence as the preferred mode of resistance. Within peace linguistics, this is a central feature: the deliberate rejection of violence in favour of dignity and discipline aligns with principles of conflict de-escalation and ethical communication (Friedrich, 2007).

**6. Inclusive Pronouns and Intergroup Solidarity**

**Utterance:** *"We cannot walk alone… their destiny is tied up with our destiny."*

The repeated use of "we" constructs a collective identity that transcends racial boundaries. Pragmatically, this inclusive pronoun functions as a unifying device, aligning diverse groups within a shared frame of reference. CDA interprets this as a strategic redefinition of social categories that dissolves "us vs. them" binaries. From a peace linguistic perspective, the emphasis on interdependence fosters empathy and mutual recognition, which are essential for sustainable peace.

**7. Repetition and the Politics of Persistence**

**Utterance:** *"We can never be satisfied…"*

This anaphoric repetition reinforces the persistence of injustice while maintaining a disciplined rhetorical structure. Pragmatically, it intensifies the illocutionary force of protest. CDA highlights how this repetition foregrounds systemic inequalities across multiple domains (housing, voting, dignity). Importantly, peace linguistics interprets this not as agitation for conflict, but as sustained advocacy grounded in moral legitimacy.

**8. Visionary Discourse and Future-Oriented Inclusion**

**Utterance:** *"I have a dream…"*

This is the central rhetorical and ideological pivot of the speech. Pragmatically, it functions as a commissive and expressive act, projecting hope and commitment. The repetition creates rhythm and emotional resonance. CDA views this as the construction of an alternative social reality, an imagined inclusive society that challenges existing power structures. Peace linguistics emphasizes the forward-looking, reconciliatory nature of this vision, which replaces resentment with hope and shared aspiration.

**9. Religious and Moral Universalism**

**Utterance:** *"All of God's children…"*

This phrase invokes religious discourse to universalize inclusion. Pragmatically, it appeals to shared moral and spiritual values, enhancing persuasive appeal. From a CDA perspective, it redefines national identity in inclusive, moral terms rather than racial or political categories. Peace linguistics interprets this as a strategy of moral unification, promoting a sense of universal belonging and equality.

**10. Climactic Repetition and Collective Liberation**

**Utterance:** *"Let freedom ring…" / "Free at last…"*

These concluding repetitions function as performative utterances that symbolically enact the freedom being advocated. Pragmatically, they serve both expressive and directive functions, inviting audience participation. CDA highlights how geographical references ("every hill," "every state") construct a comprehensive national inclusion. From a peace linguistic perspective, the culmination in a shared celebratory vision reinforces unity, reconciliation, and collective liberation without antagonism.

## Findings and Discussion

The analysis of selected utterances from Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* reveals that inclusive discourse operates as a deliberate and multi-layered strategy for constructing unity, negotiating power, and advancing a peace-oriented vision of nationhood. Three interrelated findings emerge in line with the integrated framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Pragmatics, and Peace Linguistics. First, the study finds that inclusive pronouns, deixis, and repetition function as key pragmatic resources for constructing collective identity. The recurrent use of "we," "our," and "together" minimizes social distance and aligns diverse audiences within a shared interpretive frame. This supports the pragmatic view that meaning is co-constructed through context and shared assumptions (Levinson, 1983). The repeated structures ("now is the time," "we cannot be satisfied," "I have a dream") intensify illocutionary force while reinforcing solidarity, thereby transforming individual grievances into collective aspirations.

Second, from a CDA perspective, the findings demonstrate that the speech strategically recontextualizes dominant ideological discourses to challenge systemic inequality and legitimize inclusion. The "promissory note" metaphor, for instance, appropriates constitutional language to expose institutional failure while simultaneously reaffirming national ideals. This aligns with Fairclough's (1995) assertion that discourse both reproduces and transforms social structures, and with van Dijk's (1998) view that discourse shapes social cognition and ideological positioning. By reframing exclusion as a violation of shared national commitments, the speech constructs inclusion as both a moral and political necessity.

Third, the analysis shows that the discourse is fundamentally peace-oriented, foregrounding nonviolence, moral discipline, and future-oriented hope. The rejection of "bitterness and hatred" and the emphasis on "dignity and discipline" exemplify how language can de-escalate conflict while sustaining resistance. This finding corroborates the principles of peace linguistics, which emphasize the role of language in fostering empathy, cooperation, and social harmony (Friedrich, 2007). The visionary "dream" sequences further project an inclusive social order, replacing antagonistic narratives with a unifying and aspirational discourse.

These findings suggest that inclusive discourse in *I Have a Dream* functions not merely as rhetorical embellishment but as a normative framework for modern democratic society and governance. The speech foregrounds inclusion as an ethical and political imperative, demonstrating how language can legitimize diverse identities, promote participatory engagement, and strengthen collective belonging. This has significant implications for plural societies such as Nigeria, where discursive practices in political and public domains often shape the trajectory of national integration. As Bamgbose (1991) notes, language remains central to managing diversity and fostering unity in multilingual contexts.

## Conclusion

This study has shown that Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* is a paradigmatic instance of inclusive discourse that functions as both a critique of social inequality and a constructive framework for nation-building. Through the integrated lenses of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Pragmatics, and Peace Linguistics, the study establishes that linguistic features such as inclusive pronouns, metaphor, repetition, and directive speech acts are systematically deployed to construct collective identity, reframe ideological assumptions, and promote a nonviolent, future-oriented vision of unity. The findings reaffirm that discourse is not merely reflective of social structures but actively constitutive of them, shaping both cognition and social relations (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). Pragmatically, the speech illustrates how meaning is co-

constructed through shared context and intentional alignment between speaker and audience (Levinson, 1983), while from a peace linguistic perspective, it exemplifies how language can be harnessed to de-escalate conflict and foster solidarity (Friedrich, 2007). In this sense, inclusive discourse emerges as a normative and strategic resource for democratic engagement and ethical governance.

In terms of contribution to knowledge, this study advances scholarship in three key ways. First, it offers a novel integrative application of CDA, pragmatics, and peace linguistics to a canonical political speech, bridging analytical and normative approaches to discourse. Second, it foregrounds inclusive discourse as a viable linguistic model for modern governance, emphasizing its role in legitimizing diversity, enhancing participation, and strengthening national cohesion. Third, it draws out the wider relevance of these findings for plural, multilingual democracies: without claiming a full comparative analysis, it indicates how the inclusive, peace-oriented discourse strategies identified in King's speech bear on challenges of pluralism and nation-building in societies such as Nigeria (Bamgbose, 1991).

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