

Original article

Identity, Education, and Ideology in Malala Yousafzai's 2013 UN Speech: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines Malala Yousafzai's 2013 United Nations speech through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Drawing on the frameworks of Fairclough (1), Van Dijk (2), and Wodak (3), the study investigates how language is deployed to construct identity, represent education, and convey ideological positions. Qualitative analysis of four purposively selected excerpts identifies key linguistic strategies, including anaphora, pronoun shift, metaphor, agency construction, and normative lexis. The analysis is organized around three thematic dimensions and seven analytical categories: Identity (Survivor; Advocate), Education (Right to Education; Empowerment), and Ideology (Liberation; Social Change; Moral Responsibility; Representation of the Oppressed). Findings reveal that Malala constructs a dual identity as survivor and global advocate, frames education as a universal human right and instrument of empowerment, and advances a counter-hegemonic discourse that positions knowledge against extremism. The study contributes to CDA scholarship on humanitarian advocacy and demonstrates how public discourse can be mobilized to challenge dominant power structures and promote social change.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis; Malala Yousafzai; Identity Construction; Educational Discourse.

Introduction

Malala Yousafzai's address to the United Nations Youth Assembly on July 12, 2013, stands as one of the most consequential acts of public advocacy discourse of the twenty-first century. Delivered by a sixteen-year-old survivor of a Taliban assassination attempt, the speech is remarkable not only for its moral force but for the precision of its language: every significant linguistic choice contributes to a coherent and cumulative ideological argument. As Fairclough (1) argues, "language is a social

Critical Discourse Analysis is less a unified methodology than a critical orientation committed, as Fairclough (1) describes, to treating discourse as a site of social practice that produces, naturalizes, and contests the power relations structuring social life. Several theoretical traditions inform this study. Gramsci's (4) concept of hegemony provides the backdrop against which Malala's counter-hegemonic discourse operates: dominant groups maintain power not through coercion alone but through the construction of an apparently natural common sense that the speech directly challenges. Foucault's (5) account of discourse as a system of knowledge production illuminates the conditions under which Malala's voice can claim authority. Van Dijk's (2) socio-cognitive approach, particularly his concept of the ideological square, in which in-group virtues are emphasized and out-group voices foregrounded, provides the analytical framework most directly applied in the analysis that follows. Wodak's (3) discourse-historical approach situates linguistic choices within their historical conditions of production, an essential dimension when analyzing a speech whose authority derives partly from its speaker's location within a specific history of gendered political violence. Halliday's (6) systemic functional linguistics further informs the attention paid to clause structure and transitivity as ideologically inflected meaning-making resources.

Within CDA, identity is understood as a discursive achievement, something produced, maintained, and contested through language (7). Chilton (8) observes that pronoun use is among the most *I to we* is central to her discourse, converting personal experience of targeted violence into a political claim on behalf of all children denied education. Suleman et al. (9) extend this through a feminist stylistic lens, showing how Malala's discourse is simultaneously inclusive and agentive. Norton (10) provides the broader theoretical grounding: language and identity are inseparable, and Malala's speech constitutes a performance of identity reclamation in which the silenced subject claims not only the right to speak, but the authority to speak for others. Educational discourse, as Apple (11) argues, is never politically neutral. When Malala frames education as a fundamental human right rather than a policy instrument, she repositions its denial from a governance failure to a moral violation. Atlam and Pathan (12) analyze the rhetorical force of this normative framing. Marpaung and Englishtina (13) focus on the weapon metaphor, demonstrating how Malala simultaneously demilitarizes resistance and militarizes knowledge. With respect to ideology, Fairclough (1) defines it as representations of the world that contribute to establishing, maintaining, or changing social relations of power. Van Dijk's (2) ideological square maps directly onto Malala's construction of extremists as afraid a delegitimizing rather than a neutral attribution. Gramsci (4) provides the broader framing: counter-hegemonic discourse must construct an alternative common sense, and Malala's speech achieves precisely this.

Despite this body of scholarship, existing studies tend to address the speech's rhetorical (12), feminist (9), metaphorical (13), or pedagogical (14) dimensions in isolation. Sapkota (15) addresses pronouns and

empowerment without systematically mapping linguistic strategies onto defined analytical categories. Atlam and Pathan (12) provide a strong foundation for understanding rights-framing but do not extend to identity or ideology. Suleman et al. (9) offer the most recent comprehensive analysis but through feminist stylistics rather than an integrated CDA framework. None of these studies brings together identity construction, educational representation, and ideological positioning within a single framework organized around precisely defined categories. This gap is significant: the speech's persuasive power resides in the interaction among all three dimensions, and an analysis that examines only one at a time cannot account for the coherence of the whole.

The present study addresses this gap by applying Fairclough's (1) three-dimensional CDA model to four purposively selected excerpts from Malala's speech, organized around seven analytical categories: Survivor and Advocate (Identity); Right to Education and Empowerment (Education); and Liberation, Social Change, Moral Responsibility, and Representation of the Oppressed (Ideology). The study pursues four principal aims: (1) to examine how Malala constructs a dual identity as survivor of targeted violence and global advocate for the oppressed; (2) to analyze how education is discursively represented as a universal right and instrument of empowerment; (3) to investigate the ideological messages embedded in the speech with respect to the four ideology categories listed above; and (4) to identify the linguistic and rhetorical strategies through which all three dimensions are constructed and sustained across the speech.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How does Malala Yousafzai construct and negotiate her identity as a survivor of targeted violence and a global advocate for the oppressed?

RQ2: How is education discursively represented as a fundamental human right and a source of empowerment?

RQ3: How are the ideological themes of liberation, social change, moral responsibility, and representation of the oppressed constructed through Malala's discourse?

RQ4: What linguistic and rhetorical strategies are deployed to construct these identities, represent education, and convey these ideological positions?

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in CDA. A qualitative approach is appropriate given that the research questions require interpretive engagement with language, meaning, and ideological content rather than statistical measurement (16). CDA is the primary analytical framework,

Data

The primary data source is the official transcript of Malala Yousafzai's address to the United Nations Youth Assembly, July 12, 2013 (17). Four excerpts were selected from different sections of the speech on the basis of their density of reference to the analytical categories under investigation. This purposive sampling strategy ensures that all seven categories are addressed while maintaining fidelity to the speech's internal structure. It should be noted that four excerpts cannot represent the speech in its entirety; the analysis claims to demonstrate how the categories operate and interact, not to exhaust the text's discursive resources.

Analytical Procedure

Each excerpt was analyzed using Fairclough's (1) three-dimensional model at the levels of linguistic description, discursive practice, and social practice. Van Dijk's (2) ideological square informed the analysis of in-group and out-group positioning. Wodak's (3) discourse-historical approach provided the contextual layer. Analytical attention was directed to: pronoun use and the I/we shift; anaphora and its function in building rhetorical intensity; the weapon metaphor; normative lexis and rights-framing; and modality as a marker of obligation, determination, and futurity.

Results

Table 1 presents the thematic coding of the four selected excerpts, organized by theme, analytical category, linguistic code, and textual evidence. This coding structure serves as the organizing reference for the Discussion that follows.

Table 1: The thematic coding of the four selected excerpts

Theme	Category	Linguistic/Rhetorical Code	Textual Evidence
Excerpt 1 – Identity Construction			
Identity	Survivor	Personal narrative + Contrast	"They thought that the bullets would silence us, but they failed."
Identity	Advocate	Self-positioning statement	"I am here to speak for the right of education for every child."

Ideology	Liberation	Counter-hegemonic positioning	“Out of that silence came thousands of voices.”
Education	Right to Education	Universal rights framing	“The right of education for every child.”
Excerpt 2 — Ideology & Education			
Ideology	Representation of the Oppressed	Anaphora + Repetition	“The extremists are afraid of books and pens. They are afraid of women.”
Ideology	Social Change	Causal framing	“They are blasting schools every day because they are afraid of change and equality that we will bring.”
Ideology	Liberation	Counter-hegemonic voice	“A Talib doesn’t know what is written inside this book.”
Ideology	Moral Responsibility	Religious reframing + Delegitimization	“These terrorists are misusing the name of Islam for their own personal benefit.”
Education	Right to Education	Duty/obligation framing	“It is the duty and responsibility to get education for each child.”
Education	Empowerment	Binary opposition (power vs. fear)	“The power of education frightens them.”
Excerpt 3 — Identity & Education			
Identity	Advocate	Focus statement + Gendered agency	“I am focusing on women’s rights and girls’ education because they are suffering the most.”
Ideology	Liberation	Shift in agency; collective self-reliance	“We will do it by ourselves.”
Education	Right to Education	Empowerment framing; vulnerability claim	“Girls’ education because they are suffering the most.”
Excerpt 4 — Education & Ideology			
Education	Empowerment	Weapon metaphor; imperative mood	“Let us empower ourselves with the weapon of knowledge.”
Ideology	Liberation	Absolute diction; declarative finality	“Education is the only solution. Education first.”
Ideology	Moral Responsibility	Obligation modality + Triple anaphora	“We must not forget... We must not forget... We must not forget.”
Ideology	Social Change	Call to action; collective agency	“Let us wage a glorious struggle against illiteracy, poverty and terrorism.”
Ideology	Representation of the Oppressed	Inclusive universalism; future orientation	“Our sisters and brothers are waiting for a bright, peaceful future.”
Identity	Advocate	Empowerment statement; collective voice	“We believe in the power and the strength of our words.”

Discussion

Identity: Survivor and Advocate

The identity Malala constructs is not singular but relational it derives its force from the tension between two subject positions: the Survivor, who speaks from personal experience of political violence, and the Advocate, who claims a mandate to speak not for herself but for all children denied education. These positions are not sequential but simultaneous, and their co-presence generates the speech’s distinctive rhetorical authority. The Survivor dimension is established through first-person testimony delivered with deliberate restraint. Fairclough (1) would identify this as a credential-claim: a move that grounds the speaker’s authority in lived experience rather than institutional position. Malala’s authority derives from a source no professional diplomat in the room can claim:

“They thought that the bullets would silence us, but they failed.” (17)

The contrast structure they thought... but they failed is more than stylistic. Van Dijk’s (2) ideological square predicts that speakers emphasize the failure of the out-group to consolidate the moral superiority of the in-group. In Halliday’s (6) terms, the clause structure assigns roles: the Taliban occupy the active role in “they thought that the bullets would silence us,” while the reversal in “but they failed” strips them of grammatical and ideological power simultaneously. The grammar does not merely describe this reversal. It performs it. The transition to the Advocate position is achieved through a syntactic pivot:

“I am not against anyone... I am here to speak for the right of education for every child.” (17)

The disclaimer pre-empts any reading of the speech as driven by personal revenge, repositioning suffering as the motivation for inclusive advocacy. The Advocate dimension is sustained through the anaphoric sequence we call upon, repeated seven times, converting personal address into collective mandate. As

Chilton (8) notes, the first-person plural in political discourse absorbs the audience into a shared subject position. When Malala deploys *we*, she is constructing a collective identity, not merely reporting it.

Education: Right to Education and Empowerment

Education in this speech occupies an ideological position considerably more complex than a policy argument. Through two complementary framings as a Right and as a vehicle for Empowerment Malala constructs education as simultaneously a legal entitlement, a moral absolute, and an instrument of transformation potent enough to displace armed force.

"It is the duty and responsibility to get education for each child." (17)

The choice of duty and responsibility rather than aspiration or need is not incidental. As Fairclough (1) observes, the choice between the language of rights and the language of needs is itself ideological: it determines whether those who lack access are positioned as supplicants or as rights-holders. Atlam and Pathan (12) argue that this normative framing gives Malala's educational discourse its particular ethical force, repositioning the denial of education from a governance failure to a moral violation.

The Empowerment framing is anchored in the speech's most analytically striking device:

"Let us empower ourselves with the weapon of knowledge." (17)

Marpaung and Englishtina (13) read this as a symbolic weaponization of knowledge a move that challenges the logic of physical domination by proposing an alternative form of power that is universally accessible. The speech's most celebrated line crystallizes this:

"One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen can change the world." (17)

The deliberate reduction of global change to its most elementary components implies that power is not the exclusive property of states and militaries; it is latent in every classroom. The anaphoric structure one... one... one... one mirrors the democratic access it describes: each element is equal, and each is sufficient.

Ideology: Liberation, Social Change, Moral Responsibility, and Representation of the Oppressed

The four ideological categories form a coherent counter-hegemonic framework. Liberation is positioned as the ultimate objective and the most powerful threat to those in power; Social Change is constructed as inevitable rather than aspirational; Moral Responsibility is assigned to the global audience as an active obligation; and Representation of the Oppressed ensures that the voiceless are made present

"They were afraid of equality. They were afraid of the power of education." (17)

The anaphoric parallelism builds a portrait of an out-group defined not by strength but by fear Van Dijk's (2) ideological square in operation. An oppressor who suppresses education because of what it might produce is revealed as reactive and insecure rather than powerful and certain. The Social Change dimension is sustained through Malala's consistent use of futurity, projecting change as certain rather than contingent. Wodak (3) situates this construction against the historical backdrop of generations of girls excluded from education.

"We must not forget... We must not forget... We must not forget." (17)

The modal must transform this from a reminder into a command. As Van Dijk (2) notes, structural reiteration functions to fix a proposition in the audience's consciousness. Three repetitions convert the command into something approaching a ritual moral declaration. The Representation of the Oppressed dimension is realized through Malala's most politically significant claim:

"I speak... for all children who are afraid of being forgotten by the world." (17)

This strategy of representative voice appropriation transforms personal experience into a collective political mandate. The possessive *our* in "Our sisters and brothers are waiting for a bright, peaceful future" (17) is the culminating instance of the collective pronoun construction traced throughout: not the sisters and brothers of a nation or a religion, but of a shared humanity. Together, the four ideological categories constitute what Gramsci (4) would recognize as an alternative common sense, a vision of social reality in which education is the natural right of every child, and those who oppose it are not powerful but afraid.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Malala Yousafzai's 2013 UN speech constructs its ideological force through the precision of its linguistic choices rather than through content alone. Across seven analytical categories: Survivor, Advocate, Right to Education, Empowerment, Liberation, Social Change, Moral *I to we* are the speech's central ideological act; the weapon metaphor repositions the oppressed as more powerful than their oppressors; and the triple anaphora of *we must not forget* converts aspiration into moral command. The study's principal contribution is the integrated seven-category analytical framework, which brings together identity, education, and ideology within a single CDA model, one that accounts for their interaction rather than addressing each in isolation. This framework is transferable to comparable texts in humanitarian and advocacy discourse, and offers EFL educators an evidence-based tool for developing critical literacy alongside language instruction. The study is limited by its reliance on four excerpts from the written transcript and the absence of multimodal or audience reception data. Future research should extend

the analysis to the full transcript and apply multimodal CDA to capture the prosodic and gestural dimensions of the speech.

Conflict of interest. Nil

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