



CONSTRUCTING POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY IN KEIR STARMER'S RESIGNATION SPEECH: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to examine Keir Starmer's resignation speech through Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate how discourse constructs political leadership, accountability, legitimacy, and institutional continuity. Adopting a qualitative research design, the research employs McKee's (2003) textual analysis as the method of analysis. The data consist of Keir Starmer's resignation speech, which is analyzed across the three dimensions of Fairclough's model: text, discursive practice, and social practice. The findings reveal that Starmer strategically employs lexical choices, pronouns, modality, repetition, metaphor, and evaluative language to construct a responsible leadership identity and legitimize his resignation. At the level of discursive practice, the speech reflects the institutional conventions of British parliamentary democracy while guiding audience interpretation through intertextuality, genre conventions, and media-oriented communication. At the level of social practice, the discourse reproduces broader democratic values by reinforcing accountability, public service, constitutional continuity, national unity, and confidence in political institutions. The research extends the application of Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model to the relatively underexplored genre of political resignation speeches and contributes to a deeper understanding of how discourse functions to preserve political legitimacy and democratic stability during leadership transition.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Democratic Transition, Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model, Keir Starmer, Political Discourse, Resignation Speech.*

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1. Introduction

Political discourse plays a central role in shaping how societies understand political events, leadership, and democratic institutions. Rather than merely communicating information, political language constructs particular representations of reality by defining social actors, legitimizing political actions, negotiating responsibility, and influencing public opinion. From the perspective of CDA, discourse is regarded as a form of social practice through which power relations and ideological meanings are produced, maintained, and reproduced (Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Similarly, Chilton (2004) argues that political language is inherently strategic because it enables political actors to persuade audiences, construct legitimacy, and shape interpretations of political events. Consequently, the study of political discourse provides important insights into the relationship between language, ideology, power, and society.

Among the various forms of political discourse, political speeches occupy a particularly significant position because they represent direct communication between political leaders and the public. Political speeches are designed not only to announce policies or political decisions but also to construct leadership, justify actions, reinforce institutional authority, and shape public perception (Chilton, 2004; Charteris-Black, 2011). Through carefully selected linguistic and rhetorical strategies, political leaders present preferred interpretations of political events while encouraging audiences to accept particular ideological positions. As Fairclough (1992) argues, discourse both reflects and shapes social reality, making political speeches an important site for examining how language contributes to the production and reproduction of political power.

Although political discourse has received considerable scholarly attention, previous Critical Discourse Analysis research has primarily focused on campaign speeches, inaugural speeches, parliamentary debates, presidential addresses, and election discourse (Chilton, 2004; Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2009; Charteris-Black, 2011). Comparatively less attention has been devoted to resignation speeches, particularly within the context of contemporary British politics. More specifically, Keir Starmer's resignation speech has not been systematically examined through Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis. Given that resignation speeches occur at moments when political authority, democratic legitimacy, and institutional continuity are publicly negotiated, analysing such discourse can provide important insights into how language constructs political meaning during leadership transitions.

Against this background, this research examines Keir Starmer's resignation speech through Norman Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model of CDA. The research investigates how linguistic choices at the textual level construct political identity, leadership, accountability, and legitimacy; how discursive practices shape the production, interpretation, and circulation of the speech; and how the discourse reproduces broader

ideological meanings relating to democratic accountability, institutional continuity, public service, national unity, and constitutional governance.

1.1. Problem Statement

Political resignation speeches are delivered during periods of leadership transition, where political leaders seek to explain their departure, maintain public confidence, and preserve democratic legitimacy. Through carefully constructed discourse, these speeches shape public perceptions of leadership, accountability, and institutional continuity. Therefore, examining how these meanings are discursively constructed is essential for understanding the role of language in political transition. This research analyzes Keir Starmer's resignation speech through Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model of CDA to examine how discourse constructs political leadership, accountability, legitimacy, and institutional continuity during democratic transition.

2. Literature Review

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has emerged as the most influential approach for examining the relationship between language, power, and ideology. Rather than viewing language as a neutral means of communication, CDA conceptualizes discourse as a form of social practice through which social realities, identities, and power relations are constructed, negotiated, and reproduced (Fairclough, 1992, 1995, 2003). Similarly, van Dijk (1998, 2008) argues that political discourse reflects underlying ideological structures that shape public cognition, while Wodak and Meyer (2009) emphasize that discourse both reflects and reinforces social inequalities. Within political contexts, speeches provide particularly valuable material because they enable political leaders to legitimize authority, construct collective identities, and influence public understanding through strategic linguistic choices (Chilton, 2004; Charteris-Black, 2011). Consequently, CDA has been widely employed to investigate how political discourse constructs power, ideology, legitimacy, and leadership across different political contexts.

A substantial body of research has examined political speeches using various Critical Discourse Analysis frameworks. Siregar (2021), employing van Dijk's CDA model, analyzed Joe Biden's presidential victory speech and demonstrated that linguistic features at the macro, micro, and superstructural levels collectively constructed ideologies of unity, equality, and freedom. The research further revealed that lexical choices, pronoun use, cohesion, and rhetorical organization functioned persuasively to reinforce political ideology. Similarly, Kadim (2022) investigated Donald Trump's election campaign speeches through van Dijk's discourse strategies and found that Trump systematically employed positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation to legitimize his political agenda while delegitimizing immigrants, political opponents, and minority communities. The study concluded that political speeches strategically employ discourse to construct ideological polarization and persuade audiences.

Recent research examined how political speeches construct democratic legitimacy, leadership, and collective identity during moments of political transition. Ali et al. (2025) analyzed Zohran Mamdani's victory speech through van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework and found that political authority was discursively constituted through representations of collective struggle, shared experience, and democratic participation rather than individual political success. They further demonstrated that ideological meanings were constructed through group representation, argumentation, and cognitive framing, allowing political authority to emerge as collectively owned rather than personally acquired. Likewise, Aqdas et al. (2025) examined Mamdani's inaugural address and reported that political legitimacy was established through implicit ideological polarization, collective identity construction, and the strategic representation of "the people" as a morally legitimate political community. Their findings suggest that contemporary political speeches construct legitimacy not only through explicit political claims but also through subtle linguistic and ideological strategies that normalize authority and governance.

Scholars have also increasingly emphasized the role of discourse in constructing political leadership rather than merely reflecting it. Tahir and Hussain (2026) investigated Zohran Mamdani's political discourse across multiple speeches using CDA combined with process tracing. Their findings revealed that leadership identity develops progressively through recurring linguistic patterns, including pronoun use, modality, metaphor, evaluative language, and lexical selection, enabling political leaders to negotiate legitimacy across different stages of their political careers. Similarly, Ali et al. (2026) demonstrated that Mamdani's victory speech strategically reconstructed traditional "Us versus Them" polarization by replacing exclusionary identity politics with an inclusive class-based political identity. Their research showed that discourse functions as a mechanism for redefining political legitimacy, constructing collective solidarity, and challenging dominant ideological narratives. Collectively, these studies reinforce Fairclough's (1992, 2003) argument that political discourse not only reflects social realities but actively participates in producing and transforming them.

Despite the growing body of CDA research on political speeches, previous studies have primarily focused on campaign, victory, inaugural, presidential, and election speeches (Siregar, 2021; Kadim, 2022; Ali et al., 2025; Aqdas et al., 2025). Comparatively little attention has been paid to political resignation speeches, particularly Keir Starmer's resignation speech, through Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model of CDA. Therefore, this research examines how linguistic choices, discursive practices, and broader social practices construct political leadership, accountability, legitimacy, and institutional continuity during democratic transition.

3. Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative research design to examine Keir Starmer's resignation speech through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Guided by McKee's (2003) textual analysis, the research investigates how discourse constructs political leadership, accountability, legitimacy, and institutional continuity. The data consist of Keir Starmer's resignation speech, which was transcribed verbatim to facilitate close textual analysis. Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis provides the theoretical framework guiding the analysis at the levels of text, discursive practice, and social practice.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is based on Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis. The model examines discourse through three interconnected dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice, to explore how language constructs meaning within its broader social context.

3.1.1. Text

The first dimension of Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model is text, which focuses on the linguistic features through which meanings are constructed and communicated. Rather than treating language as a neutral medium of communication, Fairclough (1992) argues that texts are socially and ideologically meaningful because linguistic choices shape representations of reality, construct identities, and establish relationships between speakers and audiences. Textual analysis therefore examines vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, textual organization, modality, pronouns, metaphor, and rhetorical devices to reveal how language contributes to the production of meaning. Fairclough emphasizes that a text should not be viewed in isolation but as one component of discourse, stating that "A text is a product rather than a process – a product of the process of text production. But I shall use the term discourse to refer to the whole process of social interaction of which a text is just a part" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 57). Consequently, textual analysis investigates how formal linguistic features function as resources for constructing particular interpretations of social and political reality.

Fairclough (1992) further explains that textual analysis extends beyond the description of linguistic forms because "Text analysis is correspondingly only a part of discourse analysis, which also includes analysis of productive and interpretative processes" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 57). At the textual level, linguistic features are understood as traces of the production process and as cues that guide audience interpretation.

3.1.2. Discursive Practice

The second dimension of Fairclough's (1992) model is discursive practice, which examines how texts are produced, distributed, interpreted, and consumed within particular institutional contexts. Unlike textual analysis, which focuses on linguistic features, discursive practice investigates the communicative processes surrounding discourse,

including production, interpretation, intertextuality, interdiscursivity, genre, and audience reception. Fairclough (1992) argues that discourse consists not only of text but also of the processes through which texts are produced and interpreted. He (1992) explains that discourse includes "the process of production, of which the text is a product, and the process of interpretation, for which the text is a resource" (p. 57).

A central concept within discursive practice is intertextuality, through which texts draw upon previous texts, genres, and established discourses. Intertextuality is "the property that texts have of being full of snatches of other texts" and that it "stresses the historicity of texts" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 84). Political speeches therefore do not emerge independently but are shaped by existing conventions of democratic discourse, institutional communication, and public expectations.

Discursive practice also considers the multiple audiences for whom political speeches are produced. Modern political discourse is not consumed only by those present during delivery but is redistributed through television, newspapers, online news platforms, and social media, where it is interpreted by different audiences. Consequently, political leaders anticipate media circulation during the production of speeches by employing memorable formulations, concise statements, and rhetorically balanced expressions that can easily be reproduced across media platforms.

3.1.3. Social Practice

The third dimension of Fairclough's (1992) framework is social practice, which situates discourse within wider social, political, cultural, and ideological structures. Fairclough (1992) asserted that discourse is both socially shaped and socially shaping because language simultaneously reflects existing social relations and contributes to their reproduction and transformation. He (1992) emphasizes that discourse "involves social conditions" that include "social conditions of production" and "social conditions of interpretation" (p. 57). Consequently, discourse cannot be understood independently of the institutional, political, and ideological contexts in which it is produced.

Within Fairclough's approach, discourse functions as a form of social practice through which power relations, ideological assumptions, and institutional legitimacy are negotiated. Political discourse is therefore not merely descriptive but actively participates in constructing social reality by legitimizing particular political actions, identities, and institutions. Through discourse, political actors seek to normalize certain interpretations of events while marginalizing alternative perspectives. Fairclough's (1992) model is particularly concerned with how discourse contributes to the maintenance or transformation of existing power relations and ideological structures.

4. Data Analysis

This section presents the analysis of the data. The findings are organized according to the research objectives and interpreted using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis.

4.1. Text

At the textual level, Starmer's resignation speech is organized around a careful balance between achievement, accountability, continuity, and personal closure. The speech does not begin with resignation itself; instead, it opens with memory and political achievement: "Walking up this street two years ago was the proudest moment of my life. A new Labour government. The first in 14 years. A page in our country's history turned after years of disappointment and despair (Starmer, 2026)." The phrase "a page in our country's history turned" is metaphorical, presenting Labour's rise to power as a new historical chapter rather than a routine electoral victory. The short, fragmented sentences, "A new Labour government. The first in 14 years," give the opening a ceremonial and emphatic rhythm. Through this structure, Starmer immediately frames his leadership as historically significant and nationally meaningful.

A dominant lexical pattern in the speech is the repeated use of the word "change." Starmer states that "the chance to change the lives of millions of people for the better" was the reason he entered politics, and later insists that Labour's work was guided by "a singular purpose. Not power for power's sake but to change Britain for the better." This repetition constructs change as the moral centre of his political identity. The contrast between "power for power's sake" and "change Britain for the better" is especially important because it distances Starmer from self-interest and presents his leadership as public service. In Faircloughian terms, the vocabulary does ideological work: it constructs political authority as legitimate only when it is connected to national improvement and public benefit.

Starmer also uses evaluative language to construct a strong contrast between the Labour Party he inherited and the Labour Party he claims to have rebuilt. He says, "Six years ago, I inherited a Labour Party that was politically, financially and morally bankrupt." The three-part structure "politically, financially and morally" intensifies the sense of crisis. The word "bankrupt" is metaphorical; it does not refer only to money but to the party's political legitimacy and ethical condition. This allows Starmer to present himself as the leader who rescued the party from collapse. Similarly, the phrase "ripping out the poison of antisemitism" uses a violent bodily metaphor. "Poison" represents antisemitism as a destructive substance inside the party, while "ripping out" presents reform as painful but necessary. Through these choices, Starmer constructs his leadership as a process of moral cleansing and institutional repair.

Pronoun use is central to the construction of identity in the speech. Starmer uses "I" when he accepts personal responsibility: "I inherited," "I was told," "I have heard," "I

accept,” and finally, “I will resign as leader of the Labour Party.” These first-person statements foreground individual accountability. However, when he discusses success, he often shifts to the collective “we”: “we proved those people wrong because we changed our party” and “look at what we’ve achieved in just two years.” This movement between “I” and “we” is strategic. The individual “I” carries responsibility for difficult decisions and resignation, while the collective “we” distributes achievement across the Labour government and party. In this way, Starmer protects the collective legitimacy of Labour while accepting personal responsibility for leadership change.

The possessive pronoun “our” also plays an important role in constructing national unity. Starmer refers to “our country’s history,” “our national flag,” “our reputation in the world,” “our values,” and “our allies in Europe.” These expressions move the speech beyond party politics and frame Labour’s achievements as national achievements. The phrase “stood proudly with, not against, our national flag” is particularly significant because it positions Labour as patriotic and aligned with national identity. The contrast “with, not against” simplifies a complex political history into a clear moral opposition, allowing Starmer to present his leadership as having restored Labour’s relationship with national symbols.

The speech also relies on accumulation to construct governmental competence. Starmer lists achievements in rapid succession: “An economy that is stronger, growing faster than our peers. Wages rising faster than inflation... Investment secured, infrastructure being built. An end to austerity... The biggest improvement in rights for workers and renters in a generation.” The repeated listing creates a sense of momentum and productivity. Many of these clauses are compact and noun-based, which makes them sound factual and objective. Comparative forms such as “stronger,” “faster,” and “biggest” strengthen the image of progress. The cumulative structure encourages the audience to view the government as active, successful, and effective.

One of the strongest rhetorical moments appears in the line: “Change promised by a Labour government. Change fought for by a Labour government, change delivered by a Labour government.” The repetition of “change” and “by a Labour government” creates parallelism and rhythm. The sequence “promised,” “fought for,” and “delivered” constructs a complete political narrative: Labour made commitments, struggled to achieve them, and fulfilled them. This is not merely stylistic repetition; it is a legitimacy claim. Starmer presents Labour not as a party of empty promises but as a government of delivery.

The resignation itself is linguistically framed as democratic acceptance rather than defeat. Starmer says, “The question my party is asking now is whether I am best placed to lead us into the next general election. I have heard the answer of my parliamentary party to that question. And I accept that answer with good grace.” This passage is dialogic because Starmer stages a question-and-answer exchange between himself and the party.

He does not name opponents or describe conflict. Instead, disagreement is softened through institutional language: “my party,” “my parliamentary party,” and “that question.” The phrase “with good grace” constructs resignation as dignified, controlled, and respectful. Through this wording, Starmer turns a moment of political vulnerability into an act of democratic responsibility.

Modality is also important in the resignation speech. Starmer repeatedly uses “will”: “I will resign,” “I will ask the National Executive Committee,” “I will remain in post,” “I will do everything I can,” and “I will also give my successor my full and unequivocal support.” The modal verb “will” expresses certainty and control. Even though the speech announces departure, the repeated use of “will” gives the impression of order, planning, and institutional stability. Starmer does not present resignation as chaos; he presents it as a managed transition.

The phrase “orderly handover of power” is especially significant. It belongs to the language of constitutional stability and democratic procedure. By promising to remain prime minister until the contest is complete, Starmer constructs himself as a responsible caretaker of state power rather than a defeated political figure. The language here shifts from emotional reflection to institutional management. This shift helps reassure audiences that the resignation will not produce disorder.

Starmer also uses the future-oriented phrase “my successor” repeatedly to normalize the transition. He promises “full and unequivocal support” and states that the successor will inherit “a Britain that is far stronger and fairer than the one I inherited two years ago.” This sentence links the beginning and end of his leadership. The verb “inherited” appears again, but its meaning changes. Earlier, he inherited a damaged party; now, his successor inherits a “stronger and fairer” country. This contrast allows Starmer to close the leadership narrative positively: he entered during crisis and leaves behind improvement.

The final part of the speech shifts from political discourse to personal discourse. Starmer thanks colleagues, Number 10 staff, the civil service, his wife, and his children. He says that after leaving “the biggest job in the country,” he will spend more time on “the most important job,” namely “being the best husband” and “being the best dad.” The contrast between “biggest” and “most important” reorders values: political office is large, but family is morally greater. This humanizes Starmer and softens the ending of the speech. The repeated structure “being the best” constructs identity beyond politics and presents him as a husband and father rather than only a party leader.

4.2. Discursive Practice

From the perspective of Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model, discursive practice concerns the processes through which texts are produced, distributed, and interpreted within particular institutional and social contexts. Analysis at the level of

discursive practice investigates how discourse is shaped by existing conventions, intertextual relations, communicative purposes, and audience expectations. Starmer's resignation speech is therefore not viewed simply as an isolated political statement but as a carefully produced institutional discourse that responds to a specific political crisis while simultaneously managing multiple audiences and constructing a preferred interpretation of his departure from office.

The production of the speech is inseparable from the political circumstances surrounding Starmer's resignation. Rather than emerging from an electoral defeat, the speech was delivered after Starmer acknowledged that he no longer possessed the confidence of his parliamentary party. This institutional context fundamentally shapes the organization of the discourse. Instead of defending his leadership or contesting the party's decision, Starmer structures the speech around acceptance, continuity, and constitutional responsibility. The political situation requires him to satisfy two competing communicative objectives. On the one hand, he must publicly acknowledge the loss of political authority; on the other, he must preserve both his personal reputation and the institutional legitimacy of the Labour government. These competing objectives explain why the speech devotes considerably more attention to governmental achievements and the future of the Labour Party than to the political disagreements that ultimately resulted in his resignation.

This selective representation demonstrates that political speeches are never neutral accounts of events but carefully designed interpretations of political reality. Fairclough (1992) argues that discursive practice involves choices about what should be included, excluded, foregrounded, and backgrounded during the production of discourse. Starmer's speech illustrates this process clearly. Although the resignation was prompted by political circumstances within his own party, there is almost no discussion of internal conflict. Individuals responsible for challenging his leadership remain unnamed, disagreements are not described, and no attempt is made to attribute blame. Instead, political disagreement is condensed into a single institutional statement: "The question my party is asking now is whether I am best placed to lead us into the next general election. I have heard the answer of my parliamentary party to that question. And I accept that answer with good grace."

The production of this passage reflects an important communicative decision. By transforming what may have been intense political disagreement into the abstract expression "the answer," Starmer removes conflict from the foreground of the discourse. The resignation is therefore represented not as the consequence of political struggle but as the natural outcome of democratic consultation. This process of backgrounding institutional conflict helps preserve party unity precisely when division could undermine public confidence. Rather than constructing competing political factions, the speech reconstructs disagreement as a legitimate feature of democratic decision-making.

The institutional character of the speech is further reflected in its emphasis on constitutional procedure. After announcing his resignation, Starmer immediately explains the formal process through which leadership transition will occur: "I will ask the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party to set out a timetable with nominations opening on the 9th of July and completed by the summer recess... I will remain in post as prime minister until the contest is complete. And I will do everything I can to ensure an orderly handover of power."

From the perspective of discursive practice, these details serve a communicative function beyond simply informing the public. They demonstrate that the production of the speech is shaped by institutional conventions governing political resignation. Instead of ending with the announcement itself, the discourse immediately shifts toward procedure, administration, and continuity. This reflects the conventions of democratic political communication, where resignation speeches are expected not only to explain departure but also to reassure audiences that constitutional processes remain stable. Consequently, the speech participates in reproducing confidence in democratic institutions by presenting leadership transition as an orderly administrative process rather than a constitutional crisis.

Fairclough (1992) also emphasizes that texts are produced with particular audiences in mind. Political speeches rarely address a single audience; instead, they anticipate multiple listeners who interpret the same discourse from different social positions. Starmer's resignation speech clearly reflects this principle. Although delivered as a public address, it simultaneously targets several overlapping audiences, each requiring different forms of persuasion.

The first audience consists of Labour Party members and parliamentarians. Throughout the speech, Starmer repeatedly reinforces the legitimacy of the party as an institution rather than emphasizing his own political future. Statements such as "we changed our party," "look at what we've achieved," and "the Labour Party secures a second term in office" consistently shift attention away from individual leadership toward collective institutional success. This suggests that one objective of the speech is to minimize internal instability by encouraging party members to distinguish between the resignation of one leader and the continuing legitimacy of the party itself. In this respect, the discourse functions as an act of institutional maintenance.

A second audience is the British public. This audience receives a different version of the discourse. Rather than focusing upon internal Labour politics, Starmer foregrounds achievements that directly affect citizens, including economic growth, rising wages, reduced NHS waiting lists, workers' rights, defence spending, child poverty, and Britain's international reputation. The careful selection of these topics demonstrates that the speech anticipates public evaluation. Citizens are encouraged to assess Starmer's premiership through measurable governmental outcomes rather than through the political

circumstances of his resignation. Consequently, the production of the speech is shaped by an awareness that the wider electorate may remember leadership less for internal party dynamics than for policy achievements.

The speech also anticipates media interpretation. Modern political speeches are rarely consumed directly by all citizens; instead, they are redistributed through television broadcasts, newspapers, digital media platforms, and social media commentary. Fairclough (1992) argues that political texts often undergo transformation as they move across different institutional contexts. Producers therefore construct speeches with awareness that journalists will extract particular quotations and organize news coverage around selected statements. Starmer's address contains several concise, self-contained formulations that appear designed for this process of media redistribution. Expressions such as "Change promised by a Labour government. Change fought for by a Labour government. Change delivered by a Labour government," "I accept that answer with good grace," and "I will do everything I can to ensure an orderly handover of power" are rhetorically complete units that can easily function as newspaper headlines or broadcast soundbites. Their balanced structure and memorable phrasing increase the likelihood that media organizations will reproduce these statements, thereby influencing how the resignation is interpreted by audiences who encounter the speech indirectly rather than in its entirety.

Intertextuality represents another central dimension of discursive practice. Fairclough (1992) argues that every text is connected to previous texts and existing discourses, drawing upon established ways of speaking in order to create meaning. Although Starmer rarely quotes other political figures directly, his speech is deeply intertextual because it incorporates several established political discourses simultaneously.

One important intertextual relationship is with the discourse of democratic accountability. Rather than resisting the parliamentary party's decision, Starmer repeatedly constructs resignation as respect for democratic procedures. His declaration that he has "heard the answer" and "accept[s] that answer with good grace" echoes the broader democratic convention that political authority depends upon continued institutional confidence rather than personal entitlement. By drawing upon this discourse, Starmer situates his resignation within the traditions of British parliamentary democracy, where leaders are expected to relinquish authority when political support is withdrawn.

The speech also incorporates the discourse of public service. Early in the address, Starmer explains that improving people's lives was "what I came into politics for," while later he thanks "our country's extraordinary civil service, who dedicate their lives to public service." These statements connect the resignation speech with a long-established political discourse that defines leadership as service rather than personal ambition. This intertextual

relationship reinforces the legitimacy of resignation because leaving office becomes another expression of public duty rather than an admission of political failure.

Another significant aspect of Starmer's resignation speech is its adherence to the established genre conventions of political resignation speeches. Fairclough (1992) argues that texts are produced within existing orders of discourse, meaning that speakers draw upon familiar communicative conventions that audiences already recognize. Starmer's speech follows many of these conventions while simultaneously adapting them to protect both his own political legacy and the future of the Labour Party. Like many resignation speeches, it contains four recognizable stages: reflection on past achievements, acknowledgement of the circumstances leading to resignation, reassurance regarding institutional continuity, and expressions of gratitude. However, the relative emphasis given to each stage reveals important discursive choices. Rather than centring the speech on the reasons for his departure, Starmer devotes considerably more attention to reviewing governmental achievements and outlining the future transition. This generic structure directs the audience's attention away from political conflict and toward institutional continuity, encouraging resignation to be interpreted as the closing chapter of a successful administration rather than the consequence of political failure.

The discourse also demonstrates what Fairclough (1992) describes as the relationship between production and consumption. Political speeches are produced with an awareness that audiences rarely consume them in identical ways. Some citizens listen to the complete address, others encounter only selected extracts through television news, newspapers, online platforms, or social media, while still others receive interpretations mediated by journalists and political commentators. Consequently, political leaders anticipate these different modes of consumption during the production process. Starmer's speech illustrates this clearly through its organization into concise thematic units. Rather than developing long argumentative passages, the speech frequently employs short, self-contained statements that can easily circulate independently of the full speech. Statements such as "Every decision I've taken has been about putting the country I love first," "I accept that answer with good grace," and "I will do everything I can to ensure an orderly handover of power" possess rhetorical completeness that allows them to retain meaning even when detached from their original context. Their structure anticipates the realities of contemporary political communication, where speeches are often fragmented into brief quotations and redistributed across multiple media platforms.

This anticipation of media circulation also influences the balance between explanation and symbolism throughout the speech. Starmer rarely provides detailed policy explanations or lengthy justifications for governmental decisions. Instead, he repeatedly employs symbolic formulations that summarize broader political narratives. For example, the statement that Labour was "ripping out the poison of antisemitism" compresses years

of internal party reform into a single memorable metaphor, while the declaration that Britain is "once again standing up for decency, respect and the rule of law" summarizes an entire foreign policy orientation through three highly evaluative nouns. Such formulations are particularly effective in mediated political discourse because they can be reproduced repeatedly across news reports without losing their rhetorical force. In this way, the speech demonstrates an awareness that contemporary political communication increasingly depends upon memorable formulations capable of circulating beyond the original communicative event.

An equally important dimension of the speech is its management of interpretation. Fairclough (1992) emphasizes that interpretation is never a passive process; audiences actively construct meaning by drawing upon their existing knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. Political speakers therefore attempt to guide interpretation by providing audiences with preferred ways of understanding political events. Throughout the resignation speech, Starmer consistently narrows the range of possible interpretations available to listeners. Rather than allowing resignation to be interpreted as evidence of governmental collapse, he repeatedly frames it as the natural outcome of democratic accountability. The audience is encouraged to interpret his departure not through the language of crisis but through the language of constitutional responsibility, institutional respect, and political maturity.

This process is particularly visible in the way Starmer constructs causal relationships. Instead of suggesting that he is resigning because of political conflict or personal failure, he explicitly links resignation to democratic principles: "The question my party is asking now is whether I am best placed to lead us into the next general election... I have heard the answer... And I accept that answer with good grace."

Here, resignation becomes the logical consequence of democratic consultation rather than the product of political confrontation. By carefully selecting this explanatory framework, Starmer shapes the interpretive resources available to audiences. Listeners are encouraged to understand resignation as evidence of democratic accountability rather than institutional instability.

The speech also demonstrates a strong orientation toward future interpretation rather than simply present communication. Many political speeches are retrospective, focusing primarily on explaining previous events. Starmer's address certainly reflects upon the past, yet its dominant orientation is prospective. After announcing his resignation, the discourse repeatedly turns toward the future through references to leadership succession, continued governmental stability, and Labour's prospects at the next general election. Statements such as "I will remain in post," "I will do everything I can," "I will also give my successor my full and unequivocal support," and "they will inherit a Britain that is far stronger and fairer" repeatedly direct the audience's attention toward what will happen

after his departure. This future orientation performs an important discursive function because it reduces uncertainty surrounding political transition. Rather than encouraging speculation about instability, the speech constructs an image of continuity in which governmental institutions remain stronger than individual leaders.

Furthermore, the discourse carefully manages the relationship between individual agency and institutional authority. Throughout the speech, Starmer presents himself as the speaker, yet institutional actors consistently occupy prominent positions within the narrative. The Labour Party, Parliament, the National Executive Committee, His Majesty the King, the civil service, and the British public all appear as legitimate participants within the political process. This distribution of institutional voices prevents the speech from becoming excessively personalized. Although Starmer recounts his own political journey, resignation is ultimately represented as occurring within constitutional institutions rather than through individual preference alone. This institutional framing strengthens public confidence in democratic governance by emphasizing that leadership change occurs through established procedures rather than personal conflict.

The speech also reveals the relationship between political discourse and legitimacy. Fairclough (1992) argues that discourse contributes to the reproduction of institutional authority by presenting existing practices as natural, appropriate, and legitimate. Starmer's resignation speech performs precisely this function. Leadership transition is represented as orderly, parliamentary consultation as authoritative, and party democracy as the proper mechanism for determining political leadership. These representations reinforce confidence not only in Labour as a political party but also in the wider democratic institutions of the United Kingdom. Consequently, the speech functions simultaneously as an explanation of resignation and as a reaffirmation of constitutional governance.

4.3. Social Practice

The social practice dimension of Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model examines how discourse is embedded within wider social, political, institutional, and ideological structures. At this level, Starmer's resignation speech is not interpreted merely as an individual explanation for leaving office but as a socially situated political discourse that seeks to preserve democratic legitimacy, reinforce institutional stability, and shape public understanding of political leadership. Rather than challenging existing political structures, the speech repeatedly reproduces the values and practices that underpin British parliamentary democracy. Throughout the address, resignation is represented not as a personal or political collapse but as a legitimate constitutional process through which democratic institutions continue to function effectively.

One of the most significant ideological functions of the speech is the construction of democratic accountability as the defining principle of political leadership. Starmer

repeatedly emphasizes that political authority depends upon the confidence of democratic institutions rather than personal ambition. This becomes particularly evident when he states, “The question my party is asking now is whether I am best placed to lead us into the next general election. I have heard the answer of my parliamentary party to that question. And I accept that answer with good grace.” Instead of questioning the legitimacy of the parliamentary party or portraying himself as the victim of political manoeuvring, Starmer presents resignation as the natural consequence of democratic consultation. At the level of social practice, this discourse reinforces the ideological assumption that leadership is conditional upon institutional confidence rather than individual entitlement. Resignation therefore becomes an affirmation of democratic values rather than evidence of political instability. By accepting the decision “with good grace,” Starmer constructs obedience to democratic procedures as an essential characteristic of responsible political leadership.

The speech also reproduces the ideology of institutional continuity, presenting political institutions as more important than individual leaders. Throughout the address, Starmer consistently minimizes his personal departure while emphasizing the continuing stability of government. This becomes particularly clear when he announces, “I will remain in post as prime minister until the contest is complete. And I will do everything I can to ensure an orderly handover of power.” The expression “orderly handover of power” belongs to the discourse of constitutional governance and administrative continuity rather than personal politics. Instead of portraying resignation as a moment of uncertainty, the speech frames leadership transition as a normal institutional process governed by established democratic procedures. At the level of social practice, this representation contributes to maintaining public confidence in political institutions by suggesting that governments remain stable regardless of changes in individual leadership. The authority of Parliament, the Labour Party, and the office of Prime Minister is therefore presented as enduring beyond the individual occupying the position.

Closely related to institutional continuity is the speech's construction of political legitimacy through public service rather than political power. Throughout the address, Starmer repeatedly distances himself from the pursuit of office for personal benefit. Early in the speech, he explains that the opportunity “to change the lives of millions of people for the better” was “what I came into politics for,” while later he insists that Labour pursued “Not power for power’s sake but to change Britain for the better.” At the level of social practice, these statements reproduce a widely accepted democratic ideology in which legitimate political authority derives from serving the public interest rather than exercising power for its own sake. Leadership is therefore represented as a moral responsibility rather than a personal privilege. By repeatedly defining politics in terms of service, improvement, and national benefit, the speech legitimizes both Starmer’s

leadership and his resignation within the broader democratic expectation that political leaders should prioritize the country above themselves.

Another important social practice reproduced throughout the speech is the construction of national unity over partisan conflict. Although the speech is delivered by the leader of the Labour Party, many of its central themes extend beyond party politics. References to “our country's history,” “our national flag,” “our reputation in the world,” “our values,” and “our allies in Europe” consistently shift attention from Labour as a political organization to Britain as a national community. At the broader social level, this discourse constructs political leadership as a national rather than partisan responsibility. Starmer's repeated use of inclusive language encourages audiences to understand governmental achievements as collective national achievements rather than exclusively Labour successes. This ideological positioning reduces political polarization by presenting the government's actions as serving the interests of the nation as a whole. Consequently, resignation is framed not as the failure of one political party but as a transition occurring within a stable national democracy.

The speech further reproduces the ideology that effective leadership is measured by delivery rather than rhetoric. Starmer repeatedly constructs his premiership through references to concrete achievements, including economic growth, increased wages, reduced NHS waiting lists, defence spending, workers' rights, and child poverty reduction. This emphasis reaches its rhetorical climax in the sequence: “Change promised by a Labour government. Change fought for by a Labour government, change delivered by a Labour government.” At the level of social practice, this discourse reinforces contemporary democratic expectations that governments derive legitimacy from measurable outcomes rather than ideological commitments alone. The repetition of “change” constructs political success as the successful implementation of promises rather than their mere articulation. In doing so, the speech reproduces a broader political culture in which governmental legitimacy is increasingly evaluated through performance, efficiency, and policy delivery.

The discourse also constructs leadership as temporary while institutions remain permanent. Rather than emphasizing personal political legacy, Starmer repeatedly focuses upon his successor and the future of the Labour Party. He promises to give his successor “my full and unequivocal support” and expresses confidence that they will inherit “a Britain that is far stronger and fairer than the one I inherited two years ago.” This future-oriented discourse positions leadership as part of an ongoing democratic process rather than the achievement of an individual politician. At the level of social practice, such representations reinforce the legitimacy of democratic succession by normalizing the transfer of authority between leaders. Political continuity is therefore located within

institutions rather than personalities, strengthening public confidence in the resilience of parliamentary democracy.

The final section of the speech also reflects broader social values concerning the relationship between public and private identities. After discussing governmental achievements and constitutional procedures, Starmer concludes by thanking colleagues, civil servants, his wife, and his children before stating that he will leave “the biggest job in the country” to focus on “the most important job,” namely “being the best husband” and “being the best dad.” At the level of social practice, this shift reflects wider cultural expectations that political leaders should remain relatable individuals whose commitment to family and personal responsibility extends beyond public office. Rather than constructing political identity as permanent, the speech restores Starmer's identity as an ordinary citizen whose family responsibilities ultimately outweigh political authority. This representation humanizes leadership while reinforcing the democratic principle that public office is a temporary form of service rather than a defining personal identity.

Finally, the speech contributes to the reproduction of constitutional legitimacy by consistently representing British democratic institutions as stable, authoritative, and trustworthy. Throughout the discourse, Parliament, the Labour Party, the National Executive Committee, the monarchy, the civil service, and the office of Prime Minister are presented as legitimate institutions that collectively regulate political transition. Even at the moment of resignation, Starmer avoids language associated with crisis, conflict, or institutional failure. Instead, the speech repeatedly emphasizes consultation, procedure, continuity, and responsibility. At the level of social practice, these representations reinforce public confidence in the constitutional order by portraying leadership transition as evidence of democratic strength rather than political weakness. Consequently, the resignation speech functions not only as a personal farewell but also as a discourse that reproduces the ideological foundations of British parliamentary democracy, where legitimacy is grounded in democratic accountability, institutional continuity, public service, national unity, and respect for constitutional procedures. Through these representations, Starmer's resignation is discursively transformed from the departure of an individual leader into a reaffirmation of the enduring authority of democratic institutions.

5. Discussion

This research examined Keir Starmer's resignation speech through Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate how discourse constructs political leadership, accountability, legitimacy, and institutional continuity during democratic transition. The findings demonstrate that Starmer strategically employs linguistic choices, institutional discourses, and broader ideological representations to frame his resignation not as political failure but as a responsible and democratic transfer of leadership. Across the textual, discursive, and social dimensions,

the speech consistently reinforces accountability, public service, constitutional continuity, and confidence in democratic institutions. These findings support Fairclough's (1992, 2003) argument that discourse is both socially shaped and socially shaping, functioning as a form of social practice through which political realities and institutional legitimacy are constructed and reproduced. They also align with Chilton's (2004) view that political language is inherently strategic and with Wodak and Meyer (2009), who argue that political discourse contributes to the construction of power, legitimacy, and social identities. This emphasis on the strategic function of language is also consistent with Zubair et al. (2025), who demonstrate that speakers employ linguistic choices as purposeful communicative resources to achieve social objectives, albeit in a different sociolinguistic context.

The findings further support previous studies demonstrating that political speeches strategically construct leadership and legitimacy through discourse. Consistent with Siregar (2021), the textual analysis shows that lexical choices, pronouns, modality, repetition, and evaluative language function persuasively to promote particular political meanings. Likewise, the findings correspond with Kadim (2022), who argues that political leaders employ discourse strategically to shape audience perceptions and legitimize political authority. The findings also support the research of Ali et al. (2025), Aqdas et al. (2025), and Ali et al. (2026), which demonstrates that contemporary political speeches construct leadership, collective identity, and democratic legitimacy through carefully selected linguistic and ideological strategies. The findings also align with Ahtisham et al. (2026), who examined Keir Starmer's resignation speech through Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Theory. However, unlike previous studies that primarily examined campaign, victory, and inaugural speeches, this research extends Critical Discourse Analysis to the relatively underexplored genre of political resignation speeches. By integrating Fairclough's (1992) textual, discursive, and social dimensions, the research demonstrates that resignation speeches function not merely as announcements of political departure but as strategic discourses through which leaders negotiate accountability, preserve institutional legitimacy, and reinforce democratic continuity during periods of political transition.

6. Conclusion

This research examined Keir Starmer's resignation speech through Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis to explore how discourse constructs political leadership, accountability, legitimacy, and institutional continuity during democratic transition. The findings reveal that the speech strategically employs linguistic choices, discursive practices, and broader ideological representations to frame resignation not as political failure but as an expression of democratic responsibility and constitutional governance. At the textual level, lexical choices, pronouns, modality,

repetition, and rhetorical devices construct a positive leadership identity and legitimize political transition. At the level of discursive practice, the speech reflects institutional conventions, intertextuality, and audience-oriented communication that guide public interpretation of resignation. At the level of social practice, the discourse reproduces broader democratic values by reinforcing accountability, public service, national unity, and confidence in British parliamentary institutions.

By applying Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model to a political resignation speech, this research extends Critical Discourse Analysis to a relatively underexplored genre of political discourse. It demonstrates that resignation speeches function not merely as announcements of departure but as strategic political discourses through which leaders preserve institutional legitimacy, negotiate political accountability, and reinforce democratic continuity. The research contributes to the growing body of research on political discourse by providing a comprehensive understanding of how language operates across textual, discursive, and social dimensions to shape public perceptions of leadership during periods of political transition.

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