



## Raciolinguistic Constraints and the Discursive Negotiation of Identity: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Political Discourse

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### ABSTRACT

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This study re-examines Barack Obama's 2008 speech *A More Perfect Union* through the lens of critical discourse analysis (CDA) in conjunction with the framework of raciolinguistics. In particular, by integrating the concept of the White Speaking and Listening Subject, the study moves beyond traditional rhetorical analysis to demonstrate how language constructs social identities and negotiates ideological tensions surrounding race and nationhood. By examining key discursive strategies such as pronoun usage, metaphor, modality, and intertextuality, the analysis reveals how Obama navigates competing narratives of division and unity. The findings illustrate the performative role of language in political discourse as a site of identity construction and power negotiation. The study also discusses broader sociolinguistic and pedagogical implications, emphasizing the importance of critical language awareness in fostering democratic participation and social justice. Suggestions for future research include cross-cultural comparisons, multimodal analysis, and audience reception studies.

### KEYWORDS

critical discourse analysis, raciolinguistic ideologies, identity negotiation, discursive strategies, White Listening Subject

## 1. Introduction

Language is a powerful tool for shaping social reality, constructing identities, and exercising ideological influence (Fairclough 1992). Political discourse, in particular, serves as a crucial arena where competing visions of nationhood, community, and power are articulated and contested (Blommaert 2005, van Dijk 2005).

Barack Obama's 2008 speech, *A More Perfect Union*, stands as a landmark in American political discourse (Boyd 2009, Catalano 2011). Delivered amid the racial controversy sparked by remarks from his former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the speech transcended its immediate political context to engage in a broader national reflection on race, history, and unity (Terrill 2009, Wang 2010). Confronting issues of race and inequality, Obama attempts to navigate deep social divisions while articulating a vision of inclusive national identity, using language as an instrument of reconciliation and moral reflection (Anderson 2016). His discourse merged personal narrative, historical consciousness, and civic idealism, transforming a moment of potential political crisis into an act of national introspection (Duranti 2006). The speech served not only to address immediate political damage but also to engage deeply with the historical and ideological complexities of race in the United States (Catalano 2011). The speech's lasting influence stems not only from its eloquence but from its ability to reframe the discourse of race within a shared moral vocabulary (Goffman 1981).

While Obama's 2008 speech has been extensively studied within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (e.g., Boyd 2009, Catalano 2011, Terrill 2009, Wang 2010), much of this research has focused on rhetorical strategies and ideological positioning within political discourse, without sufficiently attending to the raciolinguistic conditions under which racialized speakers' linguistic performances are evaluated, authorized, and constrained (Alim and Smitherman 2012, Flores and Rosa 2015). Obama's linguistic choices such as his strategic use of pronouns, modality, metaphors, and intertextual references are not merely stylistic but ideological, shaping perceptions of unity, citizenship, and national belonging (De Fina 1995, Escudero 2011). This study, therefore, re-examines Obama's speech through the lens of CDA in conjunction with the framework of raciolinguistics (Alim, Rickford and Ball 2016). In particular, by integrating the concept of the White Speaking and Listening Subject (Flores and Rosa 2015; Inoue 2006), the study moves beyond traditional rhetorical analysis to demonstrate how Obama's linguistic choices function as a strategic performance for survival and recognition within a white-dominated political sphere. This perspective foregrounds not only what Obama says, but the racialized conditions under which his speech must be rendered legitimate, intelligible, and authoritative.

This study thus seeks to uncover how linguistic form interacts with ideological content to construct identity, power, and social cohesion. It situates Obama's rhetoric within the broader frameworks of discourse theory (Fairclough 1992, 2003, van Dijk 1993, Wodak and Meyer 2009), exploring how language operates as both a reflection and a transformation of social relations. By analyzing the interplay of language, power, and ideology, the study aims to contribute to sociolinguistic understanding of political discourse and its broader societal implications.

## 2. Conceptualization of Critical Discourse Analysis in Political Discourse

### 2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis, Language, and Power

This study is grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the intricate relationship between discourse, power, and ideology. CDA is not a single theory, but a shared critical perspective concerned with the

ideological effects of language use (Fairclough 1995, van Dijk 1993, Wodak and Meyer 2009). The underlying premise is that discourse is a form of social practice through which ideology and power relations are both maintained and contested (Fairclough 1992, 2003). Discourse constitutes and is constituted by social structures (Fairclough 1992); it is a dynamic site of struggle where meanings are negotiated and redefined. CDA thus seeks not merely to describe linguistic features but to interpret and explain their social and ideological implications (Blommaert 2005, Fairclough 2003).

Discourse also shapes cognitive schemas that inform perception and action. van Dijk's (1993, 2005) socio-cognitive approach to discourse emphasizes the role of mental models, shared representations of social reality in sustaining ideological structures. In this framework, political speeches serve as acts of ideological reproduction or transformation, influencing how audiences conceptualize social categories such as race, nation, and morality (van Dijk 2005). Through discourse, as van Dijk (1993) argues, elites maintain dominance by controlling public knowledge, access to communication, and the reproduction of ideologies. CDA thus situates discourse within its broader socio-political history, tracing how recurring themes are recontextualized over time (Reisigl and Wodak 2001). Through exploring the historical embedding and intertextual chains, it seeks to shed light on how discourses and narratives are (re)produced and transformed across different contexts and genres (Bakhtin 1981, Wodak and Fairclough 2010). This perspective is particularly relevant to Obama's *A More Perfect Union*, which strategically recontextualizes historical references, from the Constitution to the civil rights movement, to legitimize its argument and evoke continuity between past struggles and present aspirations.

CDA is often utilized to investigate the intricate ideological workings of political discourse (Fairclough 1992, 1995). Its concern with power, ideology, and social justice renders it particularly suitable for examining the political rhetoric, like *A More Perfect Union*, where personal narrative and national history intersect (Duranti 2006). Political discourse functions as a crucial arena where competing ideologies of nationhood, community, and power are articulated and contested (Chilton 2004, Dunmire 2005). Previous research on political speeches has highlighted the role of rhetorical strategies such as pronoun use, metaphor, modality, and intertextuality in constructing inclusive or exclusive social categories (De Fina 1995, Escudero 2011).

The current study applies those keen insights emerging from critical discourse studies to reveal the discursive strategies and ideological workings embedded in Obama's speech. The focus of the analysis is on how linguistic choices contribute to the moral architecture of his political rhetoric. This study particularly draws on Fairclough's (2003) three-tiered analytical framework of discourse, which situates discourse at three interconnected levels: at the textual level, it concerns the formal properties of language; at the discursive level, it investigates processes of (re)production, distribution, and consumption; and at the macro-social level, it engages with the broader institutional and ideological contexts in which discourses operate. By connecting micro-level linguistic observations to macro-level social dynamics, this framework enables a nuanced examination of how discourse functions ideologically: the ways power and ideology are expressed through language (Fairclough 2003).

## 2.2 Raciolinguistic Ideology: Unsettling Race and Language

Obama's speeches have attracted extensive scholarly attention across rhetoric, communication, and linguistics. Boyd (2009) explores how Obama discursively constructs a collective American identity by recontextualizing racial issues within the broader historical narrative of American democracy. By invoking Du Bois's (1903/1994) notion of "double consciousness" experienced by African-Americans living in a white-dominated society, Terrill (2009) highlights Obama's rhetorical negotiation of an in-between identity vis-a-vis his Black and white audiences. Other scholars have also examined how Obama strategically mobilizes rhetorical and linguistic resources such as

metaphor, modality, and transitivity in engaging with ideological stances and power relations (e.g., Catalano 2011, Wang 2010). Drawing on a pragmatic analysis of the speech acts of promising, Rakaj's (2022) findings suggest that Obama tends to foreground promise and commitment over confrontation.

The enduring power of *A More Perfect Union* lies in its complex negotiation of ideology and identity (Anderson 2016, Boyd 2009). Obama speaks as both insider and outsider, an African American and a biracial man, operating under double consciousness (Du Bois 1903/1994), while simultaneously embodying Americanism (Ricento 2003). His speech exemplifies the dialectical relationship between discourse and society in which language is constitutive of social order (Fairclough 1992, 2003).

To develop a more nuanced account of the racialized dynamics embedded within Obama's rhetoric, this study also draws on the framework of raciolinguistic ideology. Raciolinguistics directly links the study of language ideologies to processes of racialization, thereby unsettling the pervasive assumption that race and language are separate phenomena. From this critical perspective, beliefs about language are deeply intertwined with racial categories, and this intersectionality of language and race is aptly encapsulated in the concept of "racing language and languaging race" (Alim, Rickford and Ball 2016).

The insidious nature of raciolinguistic ideology lies in its ability to create racialized speaking subjects who are perceived as linguistically deficient or deviant, even when their linguistic practices conform to the so-called standard (Flores and Rosa 2015; Inoue 2006). This demonstrates that the perceived deficiency is fundamentally racial rather than linguistic. Raciolinguistics critiques the idea that standardized linguistic practices, such as Standard English, are objective or neutral forms of communication. Instead, it posits that the perceived high value of these practices is an ideological construct entrenched in White Language Supremacy (Rosa and Flores 2017). This ideology is embodied by the figure of the White Speaking and Listening Subject (Flores and Rosa 2015; Inoue 2006), which serves as an ideological position that perpetually defines and polices the boundaries of linguistic appropriateness. Consequently, it upholds monoglossic language ideologies (Alim and Smitherman 2012).

From a raciolinguistic perspective, Obama's speech must be understood as a high-stakes linguistic performance constrained by the expectations of the White Speaking and Listening Subject (Flores and Rosa 2015, Inoue 2006). His consistent adherence to standardized, rhetorically polished English is not merely stylistic but functions as a necessary strategy of preemptive legitimation within a racialized listening economy (Alim and Smitherman 2012, Bourdieu 1991). This performance anticipates racially biased evaluations that equate linguistic authority with whiteness, revealing how Obama's discourse simultaneously complies with and exposes raciolinguistic norms (Alim, Rickford and Ball 2016). In this sense, his linguistic choices illuminate dimensions of political constraint that CDA alone does not fully capture, demonstrating how racialized listening practices shape what counts as credible political speech (Fairclough 2003, Rosa and Flores 2017, van Dijk 1993). Drawing on a raciolinguistic framework, the current study thus shifts the focus from a broad ideological critique to a specific analysis of how language is utilized to construct perceptions of racialized competence. In doing so, it seeks to provide a more nuanced account of the high-stakes linguistic performance expected of Obama.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs the analytical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how linguistic, rhetorical, and intertextual components of *A More Perfect Union* (re)create social meanings and ideological impacts. The data for this study is the official transcript of the speech delivered by Barack Obama on March 18,

2008, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, during his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. Philadelphia is a city symbolically associated with the signing of the U.S. Constitution. Thus, the setting of the speech constitutes a crucial contextual component of the political discourse.

Each discursive feature was examined according to Fairclough's (2003) three dimensions of discourse: the textual (linguistic form and meaning), the discursive (production and reception), and the social (power and ideology). To analyze ideological polarization (Us vs. Them), cognitive frames, and the legitimization of social actors, van Dijk's (1993, 2005) socio-cognitive model was also used. Wodak and Meyer's (2009) discourse-historical perspective guides the contextualization of Obama's rhetoric within U.S. racial discourse and democratic ideology. The analysis thus integrates textual, cognitive, and socio-political dimensions of discourse.

Initially, the text was examined for salient linguistic features, such as pronoun usage, nominalization, transitivity patterns, modality, and metaphor, to identify how grammatical and lexical choices encode ideological positions (Fairclough 2003). The analysis then proceeded to consider discursive practices, including the speech's genre, intertextual references, and rhetorical structure, to explore how Obama's message draws on and recontextualizes existing cultural and political discourses (Fairclough 2003, Wodak and Fairclough 2010). Finally, the speech was situated within its broader socio-political context (Wodak and Meyer 2009), paying special attention to its engagement with historical narratives of race, citizenship, and the American Dream. In doing so, it underscores the potential of discourse analysis not only as a theoretical and analytical framework but as a praxis of cultivating critical awareness of the ideological workings of discourse (Blommaert 2005, Fairclough 2003).

To enhance analytical transparency, examples were selected based on three criteria: (a) salience within the speech's rhetorical structure, (b) recurrence or patterning across the text, and (c) ideological relevance to race, national identity, and legitimacy (Fairclough 2003, Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, Wodak and Meyer 2009). Analytical focus was maintained through iterative close readings that moved cyclically between linguistic form and socio-ideological interpretation (Morgan and Lica 2020, Wodak and Meyer 2009). Reflexively, the analysis recognizes the researcher's interpretive positioning within critical discourse studies; interpretations are therefore grounded in explicit textual evidence and established CDA and raciolinguistic frameworks rather than impressionistic evaluation (Alim, Rickford and Ball 2016, Fairclough 2003).

## 4. Findings

This section examines how Obama's speech uses specific linguistic and rhetorical strategies to negotiate the complexities of race, power, and unity. The findings reveal the discursive mechanisms through which political language shapes social consciousness.

Obama's *A More Perfect Union* demonstrates how discourse operates simultaneously at three levels of CDA. At the textual level, Obama's lexical and grammatical choices (e.g., nominalization, modality, and pronouns) work to reconcile critique and solidarity. The grammar of inclusion (e.g., "we") and abstraction (e.g., "anger," "resentment") transforms conflict into reconciliation. At the discursive level, his intertextual allusions to the Constitution and the Bible create ideological continuity and moral legitimacy (Fairclough 2003, Wodak and Meyer 2009). Intertextual borrowing from the Constitution and the Bible frames Obama's political speech within recognizable moral dialogue (Bakhtin 1981). These recontextualizations (Fairclough 1992) and framing (Goffman 1981) create ideological continuity between past and present, legitimizing his moral authority.

At the social level, his discourse rearticulates American identity as plural, dynamic, and ethically grounded. The discourse challenges historical racial hierarchies by redefining American identity as plural, dynamic, and

reparative. Obama's speech thus becomes an instance of symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991), which reshapes perception and reality through language itself.

Through this multi-layered strategy, Obama's rhetoric exemplifies what van Dijk (1993) describes as elite counter-discourse: a form of political speech that operates within power structures yet seeks to transform their ideological underpinnings. In doing so, Obama performs the dual act of self-legitimation, which protects his political image, and social legitimation, which redefines the collective moral horizon (van Leeuwen 2007).

#### **4.1 Ideological Positioning: Pronoun Shifts and Identity Construction**

A salient feature of Obama's speech is his deliberate lexical selection, which contributes to the construction of a shared moral and national identity. Lexical repetition (e.g., "hope," "change," "unity") builds thematic cohesion while constructing ideological coherence. The use of repetition creates certain patterns, which signal and confirm the agreed meanings through the lexis (McCarthy, Matthiessen and Slade 2020). Given that the speech is a political discourse and considering Obama's background as an editor and Harvard professor, his use of repetition and relexicalization using some semantic relations (e.g., synonyms, antonyms) enriches the discursive effects produced through these rhetorical devices. For instance, throughout the speech, Obama consistently invokes lexemes associated with unity, progress, and responsibility, such as "we," "together," "common," "future," and "labor." This choice of inclusive language aligns with his ideological position that American identity transcends racial divisions and is grounded in collective effort and shared values (Anderson 2016, Dunmire 2005). Early in the speech, he draws a sharp contrast between "those who cling to anger" and "those who seek hope," which sets up a moral dichotomy that goes beyond simple racial binaries.

A brief frequency scan of personal pronouns in the speech reveals a marked predominance of inclusive forms. The pronoun 'we' occurs substantially more frequently than 'I' or 'they', underscoring the speech's collective orientation (Boyd 2009, De Fina 1995). While 'I' is primarily used in autobiographical and accountability contexts, 'they' appears sparingly and typically without fixed referents, suggesting a deliberate avoidance of rigid outgroup construction (Chilton 2004, van Dijk 2005). This distribution supports the qualitative observation that identity work in the speech is oriented toward inclusion rather than polarization, consistent with CDA accounts of ideological positioning through pronoun choice (Fairclough 2003, Wodak and Meyer 2009).

By alternating between 'I,' 'you,' and 'we,' Obama positions himself simultaneously as a personal witness, a representative voice, and a unifying leader. Obama's nuanced use of pronouns demonstrates his skill in constructing fluid identities that traverse traditional racial and political boundaries (Boyd 2009, Du Bois 1903/1994). The pronoun 'I' functions to assert his personal credibility and moral authority (Duranti 2006), especially when recounting his own experiences with racial ambiguity and complex heritage. Conversely, 'you' often appears in the speech as an address to the American public, which calls the audience to moral reflection and action. The strategic interplay of 'I,' 'you,' and 'we' weaves a narrative that situates Obama as both an individual and a collective symbol (Duranti 2006).

Further, the pronoun 'we' is employed not only inclusively but also rhetorically to draw boundaries (van Dijk 2005). Obama's frequent use of this pronoun serves a dual ideological function (Terrill 2009). On one level, it operates as a cohesive device that fosters solidarity between speaker and audience (De Fina 1995), inviting listeners to identify with a collective project of nation-building. The inclusive 'we' is redefined from the Founding Fathers' limited collective to an all-encompassing American populace. This linguistic expansion of 'we' democratizes belonging, symbolically rewriting the national narrative (Duranti 2006). On another level, it subtly shifts responsibility onto all Americans, framing the challenges of racial division as a common problem requiring joint

action (Maitland and Wilson 1987). It contrasts with ‘they,’ used sparingly but pointedly to mark out those clinging to divisive attitudes or resisting change. The third-person ‘they’ and indefinite ‘some’ mark ideological distancing from extremist or divisive groups, which is a typical ideological strategy of constructing moral ingroups and deviant outgroups through pronoun usage (van Dijk 2005). This rhetorical strategy aligns with the concept of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ polarization (Fairclough 2003, van Dijk 2005), but Obama’s speech complicates this binary by encouraging empathy and understanding even toward ‘them,’ framing societal tensions as shared challenges rather than insurmountable divisions. Obama’s fluid shifts between ‘I,’ ‘we,’ and ‘they’ reflect his effort to position himself as both participant and mediator in the racial discourse. While this rhetorical move embodies the ideological square of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (van Dijk 2005), ‘we’ is redefined here to include diverse racial and ethnic identities rather than excluding.

#### 4.2 Nominalization and the Obscuring of Agency

One of the most subtle yet powerful linguistic strategies in Obama’s speech is nominalization, the grammatical transformation of processes or actions into abstract nouns (Fairclough 2003). The use of nominalization transforms dynamic social struggles into abstract concepts (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014). Nominalization can obscure social agency, thereby depoliticizing or generalizing responsibility (Fairclough 2003). Obama uses this device to reframe racial conflict as a collective phenomenon rather than a product of individual wrongdoing.

Obama’s defense of Reverend Wright illustrates how linguistic structures can legitimize or delegitimize social actors (van Leeuwen 2007). Through nominalization and syntactic focusing, Obama condemns Wright’s ‘remarks’ rather than Wright himself. Sentences such as “I have already condemned, in unequivocal terms, the statements of Reverend Wright” place “statements” in the grammatical focus position, shifting responsibility from person to discourse (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014). Obama further mitigates conflict through concessive structures (e.g., “as imperfect as he may be”) that humanize Wright and universalize imperfection. These linguistic moves function as ideological repair mechanisms (Benoit 2018), transforming individual fault into shared human limitation, thereby preserving moral solidarity:

*“The anger is real; it is powerful.”*

*“As imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me. He strengthened my faith, officiated my wedding, and baptized my children.”*

Here, “anger” is nominalized, abstracting it from the people who feel it. Rather than ‘people are angry,’ which would assign agency and potential blame, Obama’s use of nominalization transforms the emotion into a social condition, something to be addressed rather than judged. Likewise, when he refers to “racial tensions,” “resentments,” or “the legacy of discrimination,” these nominalizations shift focus from perpetrators and victims toward the conditions that must be remedied collectively. Such abstract nominals (e.g., anger, resentment, the legacy of discrimination) depersonalize conflict and diffuse blame. Rather than attributing agency to individuals, these abstractions present racism and inequality as systemic conditions demanding collective action (Fairclough 1995). This grammatical choice instantiates ideological management (Fairclough 1995) and face-saving strategies in elite discourse (van Dijk 1993). By depersonalizing conflict, Obama reduces confrontation while maintaining a critical stance. This linguistic choice softens potential accusations and opens space for dialogue and reconciliation. Moreover, terms like “hope,” “dream,” and “promise” invoke iconic elements of American political mythology

(Ricento 2003). This abstraction enables ideological reframing, turning racial inequality from a matter of guilt or blame into a moral challenge requiring shared responsibility (Wodak et al. 2009).

#### 4.3 Historical Resonance: Intertextuality and Recontextualization of Foundational Texts

Intertextual references permeate the speech, situating it in a constant dialogue with a broader discourse of American political and racial history. Obama invokes the Preamble to the Constitution, the legacy of the civil rights movement, and figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. These references function as authoritative appeals (Reisigl and Wodak 2001) that legitimize his vision and situate his speech within a tradition of democratic struggle and moral progress.

Obama's opening line, "We the People, in order to form a more perfect union", directly references the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution. This allusion to the Constitution is particularly significant as it anchors Obama's moral argument in a shared symbolic framework. The timing and location have significance and are chosen deliberately. Philadelphia holds great historical significance as it is the place where the Constitution was written. The document was eventually signed, but it remained unfinished. The Constitution Center, which is located in Philadelphia, became a symbol of the unity of America despite its incompleteness and imperfection. This is why the speech was titled "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union."

Through the recontextualization that appropriates prior texts into new ideological frameworks (Bakhtin 1981, Wodak and Fairclough 2010), the speech transforms the static constitutional phrase into a living metaphor for racial reconciliation. America is here portrayed as an unfinished ongoing project in need of collective moral effort for "a perfect union". This intertextuality enables the audience to perceive racial reconciliation not merely as a political necessity but as a fulfillment of foundational American values (Ricento 2003).

Biblical allusion also reappears throughout the speech to lend moral legitimacy to his message:

*"Let us be our brother's keeper ... Let us be our sister's keeper, Scripture tells us."*

*"David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones."*

*"(referring to the pastor who) spoke to me about our obligations to love one another, to care for the sick and lift up the poor."*

This double intertextual grounding (i.e., the Constitution and the Scripture) allows Obama to merge civic and sacred authority, reinforcing positive self-presentation while appealing to a broad moral community (van Dijk 2005). The speech balances an honest reckoning with a forward-looking optimism (Dunmire 2005), thereby enacting the dialectic of remembrance and renewal (Wodak and Meyer 2009). This political rhetoric encourages a collective memory that includes pain but also embraces the possibility of healing (Benoit 2018).

#### 4.4 Ideological Reframing of Racial Identity and Discursive Strategies

Dominant discourses often conceal racism behind liberal values (Bonilla-Silva 2014, Reisigl and Wodak 2001, van Dijk 1993). From the perspective of footing (Goffman 1981), Obama, however, subverts the dominant discourse on race by explicitly addressing historical inequities while envisioning look-forwarding pluralism. Obama's discourse performs significant ideological work by reframing the narrative of race and identity in ways

that challenge entrenched dichotomies. Through metonymy, Obama's body becomes a symbolic microcosm of the nation: "My white grandmother," "my black pastor," "the son of a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya." This is ideological embodiment, the transformation of personal identity into a metaphor for national unity. His narrative performs discursive hybridity of the merging of multiple voices, genres, and identities (Bakhtin 1981, Duranti 2006). In essence, Obama represents racial reconciliation and serves as a symbol of its embodiment. In the portrayal of Obama, every aspect of him, from his name to his genetic makeup as the son of a White mother from Kansas and a Black father from Kenya, symbolizes American multiculturalism (Ricento 2003). His narrative positions him as both Black and white, individual and collective, local and global. This hybridity serves an ideological function, reframing racial identity not as opposition but as synthesis (Bakhtin 1981, Bucholtz and Hall 2005).

Key to this process is Obama's strategic use of modality, which conveys degrees of certainty and obligation (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014). Through deontic and dynamic modal verbs such as *must* and *can*, he articulates a moral imperative that transcends partisan divides and foregrounds shared responsibility, a pattern widely associated with ideological legitimation and moral authority in political discourse (Chilton 2004, Fairclough 2003, van Dijk 2005). The certainty expressed in these modalities strengthens the speaker's persuasive force and thus reinforces the urgency of unity (Catalano 2011, Wang 2010). Another salient discursive strategy Obama deploys is a form of elite discourse (van Dijk 1993, 2005) characterized by its effort to balance between competing narratives; he acknowledges grievances on all sides while eschewing frames of victimhood or antagonism (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, Wodak and Meyer 2009).

In sum, Obama discursively reframes racial division as a collective challenge rather than a personal grievance, thereby moving beyond traditional identity politics (Duranti 2006). By positioning himself as a mediator, Obama performs legitimacy through moral authority (Fairclough 2003), anchoring critique within an inclusive vision of change.

#### 4.5 The Ideological Square and the Moral Framing of 'Us' vs. 'Them'

Obama both employs and subverts the ideological square of positive 'we' and negative 'they' (van Dijk 2005). Rather than reproducing a stable 'us versus them' dichotomy, the speech selectively activates and reconfigures the square, emphasizing shared moral responsibility while minimizing fixed negative outgroup representation, a strategy consistent with mitigation and moral legitimation in political discourse (Chilton 2004, Fairclough 2003, Reisigl and Wodak 2001). van Dijk (1993, 2005) outlines how dominant discourse organizes meaning through a four-part structure: emphasize our good properties/actions; de-emphasize our bad properties/actions; emphasize their bad properties/actions; and de-emphasize their good properties/actions. For instance, the antonymic relations (e.g., division/unity, despair/hope, past/future) enact ideological square management, emphasizing positive attributes of the ingroup (unity, progress) and downplaying negatives (division, conflict). Obama reverses this logic by redefining 'us' not as a racial or partisan identity but as a moral community capable of self-renewal (Wodak and Meyer 2009). The ideological square is reconfigured as a moral circle, where inclusion replaces exclusion without diluting ethical responsibility. Obama's speech both uses and resists this ideological logic. On one hand, he follows the traditional rhetorical need to defend his 'ingroup' (the American public, his campaign, and his moral community). On the other hand, he subverts the binary logic of the square by redefining 'us' and 'them' in more fluid, inclusive terms. For instance, Obama says:

*"For we have a choice in this country. We can accept a politics that breeds division... or we can come together and say, 'Not this time.'"*

Here, “we” initially denotes the American public at large, while ‘they’ refers implicitly to divisive political actors. However, Obama immediately collapses this binary by appealing to shared agency: “we can come together.” The ideological square, traditionally polarizing, is thus strategically reversed. The ‘bad’ outgroup (those who divide) is not permanently excluded but invited into reform. His repeated invocation of “we” as in “We can come together,” “We can perfect our union”, collapses division into possibility. Rather than reinforcing ingroup superiority, Obama reframes moral discourse into the possibility of reconciliation (Goffman 1981), thereby transforming ideology into a means of inclusivity rather than dominance. This mitigated critique (Wodak and Meyer 2009) enables Obama to maintain his legitimacy with various audiences, including those he critiques implicitly.

#### 4.6 Metaphors: The Nation as a Moral Organism and the Construction of Hope

Obama’s rhetoric is permeated with metaphorical language that shapes the cognitive framing of race and nationhood. The title itself, *A More Perfect Union*, invokes a constitutional metaphor that connects contemporary racial struggles to the nation’s founding ideals. This metaphor powerfully frames that the United States is a work in progress, imperfect but capable of improvement through collective effort. The collocation of union with ‘perfect’ and ‘unfinished’ embodies the paradox of American democracy: aspirational yet incomplete.

The recurring imagery of the nation is a living organism which is capable of healing, growing, and perfecting itself. This organic metaphor frames social progress as both natural and necessary. This metaphorical system underpins his entire ideological project (Chilton and Ilyin 1993). The metaphor of the nation as an organism (Lakoff and Johnson 2005) conceptualizes social progress as biological or moral evolution:

*“We can perfect our union.”*

*“The union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected,”*

*“This nation can heal.”*

‘Healing’ implies both injury (i.e., acknowledgment of past injustice) and vitality (i.e., hope for recovery). By portraying unity as a process of healing, Obama naturalizes the process of social change: just as the body heals through care, the nation heals through empathy and collective effort.

Furthermore, Obama’s metaphors of motion, “to continue the long march,” “to carry forward,” portray racial progress as a historical journey rather than a completed event. This aligns with Fairclough’s (1995) view that metaphor serves as a key site for ideological reproduction. This also aligns with Obama’s campaign slogan of “Change” and “Yes We Can.” The temporal metaphor, America as a journey toward perfection, reinforces discourse as a vehicle for ideological renewal (Lakoff and Johnson 2005, Wodak and Meyer 2009). Obama’s repeated use of progressive verbs (e.g., “to move forward”, “to build”, “to continue”) aligns with the temporal legitimation (van Leeuwen 2007), projecting positive change into the future to sustain current legitimacy and thus preempting the future (Dunmire 2005). Thus, the vision of an ever-improving union allows him to reconcile critique with optimism.

Another prominent metaphor is the framing of racial conflict as a form of “shared labor” or “common burden.” Obama repeatedly references the “work” required to overcome divisions, positioning civic engagement as a form of moral effort:

*“This is the conversation we need to have. This is the **common burden** we must all carry. And more than that, this is the history we need to embrace.”* (emphasis added)

*“This generation is tired of the old racial bickering, and we have been moved by the humanity and the hope that they have brought to the process. From the young people who’ve volunteered in his campaign, and from the millions of Americans who’ve come out to support us, I know what’s possible if we face up to the past and embrace the **shared labor** of our future.”* (emphasis added)

This metaphor serves to democratize responsibility and empower the audience (Escudero 2011), thereby shifting the discourse from victimhood and blame to agency and possibility. For instance, the speech employs metaphors of ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ in a nuanced way (Lakoff and Johnson 2005). While these are traditional symbolic opposites that have often been racialized in Western political and cultural discourse (Chilton and Ilyin 1993), Obama recontextualizes them within a moral dimension of ignorance versus awareness and division versus unity, thereby shifting their ideological force toward ethical reflection rather than racial polarization (Fairclough 1992, 2003, Wodak and Fairclough 2010). This reframing aligns with his broader ideological project to transcend simplistic racial categorizations (Anderson 2016) and foster a more complex moral understanding.

#### 4.7 Navigating the White Subject: The Raciolinguistic Performance of Unity

Obama’s *A More Perfect Union* is a paradigmatic example of performing within, yet attempting to transcend, the severe constraints imposed by raciolinguistic ideology (Alim, Rickford and Ball 2016). Obama had to establish himself as simultaneously Black and the legitimate embodiment of the idealized national subject, a position historically reserved for the White Speaking and Listening Subject (Inoue 2006, Rosa and Flores 2017). This ideological construct assumes that linguistic and cognitive competence is implicitly tied to Whiteness (Alim and Smitherman 2012), perpetually positioning the language of a racialized speaker as suspect or deficient, regardless of its objective form (Flores and Rosa 2015). The extensive use of flawless, rhetorically sophisticated Standard English throughout the speech is therefore not just an indicator of high education, but a profound and necessary act of linguistic legitimation (Alim and Smitherman 2012, van Leeuwen 2007). This performance functions strategically to preempt the racist Listening Subject (Inoue 2006) who would otherwise dismiss his discourse as deficient. The linguistic choices he made are not merely stylistic, but fundamentally ideological, shaping perceptions of citizenship and national belonging (Fairclough 2003).

The speech’s negotiation with the White Speaking Subject is most vividly demonstrated through Obama’s strategic management of pronouns. His rhetorical approach uses ‘we’ not just as a cohesive device, but as a mechanism for ideologically claiming the space of the normative national subject (De Fina 1995). The frequent use of the inclusive pronoun serves a dual ideological function (Maitland and Wilson 1987). While it invites listeners to identify with a collective, unifying project, it symbolically re-writes the national narrative by expanding the inclusive ‘we’ from the Founding Fathers’ limited collective to an all-encompassing American populace (Terrill 2009).

Furthermore, the speech showcases Obama’s capacity to navigate and orchestrate socially stratified registers and linguistic repertoires, a form of stylistic and ideological orchestration characteristic of elite political discourse (van Dijk 1993). While the foundation of the speech is standard English, Obama mobilizes the rich, non-standard linguistic traditions of African American political discourse and Protestant Christianity, thereby blending civic, racial, and religious registers into a complex rhetorical synthesis (Alim and Smitherman 2012). His intertextual

references to the Constitution, the Civil Rights Movement, and biblical scripture create a powerful synthesis of civic and sacred authority (Reisigl and Wodak 2001). This convergence of personal narrative and civic argument demonstrates Obama's linguistic dexterity to perform multiple, complex positionalities (Boyd 2009, Duranti 2006).

This linguistic crossing is not merely stylistic but constitutes an ideological practice that reorganizes relations of legitimacy and authority in discourse (Rampton 1995). It functions as a profound challenge to the monoglossic ideology of the White Speaking Subject (Flores and Rosa 2015, Inoue 2006). By successfully blending these competing ideological discourses, progressive and conservative, Black and white, individual and collective, Obama enacts a heteroglossic moral vision in which a '*More Perfect Union*' requires affirming a plurality of linguistic and moral voices rather than a singular normative standard (Bakhtin 1981, Fairclough 1992, Wodak and Meyer 2009). His discourse, in its careful balancing of critique and reconciliation, exemplifies how language can be leveraged for social renewal (Wodak and Meyer 2009), even while operating under the intense racialized scrutiny of the dominant raciolinguistic ideology (Alim, Rickford and Ball 2016).

## 5. Discussion and Implications

### 5.1 Discursive Rearticulation Across Ideological and Identity Boundaries

The findings suggest that political discourse serves as a site of social negotiation, where language mediates the boundaries between power, identity, and moral legitimacy (Fairclough 1995, 2003). Obama's speech exemplifies the dialectical relationship between discourse and society (Fairclough 1992). Namely, language not only reflects existing social structures but also participates in reshaping them. By mobilizing inclusive pronouns, moral metaphors, and intertextual references to national ideals, his speech functions as a discourse of repair (Benoit 2018), responding to racial polarization through linguistic strategies that foster moral consensus and national identity reconstruction (Wodak and Meyer 2009).

Moreover, Obama's speech demonstrates how elite discourse can be both hegemonic and emancipatory. While embedded within dominant liberal-democratic ideology, it simultaneously destabilizes the binaries of race, identity, and belonging that sustain social division (Anderson 2016). By redefining 'us' and 'them' as moral categories rather than racial dichotomies, Obama disrupts the conventional ideological square (van Dijk 2005) and reconfigures power through empathy and inclusion.

The speech also illustrates the performative dimension of identity (Butler and Athanasiou 2013). Obama's discourse negotiates multiple positionalities, African American, biracial, political leader, and national moralist, demonstrating how identity is not fixed but continuously enacted through discourse (Boyd 2009, Ricento 2003). This negotiation shows how linguistic hybridity reflects and enacts social complexity in contemporary multicultural societies (Bakhtin 1981, Rampton 1995). Obama's linguistic performance thus confirms the view that language serves as identity work, through which social subjects are discursively produced and recognized (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, Wodak and Meyer 2009).

### 5.2 Discourse as Praxis: Reconfiguring Ideology and Power

The findings of this study underscore that CDA operates not only as an analytic framework but as a form of sociopolitical praxis critically engaging with discourse to illuminate and intervene in the reproduction of inequality (Fairclough 1992). Critical engagement with discourse illuminates the ways in which language sustains, challenges,

or transforms systems of inequality (Blommaert 2005). *A More Perfect Union* serves as a microcosm of these dynamics. Obama's efforts to address racial grievances through references to "the legacy of discrimination," his use of inclusive pronouns to reposition citizens as collaborators in a shared project, and his framing of the Constitution as an evolving "promise" all illustrate how speakers negotiate the constraints of raciolinguistic ideology while attempting to broaden the interpretive space available to the public. These observations contribute to broader discussions within CDA about how discourse produces, circulates, and sometimes destabilizes dominant ideologies (Blommaert 2005, Fairclough 1992).

The findings also suggest the need to investigate how inclusive discourse can sometimes coexist with latent neoliberal assumptions, for instance, individual responsibility replacing systemic critique (Anderson 2016). While invoking the hope of transcending racial boundaries (e.g., "we may have different stories, but we share common hopes"), his linguistic structures show an ambivalent stance. His discourse acknowledges persistent racial disparities even while promoting a unifying vision. This dual stance exemplifies the negotiated ideology (Blommaert 2005), which is a discourse that neither wholly resists nor reproduces dominant narratives but instead reframes them to enable social dialogue (Goffman 1981). Obama's speech therefore resists simplistic readings as color-blind rhetoric (Bonilla-Silva 2014). At the same time, the discourse of unity may suppress structural critique, transforming social justice into a question of individual attitude rather than systemic reform, a tendency widely associated with liberal and neoliberal ideological rationalities (Blommaert 2005, Fairclough 1995, 2003). Future research might explore whether conciliatory political discourse such as Obama's inadvertently reinforces certain ideological limits of liberal democracy, including the depoliticization of racial inequality and the displacement of structural responsibility onto individual moral disposition.

Pedagogically, this study suggests concrete applications for critical language education. Political speeches such as *A More Perfect Union* can be used in advanced EFL and applied linguistics classrooms to help students analyze how linguistic form mediates power, legitimacy, and racialized evaluation. Activities may include comparative pronoun analysis, tracing nominalization and agency suppression, and identifying how 'standard language' functions ideologically rather than neutrally (Fairclough 1992). Such practices foster critical language awareness by enabling learners to interrogate not only what is said, but whose language is recognized as authoritative and why (Alim, Rickford and Ball 2016, Fairclough 1992).

## 6. Conclusion

This study examines Barack Obama's *A More Perfect Union* through critical discourse analysis to show how political rhetoric operates within and challenges raciolinguistic ideology (Alim, Rickford and Ball 2016, Fairclough 1992, 2003). It demonstrates how language shapes social understandings of race, identity, and national belonging, highlighting the interplay between linguistic form and sociopolitical. Obama's negotiation of narrative, moral framing, and national ideals reveals how discourse functions as a form of praxis, actively participating in the construction of race, identity, and civic belonging (Fairclough 2003, Wodak and Meyer 2009). The analysis also shows that political discourse can serve as a site of repair during moments of social tension (Benoit 2018, Reisigl and Wodak 2001). Through inclusive rhetoric and symbolic appeals to constitutional ideals, Obama creates interpretive space for collective reflection and moral reorientation.

This study's contribution lies in demonstrating how raciolinguistic ideology operates not only through exclusionary discourse but also through the disciplined linguistic performances required of racialized political elites. By integrating CDA with raciolinguistics, the analysis reveals how Obama's pronoun management, nominalization, and register control function as strategies of ideological survival within a racially stratified

listening economy (Bourdieu 1991, Inoue 2006, van Dijk 2005). These insights extend beyond existing CDA analyses of the same speech, demonstrating the necessity of attending to racialized listening practices alongside discursive production.

These findings underscore the importance of examining discourse as a site of identity work, where multiple positionalities are performed and recognized through language. Obama's speech illustrates how political discourse can reflect and transform the conditions under which identities gain meaning and legitimacy, while challenging entrenched binaries and expanding democratic imagination. By attending to these linguistic strategies, scholars and citizens can better understand how race, power, and national identity are negotiated in public discourse.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Tertiary