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BRIDGING DIVIDES: HOPE, INCLUSION, AND LEGITIMACY IN THE TRUMP-MAMDANI ENCOUNTER

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ABSTRACT

This study employs van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to examine how linguistic choices in the press interaction between President Donald Trump and NYC Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani construct political legitimacy, inclusion, and power relations. There is a lack of understanding regarding how mental models and shared ideologies specifically shape the discursive construction of hope and the normalization of minority leadership through counter-hegemonic narratives within institutional settings.This study presents a refined Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the post-meeting press interaction between U.S. President Donald Trump and New York City Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani, emphasizing Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach. The paper explores the means by which linguistic choices construct political legitimacy, inclusion, hope, and power relations in an institutional context. The analysis draws exclusively from the verified transcript of the press interaction, focusing on lexical selection, pronoun usage, evaluative language, thematic emphasis, modality, and ideological strategies. Findings indicate that Trump's discourse enacts institutional authority via positive self-presentation, evaluative endorsement, and conditional modality, reinforcing dominant ideologies of hierarchical power. In contrast, Mamdani's discourse promotes collective identity, affordability, and civic belonging through inclusive language and mitigation strategies, functioning as a counter-hegemonic yet aligned narrative that normalizes minority leadership without overt identity marking. By applying van Dijk's socio-cognitive perspective, this refinement highlights the role of mental models and shared ideologies shape discourse production and interpretation, contributing to CDA scholarship on political discourse, democratic legitimacy, and the discursive construction of hope in contemporary U.S. governance.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Political Discourse, van Dijk, Socio-Cognitive Approach, Inclusion, Hope, Power, Ideology, Legitimacy*

1. Introduction

Language is a fundamental tool in politics, serving not just to convey information but to exercise, negotiate, and legitimize power. Political actors use discourse to articulate policies, build identities, align with audiences, and manage asymmetrical power dynamics. Critical

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Discourse Analysis (CDA) views political language as a social practice embedded in ideological and institutional frameworks, both influencing and influenced by societal structures.

The post-meeting press interaction between Donald Trump, the U.S. President, and Zohran Mamdani, the incoming Mayor of New York City, provides a compelling site for CDA. This encounter occurs in a highly formalized institutional setting, the Oval Office following a private meeting and is addressed to a media audience, requiring strategic discursive positioning. The power asymmetry Trump as the federal executive with extensive authority and Mamdani as a local leader from a progressive, minority background heightens the importance of how language constructs legitimacy and bridges ideological divides. This refined study examines how hope, inclusion, and political legitimacy are linguistically constructed in this interaction. The analysis treats discourse as strategic meaning-making rather than neutral reporting. Particular attention is given to Mamdani's discourse, which emphasizes affordability and collective belonging, and its functioning within dominant political structures. Using van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, the refinement illuminates the cognitive dimensions of discourse, including mental models that mediate ideological reproduction. This framework reveals how speakers manage context, audience perceptions, and group alignments, offering deeper insights into discourse's role in shaping social cognition.

The refinement prioritizes van Dijk's framework to address cognitive processes such as knowledge activation, attitude formation, and ideological polarization. It demonstrates how discourse reflects and actively forms social cognition, especially in politically charged encounters with evident power imbalances. By focusing solely on this approach, the study provides a more concentrated exploration of the socio-cognitive mechanisms at play. Expanding on the interaction's context, the meeting represents a rare cross-ideological dialogue in a polarized U.S. political landscape. Trump, known for his conservative, nationalist rhetoric, engages with Mamdani, a self-identified democratic socialist with roots in progressive activism. The press interaction, lasting approximately 10 minutes, includes opening statements, reporter questions, and responses, allowing for analysis of spontaneous and prepared discourse. This setting underscores the institutional constraints and opportunities for ideological negotiation, where language must balance confrontation and cooperation to maintain legitimacy. Furthermore, the analysis considers the broader socio-political environment of 2025, marked by economic recovery efforts, immigration debates, and Middle East tensions. These themes emerge in the discourse, providing rich material for examining how cognitive models of national identity, security, and prosperity are activated and contested.

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2. Literature Review

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis and Political Language

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary method that investigates the relationships between language, power, and ideology (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). CDA posits that discourse shapes and is shaped by social structures, highlighting its role in sustaining or challenging inequalities. In political domains, discourse is analyzed for its involvement in authority, governance, and legitimacy, as leaders employ language to justify actions and garner support. Political discourse often involves strategic mechanisms such as evaluation, modality, and intertextuality to maintain or transform social relations. CDA's critical orientation lies in its ability to explain how discourse functions within hegemonic power dynamics, either reinforcing the status quo or enabling change. This study applies CDA to uncover the ideological underpinnings of the Trump-Mamdani interaction, focusing on how language negotiates power in a democratic context.

2.2 Van Dijk’s Socio-Cognitive Perspective

Teun A. van Dijk’s socio-cognitive approach (1998, 2006) adds a cognitive dimension to CDA, positing that discourse is mediated by mental processes. Ideologies are defined as socially shared belief systems that influence group perceptions of self and others. Van Dijk identifies strategies like positive self-presentation (emphasizing in-group positives) and negative other-presentation (highlighting out-group negatives), which create "us" versus "them" polarizations and manage ideological conflicts.

Key concepts include mental models—individual representations of events—and context models, which guide discourse production by considering participants, settings, and objectives. Discourse influences minds by activating shared knowledge and attitudes, reproducing ideologies through semantic macrostructures (main topics) and local meanings (specific words). In political discourse, this framework is essential for analyzing how speakers mitigate authority threats, build group alignments, and handle power asymmetries.

This refinement centers on van Dijk’s model to explore previously underexplored cognitive aspects, such as how Trump and Mamdani’s discourses activate schemas of authority and inclusion, influencing public perceptions of legitimacy and hope. By examining cognitive mediation, the study reveals how discourse controls social cognition, fostering unity or division. Van Dijk's approach has been applied to various political contexts, from election campaigns to international negotiations, demonstrating its versatility in uncovering hidden ideologies. For instance, in analyses of media discourse, it shows how news frames activate biased mental models. Here, it is adapted to a press interaction, where real-time responses highlight cognitive strategies for conflict management and alignment.

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2.3 Inclusion, Legitimacy, and Minority Leadership

Recent CDA research examines the discursive construction of inclusion and legitimacy, particularly for minority political figures (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). Leaders from marginalized groups frequently use universal, civic language to normalize their roles, avoiding explicit identity emphasis to widen appeal and minimize backlash. This aligns with van Dijk's mitigation and in-group strategies, where discourse softens divides to promote unity.

Research indicates that such discourses counter hegemonic narratives by integrating progressive values into mainstream frameworks, legitimizing minority leadership. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive lens reveals how these strategies form mental models of collective hope, transcending partisanship. This paper advances this research by applying the framework to show cognitive processes underlying inclusion, such as activating shared attitudes toward affordability and peace. Studies on U.S. political discourse highlight how minority leaders navigate identity politics, often employing inclusive pronouns to build broad coalitions. In Mamdani's case, as a Muslim-American socialist, his discourse exemplifies this, using socio-cognitive mechanisms to align with institutional norms while advancing counter-narratives.

3. Research Objectives

The regorous study aims to:

1. To explore the discursive construction of power and political legitimacy through socio-cognitive insights, investigating the negotiations between institutional authority and counter-hegemonic narratives to highlight ideological reproduction.

2. To analyze hope and inclusion in Mamdani's discourse by identifying ideological strategies and employing van Dijk's framework to emphasize the role of mental and context models in cognitive mediation.

To achieve these, the analysis expands on cognitive dimensions, such as how discourse activates group schemas and manages ideological tensions.

4. Research Questions

1. How do linguistic elements construct power relations and maintain legitimacy, and how does van Dijk's model and socio-cognitive mechanisms uncover the underlying ideologies mediating these interactions?

2. What strategies build hope and inclusion through mitigation and alignment in Mamdani's discourse, and how do these reflect shared ideologies while promoting progressive goals?

These questions guide a focused examination of the transcript, emphasizing cognitive layers.

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5. Theoretical Framework

This analysis employs van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach as the primary lens. It identifies how ideologies are cognitively processed and discursively expressed, providing a nuanced view of discourse in the Trump-Mamdani interaction as reproducing or challenging power structures. Mental models help explain personal interpretations, while context models account for situational adaptations.

This framework is particularly suited for political press interactions, where discourse must respond to immediate queries while maintaining ideological consistency. By focusing on strategies like positive self-presentation and mitigation, the study dissects how speakers shape audience cognition. In summary, the socio-cognitive perspective is essential for understanding how language functions not merely as a communicative tool, but as a mechanism for managing legitimacy and negotiating power asymmetries. The rationale for selecting this approach lies in its ability to bridge the gap between textual structures and the cognitive processes of the speakers, revealing how the interaction between Trump and Mamdani is constructed to influence public perception and reinforce or challenge dominant social orders.

6. Methodology

The study uses a qualitative Critical discourse analysis methodology, based solely on the verified transcript of the Oval Office press interaction.

6.1 Data Handling and Analytical Procedure

All turns by Trump and Mamdani are included, with reporter questions considered for prompting. Iterative close reading targets:

- Evaluative language (praise, criticism).
- Pronoun usage (inclusive "we" vs. exclusive "I").
- Modality and conditionality ("would," "if").
- Thematic repetition (affordability).
- Discursive mitigation (softening disagreements).
- Socio-cognitive elements (self-presentation, in-group/out-group).

Coding is refined iteratively, guided by van Dijk's framework for mental models and strategies.

6.2 Analytical Reliability

Analysis by a single researcher is strengthened by repeated reviews and framework triangulation. Interpretations are grounded in textual evidence.

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To enhance depth, the procedure involves multiple passes: first for local meanings, second for macrostructures, third for cognitive implications.

7. Analysis and Discussion

The transcript depicts a cordial but imbalanced exchange, with Trump controlling openings and closings, and Mamdani responding strategically. The analysis uses extensive quotes and van Dijk's emphasis.

7.1 Trump's Discourse: Institutional Authority and Positive Self-Presentation

Trump begins with evaluative repetition: "We've just had a great meeting, a really good, very productive meeting." This positive self-presentation frames the event as successful under his leadership, activating mental models of presidential efficacy. Repetition reinforces authority schemas, positioning Trump as the host.

His conditional modality in "The better he does, the happier I am" asserts dominance, suggesting Mamdani's success is contingent on Trump's approval. Socio-cognitively, this manages context models, portraying Trump as in-group leader, mitigating Mamdani's potential out-group status. Later, "I think he is going to surprise some conservative people, actually" endorses Mamdani while bolstering Trump's authority, using prediction to shape cognition toward ideological convergence. Van Dijk's framework shows this as ideological management, reducing polarization. Expanding, Trump's references to economic achievements—"We had the greatest economy in the history of our country"activate shared knowledge of prosperity, reproducing neoliberal ideologies. This self-presentation polarizes past administrations negatively, strengthening his in-group image.

7.2 Mamdani's Discourse: Collective Identity, Inclusion, and In-Group Construction

Mamdani uses inclusive pronouns: "our city," "New Yorkers," "the eight and a half million people who call our city their home." These build a shared civic in-group, minimizing divisions. Cognitively, this activates unity models, countering polarization by expanding "us" to include diverse groups. Van Dijk's lens shows how this reproduces inclusive ideologies, fostering collective hope without alienating power. Mamdani's avoidance of explicit identity markers normalizes minority leadership through civic framing. In responses, Mamdani redirects to shared purposes: "the shared purpose that we have in serving New Yorkers." This mitigation softens disagreements, managing context models for cooperation.

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7.3 Constructing Hope Through Affordability: Thematic Emphasis and Ideological Framing

Mamdani anchors hope in concrete issues: “We spoke about rent, we spoke about groceries, spoke about utilities.” Thematic repetition frames hope as policy-driven, activating economic struggle knowledge, shaping moral governance attitudes.

Trump echoes: “The new word is affordability... groceries. It's sort of an old fashioned word, but it's very accurate.” This adoption creates common ground macrostructures. Van Dijk views this as conflict management, bridging partisan mental models. On genocide, Mamdani mitigates: “I've spoken about the Israeli government committing genocide... the concern that many New Yorkers have of wanting their tax dollars to go towards the benefit of New Yorkers.” Redirecting to affordability normalizes progressive views civically. Expanding, this framing reproduces ideologies of fiscal responsibility, activating attitudes that prioritize local needs over foreign entanglements, fostering hope through practicality.

7.4 Mitigation, Cooperation, and Conflict Management

On immigration and crime, Mamdani mitigates: “I appreciate all efforts towards peace... people were tired of seeing our tax dollars fund endless wars.” This softens critiques, aligning with van Dijk’s strategies to avoid negative other-presentation, preserving cooperative models.

Trump cooperates: “We actually have peace in the Middle East... we have in common, we want to see peace.” Mutual positive presentation reduces polarization, reproducing unity ideologies.

In discussions on ICE, Trump says: “I think he wants to get them out maybe more than I do.” This aligns positions, managing dominance cognitively without concession.

The analysis reveals how mitigation allows ideological negotiation, with discourse shaping attitudes toward collaboration despite differences.

7.5 Affordability as Moral Framing and Ideological Reproduction

Mamdani’s affordability focus frames governance morally: “New York City loves a future that is affordable.” Universalizing progressive aims broadens appeal, reducing polarization. Van Dijk’s approach illustrates how this activates inclusive ideologies, transcending identity politics.

Trump affirms: “He wants to see rents coming down... that's the ultimate way.” Convergence shows ideological negotiation, discourse forming shared goal cognition.

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Expanding, this framing counters hegemonic individualism by emphasizing collective welfare, cognitively shifting mental models toward equity.

7.6 Discursive Closure, Transformation, and Future-Oriented Modality

Mamdani concludes: "...what it can look like when the federal government and New York City government work together to deliver on affordability, it can be transformative." Modality invokes possibility, reinforcing hope. Socio-cognitively, it builds optimistic future models, aligning counter-hegemonic narratives with legitimacy.

Trump's praise—"He came out of nowhere... that's a great tribute"—normalizes minority success, mitigating stereotypes.

Additional exchanges on international issues, like Zelenskyy and socialism, further illustrate cognitive strategies. Trump's war comments activate anti-intervention attitudes, while Mamdani's socialism response mitigates labels, focusing on work.

8. Findings

Trump's discourse reinforces authority through self-presentation and conditional support, reproducing dominant ideologies. Mamdani builds hope via inclusion and affordability, managing asymmetries through mitigation and in-group expansion. Van Dijk's focus reveals mental models mediating unity over division. Minority leadership is normalized civically, enhancing legitimacy. The findings underscore discourse's cognitive role in bridging divides, contributing to understanding democratic negotiations.

9. Conclusion

This analysis positions political discourse as a site for ideological negotiation, revealing the complex cognitive mechanisms at play in high-stakes political encounters. Through the lens of Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, the study dissects the interaction between President Donald Trump and Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani, highlighting how language constructs and contests legitimacy. The findings demonstrate that while Trump utilizes positive self-presentation to assert hierarchical authority, Mamdani employs mitigation strategies and inclusive "we" constructions to foster a sense of collective identity and hope. Mamdani's language promotes inclusive, hopeful governance while maintaining institutional legitimacy, navigating asymmetries discursively. By anchoring his discourse in the universal theme of affordability rather than specific identity politics, Mamdani successfully normalizes minority leadership within the existing institutional framework.

Anchored in the transcript and van Dijk's socio-cognitive insights, the study enriches scholarship on discourse, legitimacy, and inclusion. It provides critical evidence of how counter-hegemonic narratives can function within dominant structures without direct

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confrontation. The analysis underscores the importance of mental models in shaping public perception, showing that strategic discursive choices can bridge profound ideological divides. Future research could compare interactions, exploring cognitive impacts through reception studies to measure the actual audience uptake of these strategies. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how linguistic negotiation serves as a vital tool for democratic governance and social cohesion in a polarized era.

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