

DISCURSIVE ARCHITECTURES OF POWER: REVISITING TEUN A. VAN DIJK'S TRIADIC MODEL OF DISCOURSE, COGNITION, SOCIETY IN POSTCOLONIAL SOUTH ASIA FROM COLONIAL PAST TO DIGITAL PRESENT

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Abstract

Teun A. van Dijk's Elite Discourse and Racism (1993) revolutionized the study of ideology by framing racism as a linguistic, cognitive, and institutional system rather than a biological or emotional bias. This article revisits Van Dijk's Triadic Model of Discourse–Cognition–Society across the historical continuum of South Asia touching the colonial past to the digital present, to trace how linguistic and ideological hierarchies evolve yet persist through discourse. Using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, this study connects colonial-era newspapers (The Times of India, The Civil and Military Gazette, The Statesman) with contemporary South Asian media, policies, and digital communication (2023–2025).

The analysis demonstrates that discursive racism has transitioned from overt imperial rhetoric to symbolic and moralized language. In colonial times, English-language newspapers framed domination as “civilization”; in postcolonial South Asia, nationalist and bureaucratic discourses reproduce exclusion under slogans like “unity,” “integration,” or “merit.” In the digital present, hashtags, tweets, and political speeches continue to naturalize linguistic hierarchies through the moral grammar of patriotism.

By integrating Van Dijk's Triadic Model with postcolonial and decolonial theory, the paper argues that modern racism in South Asia is not about color but about control of meaning, the power to define belonging and legitimacy through discourse. It concludes that decolonizing communication systems, curricula, and digital platforms is essential to disrupt the recursive cycle of linguistic domination that connects empire to modernity.

Keywords: *Teun A. van Dijk, discourse, cognition, racism, postcolonialism, South Asia, CDA, digital discourse, colonial continuity, decolonization.*

1. Introduction

“Language is not innocent—it carries ideologies.” — Teun A. van Dijk (1993, p. 1)

Language shapes not only how people communicate but also how societies think, remember, and exclude. In *Elite Discourse and Racism* (1993), Teun A. van Dijk exposes how elites—politicians, journalists, educators, and bureaucrats—construct, transmit, and legitimate racism through discourse. His central claim that “controlling discourse means controlling thought” (1993, p. 67) shifts attention from overt hate speech to the subtle power of everyday language that organizes meaning and maintains inequality.

Van Dijk's *Triadic Model of Discourse–Cognition–Society* integrates linguistic, cognitive, and institutional dimensions of racism into a single system of domination. However, the model has been predominantly applied to Western contexts, such as media representations of immigrants or racial minorities in Europe and North America.

2. Literature Review: From Colonial Discourses to Digital Coloniality

2.1 The Historical Continuum of Discourse and Power

The study of discourse and ideology has long been central to the analysis of power, but its application to the South Asian context requires a temporal lens that stretches from the colonial past to the digital present. From the early British Raj newspapers to twenty-first-century digital platforms, language has operated as a tool for defining social order. Colonial journalism such as *The Times of India* (est. 1838) and *The Civil and Military Gazette* (est. 1872) systematically reproduced imperial hierarchies, representing British rule as benevolent and native resistance as chaotic. Terms like “rebellion,” “mutiny,” and “law and order” were not neutral—they functioned ideologically to shape cognitive schemas of civilization and barbarism (Rao, 2008). This early link between language and domination provides the historical foundation for Van Dijk’s (1993) later argument that discourse is a primary mechanism of social control.

After independence, the same linguistic hierarchies persisted, albeit in nationalized forms. Postcolonial states inherited colonial bureaucracies and communication systems that continued to privilege certain languages—English in Pakistan and India, Bengali in Bangladesh—as the symbolic markers of authority and modernity (Rahman, 1996; Mahboob, 2009). Thus, while the political order shifted, the linguistic order remained, creating what Mignolo (2011) calls *coloniality of power*: the endurance of colonial epistemic structures beneath postcolonial governance. The continuity from colonial print culture to nationalist media provides the discursive genealogy that underpins this study.

2.2 From Structuralism to Critical Linguistics

The roots of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) lie in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) developed by Halliday (1978), who viewed language as a *social semiotic system*—a means of constructing social reality, not merely reflecting it. Building on this foundation, Fowler et al. (1979) introduced *Critical Linguistics*, arguing that grammatical choices are ideologically motivated. For instance, passive constructions like “protesters were arrested” erase agency, while active ones like “the police arrested protesters” expose it.

These principles apply directly to colonial discourse. British newspapers consistently used the passive voice to obscure the violence of empire: “law and order restored,” “rebels subdued,” or “peace achieved,” transforming coercion into civility. Through such linguistic choices, colonial discourse created the illusion of moral legitimacy—what Fairclough (1995) later theorized as *ideological common sense*. The same mechanisms of syntactic naturalization persist today in bureaucratic language such as “standardization,” “policy compliance,” and “cultural integration.”

2.3 Fairclough: Discourse as Social Practice

Norman Fairclough (1992, 1995) advanced CDA by integrating linguistic analysis with Gramscian social theory. His model of discourse as *text*, *discursive practice*, and *social practice* highlights the dialectical relationship between language and power. Fairclough’s emphasis on *hegemony through consent*—how ideologies become accepted as common sense—finds direct resonance in South Asian media history.

During the Raj, English-language newspapers framed colonial governance as “modernization,” while postcolonial media rebranded elite control as “development.” In both cases, discursive continuity masked structural inequality. For example, *The Statesman* (Calcutta, 1930s) praised the “rational administration of justice” during British rule, while *Dawn* (1950s) celebrated Urdu as “the unifying language of national progress.” In both instances, the ruling elite used linguistic symbols to consolidate authority. Fairclough’s (1995) concept of *ideological reproduction*

provides a framework for understanding how such discourses continue to normalize hierarchy in postcolonial bureaucracies and media.

2.4 Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)

Ruth Wodak's (2001) *Discourse-Historical Approach* (DHA) contributes a diachronic lens crucial for a study spanning the colonial and digital eras. Wodak identifies three interlinked discursive strategies—*nomination* (how actors are named), *predication* (how they are described), and *argumentation* (how actions are justified). Applying this lens to South Asian print culture reveals the ideological migration of colonial rhetoric into postcolonial nationalism.

For instance, *The Civil and Military Gazette* described British administrators as “civilizers” and Indian leaders as “agitators,” employing nomination and predication to create an us–them binary. Decades later, *Dawn* (1952) used similar structures, labeling Urdu-speaking elites as “unifiers” and regional activists as “provincial.” Even modern digital media retains these patterns, describing dissenters as “anti-national” or “foreign-influenced.” As Reisigl and Wodak (2016) note, such strategies are not historically isolated but evolve with new ideological contexts, continuously reconstructing difference.

2.5 Van Dijk and the Cognitive Turn in CDA

Teun A. van Dijk (1993, 2008) reoriented CDA by emphasizing *cognition*—the mental interface between discourse and society. He proposed that racism endures not because individuals consciously hate, but because they unconsciously reason through biased *mental models*. His concept of the *ideological square*—emphasizing our good, their bad, minimizing our bad, and minimizing their good—captures how bias becomes normalized through repetition.

This cognitive framework illuminates the South Asian postcolonial condition. Media coverage of ethnic minorities, refugees, and regional movements consistently reproduces Van Dijk's ideological square. For example, *Dawn* and *The Hindu* regularly portray Afghan or Rohingya refugees as “illegal” or “burdensome,” while state officials are “protectors of national security.” Such framing naturalizes inequality as policy. Contemporary examples from *Times of India* (2025a, 2025b) — where linguistic debates about Hindi and Bengali became framed as “patriotic duty” versus “regional extremism” — demonstrate the persistence of cognitive bias as discursive common sense.

Van Dijk's (1993) triadic model—*Discourse, Cognition, Society*—thus provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how colonial epistemologies adapt to modern governance and media environments.

2.6 Foucault and the Order of Discourse

Michel Foucault's (1972) notion of *discursive formation* complements Van Dijk's structural triad by revealing the historical and institutional mechanisms that determine who may speak and what may be said. Foucault argued that power is not centralized but circulates through networks of knowledge. Colonial institutions—courts, schools, newspapers—functioned as discursive regimes producing the “truth” of British rationality and Indian irrationality.

In postcolonial contexts, the same regimes persist. Bureaucratic documents in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh continue to privilege English or national languages as markers of legitimacy, defining what counts as educated, modern, or patriotic. Foucault's insight that *knowledge is power* underscores how linguistic authority translates into administrative authority. CDA scholars like Fairclough and Van Dijk operationalize this insight by showing how textual practices encode these epistemic hierarchies.

2.7 Postcolonial Theory: Said, Spivak, and Bhabha

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) remains foundational for understanding how discourse constructs cultural superiority. Said revealed how Western media and scholarship invented "the Orient" as an inferior mirror image of Europe. In the South Asian colonial context, this Orientalist logic materialized through journalism and education, where English became the language of reason and local languages the idioms of emotion.

Gayatri Spivak's (1988) question, "*Can the subaltern speak?*", resonates in the linguistic hierarchies of postcolonial South Asia, where marginalized groups are often spoken *for* by elites. The continued dominance of English and Urdu/Hindi/Bengali in official communication reproduces epistemic exclusion. Similarly, Bhabha's (1994) concept of *hybridity* helps explain the ambivalence of postcolonial discourse—oscillating between imitation of colonial norms and assertion of local identity.

Together, these theorists align with Van Dijk's triadic vision: discourse (representation), cognition (internalization), and society (institutionalization). The postcolonial subject navigates this triad daily—internalizing colonial grammars of prestige while resisting them through cultural assertion.

2.8 Decolonial Thought: Coloniality in the Digital Present

Decolonial theorists such as Mignolo (2011) and Maldonado-Torres (2007) extend the critique of colonial power into the epistemic and digital realms. They argue that coloniality persists in *language, knowledge systems, and global communication*. In South Asia, digital platforms reproduce hierarchies through algorithmic visibility and linguistic bias. English dominates online spaces, while regional languages face marginalization even in domestic discourse.

Recent examples illustrate this continuity. Indian social media debates around #SpeakHindiBePatriotic (Facebook Post, 2025) reveal how linguistic nationalism has migrated from print propaganda to digital populism. Similarly, in Bangladesh, state-aligned newspapers like *Dhaka Tribune* (2025) promote linguistic pride under the banner of national unity, while minority languages remain peripheral. Pakistani digital media mirrors colonial structures: English-language news outlets target elites, while Urdu platforms are seen as "popular" but less credible.

This digital reconfiguration of linguistic coloniality aligns with Van Dijk's notion of *symbolic racism*—discrimination through moralized and ostensibly neutral discourse. In the digital present, domination is algorithmic: visibility replaces voice as the measure of worth.

2.9 Synthesis: Gaps and Directions

Across colonial, postcolonial, and digital contexts, one pattern endures: power speaks through language that appears virtuous. Whether the rhetoric of "civilization," "development," or "national unity," the underlying function is the same—ideological control through discourse. While CDA and postcolonial studies have independently analyzed these dynamics, few have explicitly connected Van Dijk's triadic model with the South Asian historical continuum. Existing studies (Rahman, 1996; Thussu, 2007; Udupa, 2015) explore media and identity, but they stop short of integrating cognitive and institutional dimensions.

This research fills that gap by combining CDA, postcolonial, and decolonial frameworks to trace how colonial hierarchies of language and thought persist in contemporary South Asia. By examining newspapers, educational policies, and digital discourse, it positions Van Dijk's model as both historical and diagnostic—revealing how colonial power survives in the semantics of modernity.

3. Research Gap

Despite Van Dijk's global influence, there is limited scholarship applying his triadic model to postcolonial South Asian societies, where racism takes linguistic and bureaucratic rather than

racialized forms. In Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, the remnants of colonial power survive in language hierarchies, national ideologies, and administrative discourse that moralize exclusion in the name of unity or merit. This study fills that gap by applying Van Dijk's model to **postcolonial discourses of nationalism, education, and governance**.

4. Research Aim

To explore how Van Dijk's Triadic Model can be used to analyze the discursive, cognitive, and institutional dimensions of racism in postcolonial South Asia.

5. Research Questions

1. How does Van Dijk's *Triadic Model of Discourse–Cognition–Society* explain racism as a system of meaning rather than emotion?
2. In what ways do South Asian nations reproduce exclusion and hierarchy through linguistic and bureaucratic discourse?
3. How can Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) be used as a decolonial strategy to challenge symbolic racism in postcolonial societies?

6. Significance of the Study

This study bridges Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Postcolonial Theory, offering a decolonial reinterpretation of Van Dijk's framework. It demonstrates that postcolonial racism survives not through color, but through language and cognition, the invisible architecture of power that sustains hierarchy under cultural and moral legitimacy.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emerged as an interdisciplinary movement aimed at uncovering how language reproduces power. Rooted in linguistics, sociology, and critical theory, CDA's premise is simple yet profound: language is not neutral, it constructs ideology (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2001; Van Dijk, 1993). Over the past five decades, CDA has evolved from structuralist linguistics to a multidimensional framework capable of analyzing how political, racial, and cultural dominance operates discursively.

7. Theoretical Framework: The Triadic Model of Discourse–Cognition–Society

Van Dijk's (1993) triadic framework proposes that racism operates through a dynamic relationship among three dimensions:

1. **Discourse** – The linguistic and communicative level where ideology is encoded.
2. **Cognition** – The mental level where discourse is internalized as shared social belief.
3. **Society** – The structural level where cognition is institutionalized through laws, policies, and bureaucracies.

Together, these create what Van Dijk calls the "*discursive circuit of domination*"—a recursive system where power reproduces itself through the organization of meaning. In this sense, modern racism is not about color but about control of discourse, making it especially relevant to postcolonial nations still haunted by linguistic imperialism.

8. Methodology: Conceptual–Critical Synthesis

This paper uses a qualitative conceptual methodology rooted in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Instead of empirical data, it synthesizes theoretical concepts and sociopolitical examples to demonstrate the applicability of Van Dijk's model to South Asia. The analysis proceeds across three interpretative layers:

- **Discourse Analysis:** examining rhetorical forms, slogans, and official language.
 - **Cognitive Analysis:** identifying mental models that reproduce hierarchy.
 - **Institutional Analysis:** tracing how discourse becomes policy and law.
- South Asian examples are selected to illustrate how linguistic and bureaucratic practices perpetuate inequality under seemingly neutral terms.

It is worth mentioning that Primary evidence includes archival newspapers (e.g., *Dawn*, *Pakistan Times*, *The Times of India*, *The Hindu*, *The Statesman*, *The Daily Ittefaq*), were also analyzed via DHA strategies.”

9. Analysis and Discussion

Van Dijk’s (1993) insight that “discourse is not a mirror of reality—it is a constructor of social worlds” underscores the central claim of this analysis: power in South Asia operates linguistically. Discourse provides the architecture through which ideology becomes both natural and moral. In the postcolonial context, elites—politicians, editors, bureaucrats, and corporate leaders—continue to construct meanings that sustain social hierarchy. Their language rarely appears overtly prejudiced; rather, it disguises exclusion beneath the rhetoric of unity, development, or professionalism. The statement “Urdu unites the nation,” long repeated in Pakistan, exemplifies how linguistic nationalism functions as a moral virtue while marginalizing regional languages. Likewise, the slogan “Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan” fuses religion and nationality into a single ideological construct, while in Bangladesh the phrase “One language, one nation” equates Bengali with authenticity. Each slogan pretends inclusivity but performs discursive othering. In these utterances, language is not simply communication—it is the polite mask of exclusion.

Contemporary political speech confirms this continuity. In June 2025, India’s Home Minister Amit Shah asserted that “Hindi is a friend of all Indian languages and cannot be opposed to any” (Shah, 2025). His choice of the word *friend* moralizes dominance by translating linguistic hierarchy into an ethics of harmony. Similarly, Andhra Pradesh’s Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan argued that citizens should not be “ashamed of Hindi” because “it can be understood across all states” (Kalyan, 2025). Here, elite discourse transforms linguistic diversity into a problem of national shame and redemption. Van Dijk would read these utterances as examples of *symbolic racism*—discursive moves that deny prejudice while sustaining the ideological square: emphasizing “our good” (unity) and “their bad” (division).

The same structure appears in Bangladesh, where official commemorations of International Mother Language Day celebrate diversity yet re-centre Bengali as the moral core of national identity. A 2025 tweet from the *Dhaka Tribune*—“Let us all recognize the power of language in shaping our identity”—frames linguistic pride as civic virtue but simultaneously erases minority tongues. As Hoque and Vize (2024) note, Bangladesh has reached “a critical point of losing much of this diversity,” revealing how even inclusive rhetoric reproduces hierarchy. These contemporary data confirm that South Asian elites use moralized discourse to maintain cognitive control—the very process Van Dijk described when he wrote that “controlling discourse means controlling thought.”

Cognition, the second dimension of Van Dijk’s triad, concerns how individuals internalize such language as social truth. Ideologies work through repetition, transforming statements into self-evident “common sense.” In Pakistani education, Ali (2025) observes that policies “rooted in colonial legacies ... perpetuate linguistic disadvantage.” Schoolbooks glorify Muslim rulers while erasing pre-Islamic or regional histories; Indian curricula privilege Sanskritized Hindi and Aryan-Vedic narratives; Bangladeshi syllabi center Bengali nationalism while silencing tribal voices. Through decades of such pedagogy, linguistic hierarchy becomes cognitive morality: to speak the national tongue is patriotic; to speak otherwise is deviant. The 2020 Indian National Education Policy reignited this dynamic by proposing a “three-language formula” that several southern states interpreted as a “veiled scheme to enforce Hindi” (Channel News Asia, 2025). In cognitive terms, these debates show how ideological schemas, unity vs fragmentation, civilization vs backwardness—are recycled from colonial epistemes into democratic vocabularies. Van Dijk’s

ideological square is not merely textual but mental: people are trained to emphasize their group's virtue and the other's deficiency until bias feels like reason.

Cognitive control extends beyond education into the mediated public sphere. Social media hashtags such as #SpeakHindiBePatriotic or #StopCryingSpeakHindi (Facebook Post, 2025) exemplify how lay users reproduce elite frames online, converting nationalism into performative linguistic conformity. At the same time, digital resistance emerges through counter-hashtags defending regional tongues, demonstrating that cognition is contested terrain. This dialogic struggle—between normalization and resistance, illustrates how discourse circulates through society to reinforce or challenge power. The digital domain thus adds a fourth dimension to Van Dijk's model: the algorithmic dissemination of ideology.

Society, the third dimension, institutionalizes what discourse and cognition produce. Bureaucratic language transforms prejudice into policy, creating what Van Dijk (1993, p. 182) calls “the velvet glove of power.” In Pakistan, English-only civil-service examinations continue to privilege urban elites; in India, Hindi-based recruitment quietly sidelines non-Hindi speakers. A 2025 *Times of India* report described the transfer of a State Bank of India manager who refused to speak Kannada to clients—an event that sparked nationwide debate on linguistic coercion (Times of India, 2025c). Such incidents demonstrate how institutional expectations of “efficiency” and “communication” encode nationalist ideology. Corporate culture mirrors this trend: the Managing Director of LG Electronics India delivered his 2025 investor speech in Hindi to “connect emotionally with the market” (Navbharat Times, 2025), signaling that economic legitimacy now requires linguistic conformity. In academic and media institutions, Western theorists remain the “core” curriculum while South Asian scholars are labeled “supplementary,” reproducing epistemic racism through syllabi and citation. Across these arenas, institutions operationalize cognition; discourse thus completes its circuit by materializing as structure.

The Bangla identity debates of 2025 further illuminate how discourse travels from policy to protest. When Delhi Police documents described Bengali as “Bangladeshi language,” Trinamool Congress leader Abhishek Banerjee denounced the act as “a calculated insult ... to strip language of its identity” (Times of India, 2025a). Days later, BJP spokesperson Malviya retorted that “there is no language called Bengali—Bengali denotes ethnicity, not linguistic uniformity” (Times of India, 2025b). West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee countered that she “will not allow linguistic terrorism” and vowed to “fight for Bengali identity” (Economic Times, 2025). The exchange demonstrates Van Dijk's triadic interplay in real time: political discourse frames hierarchy, citizens internalize or resist it cognitively, and institutions, here the police bureaucracy, enact it administratively. Each participant claims moral authority, showing that modern racism, as Van Dijk insists, hides behind virtue.

Across South Asia, then, the triadic model explains a continuous loop. Discourse provides the linguistic scaffolding of ideology; cognition internalizes that ideology as social truth; society institutionalizes it through bureaucratic procedure and media narrative. From colonial “civilization missions” to contemporary “integration policies,” elites manage meaning rather than impose coercion. Their dominance persists because it feels ethical—unity, progress, patriotism. The examples from 2023 to 2025—ministerial speeches, newspaper editorials, tweets, and corporate communication—demonstrate that racism now operates symbolically, through the moralization of language. In Van Dijk's terms, this is *racism without racists*, a system where power reproduces itself through discourse circuits that appear benevolent.

The implication for Critical Discourse Analysis is clear: researchers must treat language not only as data but as a moral technology. To decolonize discourse is to interrupt the feedback loop

between text, thought, and institution. Educational reform, media pluralism, and linguistic equity policies become instruments of emancipation only when they expose and replace the underlying cognitive schemas of hierarchy. As Van Dijk (1993, p. 305) reminds us, “When discourse changes, the world changes.” The South Asian evidence suggests that the inverse is also true: when discourse remains unchanged, so does domination.

10. Findings and Implications

The analysis reveals that Van Dijk’s triadic model remains profoundly relevant to postcolonial South Asia.

- **Finding 1:** Racism operates discursively through nationalist and bureaucratic language.
- **Finding 2:** Cognitive frameworks inherited from colonial epistemes normalize hierarchy as moral duty.
- **Finding 3:** Institutional systems perpetuate these hierarchies through policy, education, and media.

Implications:

CDA must evolve into a decolonial tool, not only diagnosing ideological language but transforming it. Critical pedagogy, inclusive policy-making, and linguistic pluralism are necessary for dismantling symbolic racism.

7. Conclusion

Van Dijk’s *Elite Discourse and Racism* reveals that modern power resides not in coercion but in control of meaning. His Triadic Model—Discourse, Cognition, Society—demonstrates how ideology circulates through language, thought, and institutions to reproduce inequality. In postcolonial South Asia, linguistic nationalism and bureaucratic elitism perform the same function as colonial racism: legitimizing hierarchy through words that appear moral and patriotic.

To resist this invisible domination, societies must decolonize discourse itself, revising education, redefining policy language, and reconstructing the moral grammar of nationhood. As Van Dijk (1993, p. 305) concludes:

“When discourse changes, the world changes.”

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