

## Words are louder than speech: Critical Discourse Analysis of Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail (16 April 1963) in Socio-Political Perspective

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### Abstract

*This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail (16 April 1963), focusing on its socio-political implications. Written in response to clergymen who criticized his nonviolent protests, the letter is a cornerstone of the Civil Rights Movement and an enduring manifesto for justice and equality. By analyzing the language, rhetoric, and ideological underpinnings of King's discourse, this research investigates how his use of persuasive techniques, such as ethos, pathos, and logos, reflects and challenges the political climate of his time. The study reveals how King's rhetoric not only critiques systemic oppression but also strategically positions his arguments within the broader struggle for civil rights and social change. By situating King's letter within the socio-political context of 1963 America, this analysis underscores the power of language as a tool for resistance and societal transformation, highlighting how words, as articulated by King, transcend the immediate moment to shape a lasting socio-political discourse.*

### Introduction:

According to Sipra & Rashid (2013) Martin Luther King's words (speeches and letters) have importance from a socio-political perspective, in which King stood with his stance that the blacks and the whites are one nation without any discrimination. Hence, the memorable letter by King Martin Luther (when he was in prison) highlights the racial discrimination faced by blacks during the Civil Rights Movement.

Critical discourse analysis is carried out to evolve a relationship between language, power and ideology. Martin Luther King's memorable letter highlights the racial discrimination faced by blacks during the Civil Rights Movement. He fought for the equal rights and aimed to eliminate the discriminatory attitude of whites towards blacks. King aimed to make people aware of their rights and the exploitation of whites, aiming to work towards the progress of the nation.

### Purpose of analysis:

The text of the letter revolves around justice and the urgent need for solutions to the Black and White American conflict. Thus, such political text (in the form of speeches or letters) could fulfill the objectives of the present critical discourse analysis to uncover the ideology of justice and social inequality contained within King Martin Luther's speeches and letter.

The purpose of the letter is also to reveal the determination of a prisoned political leader, who even behind the bars is fully aware of his people and somehow tries to communicate with them through letter.

The letter, written by a political prisoner, is considered a significant historical document and a classic example of civil disobedience.

### **Data collection:**

For the sake of data collection web-scraping approach has been adopted which is used to extract data from online platforms such as social media and websites.

The data for the Critical Discourse Analysis is comprised of Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail (16 April 1963). The text of the letter was downloaded from the internet source

➤ [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)

The web page is maintained by African Studies Centre - University of Pennsylvania (United States).

### **Literature Review**

In critically analyzing Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (1963), it is essential to understand how the text serves as both a personal plea and a profound socio-political document (King, 1963). This letter was written during his imprisonment in Birmingham, Alabama, in response to a public statement by eight white clergymen who had criticized his actions and leadership in the Civil Rights Movement (King, 2020). While the letter addresses specific critiques, its deeper implications reveal King's strategic use of rhetoric, moral authority, and ethical appeals, which were designed to transcend the immediate situation and speak to broader questions of justice, morality, and the need for social change.

King's choice of words in the letter becomes a tool for reinforcing his argument. His engagement with the clergymen's arguments uses logical, ethical, and emotional appeals—often in tandem—to demonstrate the ethical necessity of civil disobedience in the face of unjust laws. The letter itself serves as an exemplary case of critical discourse analysis (CDA), a method used to understand how power and inequality are enacted through language. King's discourse is not merely a form of protest but also an articulation of the African American struggle (Leff, & Utley, 2004) for human dignity and equality, challenging the established socio-political norms of the time.

The socio-political context of the letter is critical to its interpretation (Patton, 2004). By placing King's words in the historical milieu of 1960s America—where racial segregation, disenfranchisement, and systemic injustice were rampant—the letter's argument gains significance. King's use of language is not just a rhetorical tool but a means of positioning himself as both a moral and political leader within the Civil Rights Movement. He draws upon historical references, religious imagery, and philosophical arguments to establish the righteousness of his cause, asserting that the struggle for civil rights was a moral imperative that transcended the boundaries of legalistic interpretations of justice.

Moreover, King's response to the clergymen's accusations reveals the tensions between the ideals of nonviolent resistance and the harsh realities of racial oppression (Ghasemireza, 2023). By calling out the hypocrisy of those who advocated for order and stability while turning a blind eye to the rampant racial injustice, King critiques not just the segregationists but also the white moderate, whose inaction he deems as equally dangerous. The discourse here engages with the socio-political reality of white liberalism, which, despite claiming to support equality, often rejected direct action and favored a gradual approach to reform.

Critical discourse analysis of this text reveals how King's rhetorical strategy involves more than just rebutting criticism. It also serves as a call to action for those who were complicit in racial injustice, urging them to confront their own roles in perpetuating a system of inequality. King's appeal to ethos (moral character), logos (logic), and pathos (emotion) creates a multifaceted argument that transcends the immediate context of Birmingham (Zhu, 2021) and becomes an iconic representation of the broader struggle for civil rights in America.

Additionally, the letter underscores the importance of time and urgency. King's famous phrase, "justice too long delayed is justice denied," encapsulates the impatience that fueled the Civil Rights Movement

and critiques the tendency of the white moderates to ask African Americans to wait for a "better time" for equality. Through this, King invokes the socio-political principle of immediacy, arguing that reform cannot be postponed any longer in the face of systemic injustice (Sails-Dunbar, 2017).

In conclusion, Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail* is an eloquent (Johnson, 2007), strategically crafted text that employs the power of language to challenge the socio-political landscape of 1960s America. Through critical discourse analysis, it becomes evident that King's words serve a dual purpose: they respond directly to the criticisms of the white clergymen, while simultaneously positioning King as a moral and political authority advocating for systemic change. The text is not just a letter, but a powerful political tool that continues to resonate with the struggles for justice and equality in contemporary socio-political contexts.

### Methodology:

**Qualitative approach** is adopted to analyze the data. **Fairclough's three Dimensional model** being used to analyze and interpret words, focusing on expressive, ideational, and relational values.

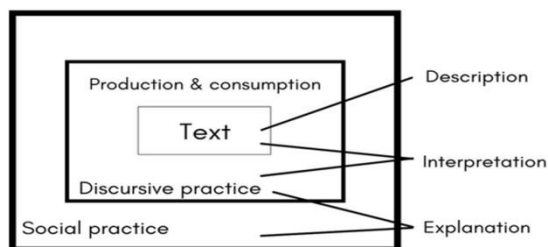
1. **Description** (Aspect, Mood(indicative/subjunctive),use of Pronouns(inclusiveness/to exclude),figures of speech, repetition, sayings)
2. **Interpretation** (Discourse, as a discursive practice, involves the production, distribution, and consumption of information by the reader/listener.)
3. **Explanation** (Social practice involves the interaction with discourse within a broader societal context, examining its relationship with the wider societal context.)

The researcher uses CDA as a theoretical framework to analyze textual aspects revealing social inequality and racial discrimination.

Each of the twelve paragraphs is started with the topic sentence and throughout the paragraph the same concept or ideology is emphasized. This trait of writing refers to **Constant Thematic Progression** in speech, where the Theme of the previous clause is repeated as the Theme in the following one: focusing on the main idea and organizing the selected parts. This technique maintains audience emotions and encourages unity, freeing them from long slavery.

### Data analysis:

According to Fairclough's three Dimensional model



### 1. Description

In this dimension there is an analysis of formal properties of the text (body of the letter). The data has been analyzed by categorizing the repeated concepts in the letter as major themes. To highlight the most recurring features, different aspects of the text has been analysed.

1. **Perfective Aspect of sentences:** There are almost 100 sentences and 92 of them are of Perfective Aspect (the event or action has been completed) as,
  - *when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters;*
  - *Having aided in this community need, we felt that our direct action program could be delayed no longer.*

- *Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts.*
- *My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure.*
- 2. **The repetition** of few content words such as Negro(7), negotiation(9), never (7), just means justice, (19), unjust law (5), direct action (11), no not(18), for years (2), wait (6), help to propagate writer's ideologies effectively and make others to accept it wholeheartedly.
- 3. **Quotation marks(“”)** are used with few words in order to emphasize the meanings of the words, "unwise and untimely", "outsiders coming in", "outside agitator", "Bull", "tension", "well timed", "Wait!", "Never", "nigger", "white" and "colored", "nobodiness". This reflects the basic demand of the text.
  - *While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely."*
  - *I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against "outsiders coming in."*
  - *Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea.*
  - *My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension."*
  - *This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never."*
  - *When you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger."*
  - *When you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"*
- 4. **The Mood of the sentences** is indicative(expresses facts, opinions and general statements), interrogative (?=8) and conditional ( If, 17)
  - *But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms. (Indicative)*
  - *I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham. (Indicative)*
  - *I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience. (Indicative)*
  - *"Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?"*
  - *"Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?"*
  - *You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit- ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?"*
  - *Some have asked: "Why didn't you give the new city administration time to act?"*
  - *When you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"*
  - *One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?"*
  - *If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything (conditional)*
  - *We are sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of Albert Boutwell as mayor will bring the millennium to Birmingham. (conditional)*
  - *Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct action program if such were deemed necessary. (conditional)*



5. **To show Inclusiveness** or the concerns of the writer in the text 1<sup>st</sup> person pronouns are being used frequently (66 times use of I and We) and **to accountable or liable** the intended reader from the mentioned situation of the text 2nd person pronouns (45 times) have been used.

- *Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas.*
- *I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia.*
- *So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here. I am here because I have organizational ties here.*
- *Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.*
- *We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.*
- *We have gone through all these steps in Birmingham.*
- *As the weeks and months went by, we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise.*
- *Mindful of the difficulties involved, we decided to undertake a process of self-purification.*

**To accountable or liable the intended reader (use of 2<sup>nd</sup> person)**

- *But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.*
  - *But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations.*
  - *You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action.*
  - *I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation.*
  - *I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure.*
  - *when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammer to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park*
  - *When you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.*
6. **Use of sayings:** There is also the use of sayings as, "an unjust law is no law at all", "justice too long delayed is justice denied", "thus saith the Lord"
- *One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."*
  - *We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."*
  - *Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home town.*

7. **Constant Thematic Progression**

Each of the twelve paragraphs is started with the topic sentence and throughout the paragraph the same concept or ideology is emphasized, that with the same order are as follows

1. *While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely."*
2. *I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against "outsiders coming in."*
3. *But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here.*
4. *Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states.*

5. *You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations.*
6. *In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action.*
7. *Then, last September, came the opportunity to talk with leaders of Birmingham's economic community. In the course of the negotiations, certain promises were made by the merchants--for example, to remove the stores' humiliating racial signs.*
8. *Then it occurred to us that Birmingham's mayoral election was coming up in March, and we speedily decided to postpone action until after election day.*
9. *You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation.*
10. *One of the basic points in your statement is that the action that I and my associates have taken in Birmingham is untimely.*
11. *We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.*
12. *We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights.*

### **Context and Audience Analysis:**

Context and audience analysis are vital aspects of studying political language and rhetoric. Martin Luther King Jr. (January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968) was an American activist and political philosopher who was one of the most prominent leaders in the civil rights movement from 1955 until his assassination in 1968. The letter, written in response to "A Call for Unity" during the 1963 Birmingham campaign, was widely published, and became an important text for the civil rights movement in the United States. The letter has been described as "one of the most important historical documents penned by a political prisoner", and is considered a classic document of civil disobedience.

### **2. Interpretation and explanation:**

Analysis of the text on the basis of descriptive features refers the patterns of particular identification in the speech. It is clear from the start that the letter is written in response to white clergymen's article ("A Call for Unity") published in a newspaper. To highlight distinctive lexical choices throughout the letter above mentioned descriptive tools of the writing were used.

King began the letter by addressing criticism on his fellow activists as "outsiders" in Birmingham.

Words in the **quotation marks** ("") are the same words which were used by the opposition in order to slow down or stop their movement in different meetings and recent written article. **Perfective aspect** of the sentences reveals that most of the issues and things which have been discussed in the letter have done or implemented practically from centuries (340 years) which is mentioned in the first line of the last (12th) paragraph. As he was fighting for the rights of Afro-Americans so, he mentioned the brutal behavior of White American which was being in practice by using Perfective aspect of the sentences.

**Expressive and relational values** in the letter are maintained through the **Mood of the sentences**, significantly stating the tone of the text. Indicative mood reflects how personally Martin Luther desires to resolve and taking the issues of Black Americans seriously. The writer, a Negro, embodies the experiences of all Negroes, expressing their involvement and enthusiasm in addressing the same deprivation and indifferent attitude of Whites. By posing number of questions and conditions he asked to the authorities what if you were at the same place and insisted to imagine the same scenario.

He painted the dreadful future of his generation by explaining the questions a (Negro) child asks when he is growing up (in the last para of the selected text) in such miserable socio-political situation of injustice.

**Inclusiveness** of the writer is expressed through his frequent use of 1<sup>st</sup> person pronouns (I, We), as he identifies himself as part of the oppressed group, using pronouns like 'I' and 'We' to engage with and express their sentiments. In the same way by using 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun "you", Martin Luther exclude or liable to the authorities or government. Three times **sayings** were used in the letter. King listed numerous ongoing injustices toward Black people, including him by using the saying, as "*justice too long delayed is justice denied*," which declared that African Americans had waited for the God-given and constitutional rights long enough. By using the saying of St. Augustine that "*an unjust law is no law at all*" in the last (12th) paragraph he explained that one has the responsibility to obey the law but if the law is unjust one has the right to raise against or disobey the law.

The selected part of the letter is thought wise well organized and well knitted. The chain of the related ideas can be observed by the topic sentence of each of the twelve paragraphs which represent the **constant thematic progression**. To keep the audience feelings intact this technique is used.

### Conclusion:

The analysis investigated the ideological discourse structure and core themes of the letter. The letter carries all of the prerequisites which a text must contain in order to propagate the ideology in an accentuated way. It seems to be syntactically well-organized with frequent repetitions emphasizing the main theme which is inequality of socio-cultural rights and racial discrimination on the basis of color and creed. In the last para of the selected text King stressed that they have been suffering from the identity of "nobodiness", if the situation will not be handled wisely it will lead inevitably to a frightening nightmare of social inequality and injustice.

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