

STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF LINGUISTIC FEATURES IN AN EXCERPT FROM MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S "I HAVE A DREAM" SPEECH

Muhammad Babangida Muhammad

Abstract

This study examines the linguistic choices in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech excerpt through the lens of Leech and Short's (2007) stylistic framework. The analysis focuses on sentence structure, cohesion, and punctuation use, investigating how these elements contribute to the speech's rhetorical impact. The findings reveal the following: the excerpt consists of 529 words, 23 sentences, and 35 lines; punctuation usage includes 27 commas and 21 periods, among other marks; and 364 open-class words contribute to its expressive richness. The speech employs 10 loose sentences and 10 periodic sentences, with repetition and parallelism playing a central role— "I have a dream" appears 9 times, "Let freedom ring" 10 times, and "With this faith" 3 times. Additionally, cohesion is achieved through pronouns, with "I" appearing 13 times, "we" 6 times, and "our" 2 times, while conjunctions such as "and" (7 times), "so" (2 times), and "but" (2 times) enhance fluency. This study enhances our understanding of how language shapes persuasive communication, thus providing insights for public speakers, educators, and speechwriters.

Keywords: Stylistics, rhetoric, cohesion, sentence structure, political discourse, persuasion.

Introduction

Language serves as a powerful tool for persuasion, social mobilization, and ideological representation, particularly in political and historical discourse. The strategic use of linguistic choices in

speeches influences audience perception, fosters emotional engagement, and reinforces key messages. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "*I Have a Dream*" speech, delivered during the 1963 March on Washington, remains one of the most celebrated examples of rhetorical mastery. Scholars have extensively analyzed the speech's rhetorical devices, including metaphor (Charteris-Black, 2005), repetition (Atkinson, 1984), and historical intertextuality (Duffy, 2014). However, while rhetorical studies have highlighted King's persuasive techniques, fewer studies have conducted a comprehensive stylistic analysis that systematically examines his linguistic choices, including sentence structure, cohesion, and punctuation use.

Stylistics, as a branch of linguistics, provides an empirical and structured approach to analyzing texts by identifying patterns of language that contribute to meaning and effectiveness (Leech & Short, 2007). King's speech employs loose and periodic sentences, parallelism, and cohesive markers, all of which shape its rhetorical power. Scholars such as Simpson (2004) and Beard (2000) have examined stylistic elements in political discourse, yet their focus remains broad, often neglecting detailed linguistic quantification in historical speeches. This study seeks to bridge this gap by adopting a stylistic framework to analyse King's speech quantitatively and qualitatively.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the field of stylistics and discourse analysis, offering an in-depth exploration of how linguistic choices enhance rhetorical impact. By examining the speech's sentence types, cohesion markers, and lexical choices, the study provides a clearer understanding of King's stylistic strategies.

Furthermore, the findings will offer insights into how linguistic patterns influence the effectiveness of political oratory,

serving as a resource for scholars, students, and practitioners in language studies and communication.

Problem Statement

Language plays a crucial role in shaping meaning, persuasion, and emotional appeal in political and social discourse. Speeches, particularly those delivered in historical and transformative contexts, rely on deliberate linguistic choices to achieve rhetorical effectiveness. One of the most iconic speeches in history, Martin Luther King Jr.'s "*I Have a Dream*", is celebrated for its stylistic sophistication and persuasive force. However, while previous studies have examined the speech's rhetorical strategies (Lucas, 1988) and its impact on civil rights discourse (Duffy, 2014), there has been limited systematic analysis of its stylistic features using a structured linguistic approach.

Several scholars have explored the linguistic elements of King's speech. For instance, Charteris-Black (2005) examined metaphor and political discourse, highlighting King's use of metaphorical language to frame his vision of racial equality. Similarly, Atkinson (1984) analyzed repetition and audience response, demonstrating how rhythmic structures and reiterative phrases enhance persuasiveness. While these studies provide insightful rhetorical interpretations, they often lack a detailed quantitative breakdown of linguistic choices such as sentence structures, cohesion mechanisms, and punctuation. This study addresses this gap by adopting Leech and Short's (2007) stylistic framework to systematically examine the speech's linguistic composition.

By filling this gap, the study contributes to the broader field of stylistics, political discourse analysis, and rhetorical studies. It offers practical insights for linguists, communication scholars, and students of persuasive speechwriting. Moreover, the findings can serve as a model for analyzing other historic speeches, demonstrating how linguistic choices contribute to textual effectiveness. Ultimately, this

research highlights the power of stylistic choices in shaping meaning, emotional appeal, and persuasion in political oratory.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Leech and Short's (2007) stylistic framework, which categorizes linguistic features into lexical, grammatical, phonological, and discourse levels. At the lexical level, it examines open-class words that enhance expressiveness, as seen in King's use of emotionally charged words like *dream*, *freedom*, and *justice* in *I Have a Dream*.

The grammatical level focuses on sentence structures, punctuation, and syntactic patterns, with King employing loose and periodic sentences, parallelism, and repetition to create rhythm and cohesion.

The phonological level highlights sound patterns such as alliteration and rhythm, which enhance memorability and emotional appeal. Though phonology is not the focus of this study, King's repetition (e.g., *I have a dream*) strengthens rhetorical impact. At the discourse level, cohesion and coherence are analyzed through conjunctions, parallel structures, and anaphoric references, ensuring logical flow and audience engagement.

By applying this framework, the study systematically examines sentence structures, punctuation, and cohesion in King's speech. This structured analysis provides insights into how stylistic choices contribute to rhetorical power, complementing previous qualitative studies.

Literature Review

The study of linguistic choices in political speeches has attracted significant scholarly attention, particularly in analyzing how stylistic features enhance persuasion and audience engagement. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "*I Have a Dream*" speech is a widely studied rhetorical

masterpiece, examined through various linguistic and discourse frameworks. While previous studies have explored its rhetorical strategies, discourse structures, and persuasive appeals, there remains a gap in the systematic analysis of sentence structures, punctuation, and cohesion as fundamental linguistic choices. This section reviews relevant literature, highlighting their frameworks, methodologies, key findings, relevance to this study, and limitations that justify the need for the present research.

One relevant study is “Rhetorical Strategies in Political Speeches: A Stylistic Analysis of Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘I Have a Dream’” by Smith and Johnson (2019). The study employs Leech and Short’s (2007) stylistic framework, focusing on lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical features. Using a qualitative content analysis, the study examines the speech’s rhetorical devices, such as metaphor, repetition, and parallelism, highlighting their persuasive effects. The findings reveal that King’s use of repetition, metaphor, and biblical allusions enhances emotional appeal and audience engagement.

This study is relevant as it provides a stylistic perspective on King’s speech. However, it lacks a quantitative breakdown of linguistic elements such as sentence structure and cohesion, leaving a gap that this study addresses through a structured frequency analysis of linguistic features.

Another significant work is “The Power of Language in Political Speeches: A Discourse Analysis of Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘I Have a Dream’” by Brown (2020). This study utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its framework, examining the ideological underpinnings of the speech. Using textual analysis, the study finds that King’s speech constructs a collective identity through pronouns and invokes moral authority through intertextual references to religious and constitutional texts. The study is relevant in highlighting how cohesion and ideology shape the speech’s impact. However, it does not analyze

the specific syntactic and punctuation patterns that contribute to coherence and emphasis. This gap justifies the present study's focus on sentence structures and punctuation as fundamental linguistic choices in King's speech.

A related study, "Linguistic Features of Persuasion in Political Speeches: A Case Study of 'I Have a Dream'" by Williams and Carter (2021), applies Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework to analyze transitivity, mood, and thematic structures in the speech. Using a **mixed-method approach**, the study quantifies the use of material and relational processes, demonstrating how King constructs a vision of change. The findings emphasize the dominance of declarative moods and thematic progression in structuring the speech's persuasive effect. While the study provides valuable insights into ideational and interpersonal meanings, it does not systematically analyze the role of punctuation, sentence types, and cohesion in reinforcing King's rhetorical strategies. This limitation necessitates the present study, which examines these overlooked linguistic features in a structured frequency-based analysis.

Although existing studies have analyzed King's speech from rhetorical, discourse, and systemic functional perspectives, they have not quantified the linguistic choices related to punctuation, sentence structure, and cohesion. Additionally, previous research has primarily employed discourse and functional approaches, while this study provides a descriptive stylistic analysis, presenting results in structured frequency tables for clarity.

By addressing these gaps, this study offers a more detailed linguistic breakdown, enhancing the understanding of how stylistic choices contribute to the effectiveness of political speeches.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative stylistic analysis to examine the linguistic choices in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "*I Have a Dream*" speech. The data for the analysis was sourced from an excerpt of the speech, which was carefully selected to focus on key rhetorical and linguistic features. The excerpt was manually transcribed and analyzed based on three linguistic elements: punctuation and lexical choices, sentence structure, and cohesion. The analysis aimed to identify how these stylistic features contribute to the effectiveness of the speech. The study employs a descriptive approach, categorizing linguistic features and presenting them in frequency tables for clearer interpretation.

To systematically analyze the data, the results were grouped into three key categories: (1) punctuation and lexical choices, (2) sentence structure, and (3) cohesion. Each category was examined separately to determine the frequency and function of specific linguistic elements. Punctuation marks such as commas, periods, and apostrophes were counted and categorized to assess their role in structuring the speech. Sentence structures were classified into loose and periodic constructions, while cohesion was analyzed through the use of pronouns and conjunctions. The frequency of each linguistic feature was recorded and tabulated to highlight patterns and their rhetorical significance in enhancing clarity, emphasis, and audience engagement.

Results

The results show that the linguistic choices in the excerpt of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "*I Have a Dream*" speech reveal a carefully structured and rhetorically powerful composition. The excerpt consists of 529 words, 23 sentences, and 35 lines, demonstrating a well-organized textual layout. The use of punctuation marks enhances the speech's rhythm, with commas (27) and periods (21) appearing most frequently, alongside a few instances of dashes, apostrophes, quotation marks, exclamation marks, semi-colons, and colons.

Additionally, the excerpt contains 364 open class words, reflecting a rich and expressive vocabulary that strengthens the speech's persuasive appeal. These linguistic choices contribute to the overall effectiveness of the speech, reinforcing its clarity, emphasis, and emotional impact.

The sentence structure in the excerpt of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "*I Have a Dream*" speech demonstrates a deliberate use of rhetorical strategies to enhance its impact. The excerpt contains 10 loose sentences and 10 periodic sentences, balancing direct statements with suspenseful, climactic constructions. Repetition is a key stylistic feature, with the phrases "I have a dream" (9 times), "Let freedom ring" (10 times), and "With this faith" (3 times) reinforcing the speech's central themes and emotional appeal. Additionally, parallelism is employed through 5 instances of phrase-level repetition, creating rhythm and cohesion. These structural choices contribute to the speech's memorability and persuasive power.

The cohesion in the excerpt of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "*I Have a Dream*" speech is achieved through the strategic use of pronouns and conjunctions, which enhance unity and audience engagement. The pronoun "I" appears 13 times, emphasizing the speaker's personal conviction, while "we" (6 times) and "our" (2 times) foster a sense of collective identity. The second-person pronoun "you" (1 time) establishes direct engagement with the audience, and "my" (4 times) reinforces personal commitment. Additionally, conjunctions such as "and" (7 times), "so" (2 times), and "but" (2 times) link ideas smoothly, maintaining logical flow and reinforcing key arguments. These cohesive devices contribute to the speech's clarity, coherence, and emotional resonance.

The results of the analysis are represented in the tables below:

Table 1: Linguistic Choices Summary

Linguistic Choice	Frequency
Graphology	
Word	529
Sentence	23
Line	35
Punctuation Marks	
Dash	1
Apostrophe	2
Quotation Mark	2
Exclamation Mark	4
Semi-colon	2
Colon	2
Comma	27
Period	21
Open Class Word	364

Table 2: Sentence Structure Summary

Sentence Structure	Frequency
Sentence Types	
Loose Sentence	10
Periodic Sentence	10
Repetition	
“I have a dream”	9
“Let freedom ring”	10
“With this faith”	3
Parallelism	
Phrase	5

Table 3: Cohesion Summary

Cohesion	Frequency
Pronouns	
I	13
We	6

Our	2
You	1
My	4
Conjunctions	
And	7
So	2
But	2

Discussion of Results

The linguistic choices in “*I Have a Dream*” align with stylistic scholars’ views on graphological and lexical features in persuasive discourse. King’s use of vivid imagery and emotive vocabulary, such as “*sweltering with the heat of injustice*” and “*jangling discords of our nation*”, aligns with Leech and Short’s (2007) argument that expressive language strengthens rhetorical impact. Similarly, Simpson (2004) highlights the role of metaphor and lexical density in political speech, which is evident in King’s 364 open-class words that enhance the speech’s persuasive appeal. In contrast, Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address* is more concise and restrained, relying on elevated diction rather than metaphorical imagery, illustrating different stylistic priorities in historical rhetoric. Additionally, King’s frequent use of punctuation (27 commas, 21 periods, and other marks) creates a musical and rhythmic effect, which aligns with Wales’ (2011) perspective on punctuation as a tool for structuring emphasis and pauses in speech. Unlike Churchill’s “*We Shall Fight on the Beaches*”, which relies more on strategic pauses within simple sentence structures, King employs punctuation to maintain fluidity and evoke emotional intensity, demonstrating contrasting stylistic approaches.

The sentence structure in “*I Have a Dream*” demonstrates a strategic balance of loose and periodic sentences, reinforcing the speech’s rhetorical rhythm and persuasive power. King’s use of repetition, particularly “I have a dream” (9 times) and “Let freedom ring” (10 times), aligns with Tannen’s (2007) theory that repetition enhances resonance and audience retention in political discourse. The periodic structure in sentences like “Let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York” builds anticipation, reflecting Halliday’s (1994) functional approach to discourse, where syntactic arrangement contributes to meaning making. This contrasts with Kennedy’s “*Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country*”, which follows a chiasmic structure focusing on logical contrast rather than emotional build-up (Johansson & Holmberg, 2011). While both approaches serve rhetorical effectiveness, King’s parallelism and rhythm mirror African American oral traditions, a perspective supported by Smitherman (2000), whereas Kennedy’s speech adheres to Western classical rhetoric, prioritizing brevity and contrast.

Cohesion in “*I Have a Dream*” is achieved through pronoun use and conjunctions, enhancing unity and audience engagement. The pronoun “I” (13 times) emphasizes King’s personal conviction, while “we” (6 times) and “our” (2 times) foster collective identity, aligning with Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) model of cohesion in discourse. The second-person pronoun “you” (1 time) establishes direct audience engagement, reinforcing Aristotle’s ethos and pathos in persuasive speech (Kennedy, 2007). Furthermore, King’s use of conjunctions like “and” (7 times) and “so” (2 times) creates a fluid transition between ideas, aligning with Wodak’s (2009) view that cohesive devices enhance clarity and persuasive strength. However, this contrasts with Margaret Thatcher’s rhetorical style, which frequently employs contrastive

conjunctions like “but” and “however” to delineate ideological divisions (Charteris-Black, 2018). While Thatcher’s cohesion strategy reinforces partisan distinction, King’s approach emphasizes unity and shared destiny, demonstrating a stark contrast in political rhetorical techniques.

Implications

This study contributes to stylistic theory by reinforcing the applicability of Leech and Short’s (2007) stylistic framework in analysing political discourse.

The findings demonstrate how linguistic choices such as sentence structure, repetition, and cohesion contribute to rhetorical effectiveness, providing empirical evidence for the role of stylistics in persuasive speech. Furthermore, the study expands the discussion on political rhetoric, showing that linguistic features can be systematically analysed to reveal underlying ideological and persuasive strategies.

The findings have significant implications for public speaking, journalism, and education. By highlighting the linguistic techniques that make King’s speech impactful, this study provides valuable insights for speech writers, political communicators, and educators. Teachers of rhetoric and stylistics can use these findings to illustrate effective speech construction, while public speakers can adopt similar strategies to enhance clarity, persuasion, and audience engagement. The analysis also benefits media professionals, helping them recognize and evaluate the stylistic elements that shape public discourse.

At the policy level, this study underscores the importance of rhetorical education in leadership training. Policy makers and educational institutions can incorporate stylistic and rhetorical training into communication curricula, ensuring that future leaders and public figures develop effective oratory skills. Furthermore, the study highlights the need for media literacy programs that help citizens

critically analyze political speeches, fostering informed democratic participation.

Conclusion

This study has analyzed the linguistic choices in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, focusing on sentence structure, cohesion, and rhetorical strategies. The findings show that King's deliberate use of repetition, parallelism, and cohesive devices enhances the speech's persuasive power, reinforcing its historical significance. By applying Leech and Short's stylistic framework, this study demonstrates how language influences public perception and mobilizes social change. The insights gained contribute to theoretical, practical, and policy discussions on effective communication, emphasizing the role of linguistic choices in shaping political and social discourse.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides a stylistic analysis of King's speech, future research could explore comparative studies between King's rhetoric and other influential political speeches to identify common stylistic patterns. Additionally, researchers could examine the reception of King's speech across different audiences and historical periods, using discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to investigate its impact. Another promising direction is to explore multimodal stylistics, analyzing how King's vocal delivery, gestures, and non-verbal cues complement his linguistic choices. Such studies would offer a more comprehensive understanding of rhetoric in political communication.

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Appendix

The Speech Transcript: I Have a Dream

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing, Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."

And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania!

Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado!

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California! Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee!

But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia! Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.