

CONSTRUCTING LEGITIMACY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF KEIR STARMER'S RESIGNATION SPEECH

ФОРМУВАННЯ ЛЕГІТИМНОСТІ: КРИТИЧНИЙ ДИСКУРС-АНАЛІЗ ПРОМОВИ КІРА СТАРМЕРА ПРО ВІДСТАВКУ

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Political resignation speeches represent an underexplored genre of political discourse where leaders attempt to preserve legitimacy while giving up formal authority. In contemporary mediated democracies, political leadership is often evaluated not only through policy outcomes but also through the ability to construct persuasive narratives of responsibility, success, institutional continuity, and public trust. This study investigates the discursive strategies employed in Keir Starmer's resignation speech and linguistic means of their realisation to research how political legitimacy is reconstructed at the moment of leadership transition. The research applies Critical Discourse Analysis based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, van Dijk's ideological approach, and Wodak's discourse-historical perspective. The analysis focuses on evaluative language, metaphors, pronoun distribution, narrative construction, and discursive omissions.

The results demonstrate that the resignation speech constructs a transformation narrative from a crisis-ridden past, successful political leadership to a stable institutional future. Positive self-presentation is emphasised through moralised vocabulary focusing on decency, fairness, dignity, and responsibility. The distribution of singular and collective pronouns separates responsibility and political achievement. Metaphors present political change as renewal and progress, while the omission of internal political conflicts and failures depoliticises the resignation and represents it as responsibility, not a political failure. Resignation speeches function as means of legacy construction that influence public perceptions of political authority. The research adds to the conceptualising of resignation discourse as a distinct political genre and broadens the understanding of legitimacy construction in contemporary political communication.

Key words: Critical Discourse Analysis, political discourse, legitimacy, mediatization, narrative, Keir Starmer, ideology.

Політичні промови про відставку представляють собою недостатньо досліджений жанр політичного дискурсу, у якому лідери намагаються зберегти легітимність, відмовляючись від формальної влади. У сучасних медіатизованих демократіях політичне лідерство оцінюється не лише за результатами політики, але й за здатністю конструювати переконливі наративи відповідальності, успіху, інституційної безперервності та довіри суспільства. Це дослідження аналізує дискурсивні стратегії, використані у промові про відставку Кіра Стармера, та мовні засоби їх реалізації для з'ясування того, як політична легітимність реконструюється в момент переходу влади. Дослідження застосовує критичний дискурс-аналіз, заснований на трикомпонентній моделі Нормана Ферклафа, ідеологічному підході Теуна ван Дейка та дискурсивно-історичному підході Рут Водак. Аналіз зосереджується на оцінній лексиці, метафорах, вживанні займенників, наративній побудові та дискурсивних замовчуваннях.

Результати аналізу показують, що промова про відставку вибудовує наратив трансформації: від кризового минулого до успішного політичного лідерства та стабільного інституційного майбутнього. Позитивна самопрезентація підкреслюється через морально забарвлену лексику, що акцентує порядність, справедливість, гідність і відповідальність. Розподіл займенників в однині і множині розмежовує відповідальність і політичні досягнення. Метафори подають політичні зміни як оновлення і прогрес, тоді як замовчування внутрішніх політичних конфліктів і невдач деполітизує відставку та подає її як відповідальність, а не політичну поразку. Промови про відставку функціонують як засіб конструювання політичної спадщини, що впливає на суспільне сприйняття політичної влади. Дослідження доповнює концептуалізацію дискурсу відставки як окремого політичного жанру та розширює розуміння конструювання легітимності в сучасній політичній комунікації.

Ключові слова: критичний аналіз дискурсу, політичний дискурс, легітимність, медіатизація, наратив, Кіра Стармер, ідеологія.

Introduction. Contemporary political communication is often shaped by mediatization and narrative-driven legitimacy construction [1, p. 93; 2, p. 132]. “Media logic provides an incentive structure that contextualises, and often shapes, political processes – particularly those that are dependent on publicity and public support.” [3, p. 177]. Political leaders are no longer evaluated only through policy outcomes but also through their ability to construct coherent narratives of leadership and institutional stability. So, resignation speeches function not only as common institutional announcements, but also serve as legacy-defining performances where political actors try to stabilise interpretations of their holding of an office.

The resignation speech of Keir Starmer [4] presents a valuable example for examining how modern political leaders construct legitimacy at the moment of their exit. The report is structured by narratives of transformation and national renewal. His resignation is framed not as a political defeat but as a rational and responsible democratic transition. This article analyzes how discursive strategies and linguistic means construct the post-authority legitimacy and fill a gap in CDA research on exit discourse as a political genre.

Analysis of contemporary scientific papers. Recent CDA studies emphasise that political discourse should be considered in broad structures of mediatized governance and affective legitimacy [5, p. 25; 6, p. 789]. Critical Discourse Analysis remains central to understanding the relationship between language and power in political contexts. Fairclough [7, p.85] identifies discourse as a dialectical process linking textual features with social structures. Wodak highlights the increasing role of legitimacy narratives in sustaining political authority in fragmented democracies [8, p. 203]. Van Dijk’s ideological square is applied in analysing how political actors emphasise in-group achievements while hiding their mistakes [9, p. 30].

Political communication research highlights the transformation of political leadership into a mediated performance [9, p. 4; 11, p.18]. Leaders often construct identity through narrative coherence, emotional framing, and symbolic gestures. This is particularly relevant for resignation speeches, which function as visible media events. Leaders construct “life-cycle narratives” that link past achievements with future legitimacy [12, p. 74]. And resignation reports represent closing periods that are often reframed as moral or institutional decisions rather than consequences of failure [13, p. 6; 14, p.87].

Resignation speeches remain underexplored as a distinct discursive genre as existing CDA research focused on electoral discourse, populist communication, crisis rhetoric, parliamentary debates [1, 2, 10, 11, 18]. Little attention has been paid to exit discourse and legacy stabilization strategies in parliamentary democracies.

The purpose of the article is to study the discursive strategies that construct ideology beyond formal political authority in the resignation speech and to explore the linguistic means for their realisation.

Methodology. This study applies Critical Discourse Analysis with Fairclough’s three-dimensional model [15, p.87], van Dijk’s ideological square [9, p. 30], Wodak’s discourse-historical approach [5, p. 25]. We conducted textual analysis (evaluative language, metaphors, pronoun distribution, omission and silencing strategies), analysed discursive practice (narrative structure, audience positioning, intertextuality) and social practice (ideological framing, legitimacy construction, political context).

Presentation of the main material. The results of the research show that the resignation speech represents the type of political legitimacy reconstruction where the leadership is interpreted at the moment of exit. As a result, the report constructs a transformation narrative: the degraded past that was inherited, the reformist present while holding the office and a stable future after the exit, that corresponds to the contemporary research findings on political storytelling as legitimacy work [12, p. 74]. The narrative intensifies crisis framing, redefines political leadership as successful progression and establishes a starting point for redemption:

“Six years ago, I inherited a Labour Party that was politically, financially and morally bankrupt. I was told, time and time again, that my party was finished.”

“An economy that is stronger, growing faster than our peers. Wages rising faster than inflation in every single month since we came to power. Investment secured, infrastructure being built. An end to austerity, with the fastest fall in NHS waiting lists for 17 years.... The biggest improvement in rights for workers and renters in a generation. The biggest uplift in defence spending since the Cold War. Small boat crossings falling, asylum hotels closing, protecting young people from social media, and half a million children being lifted out of poverty because of the choices that I made.... Our reputation in the world restored, with Britain once again standing up for decency, respect and the rule of law. Securing trade deals, standing with Ukraine, standing up for our values, and rebuilding our relationship with our allies in Europe.”

"And I will do everything I can to ensure an orderly handover of power. I will also give my successor my full and unequivocal support..."

So, in Keir Starmer's resignation speech [4], discourse does not mark the end of authority but presents it as the transformation into symbolic legacy. This supports Fairclough's [17, p. 11] view of discourse as part of social reality, particularly in moments of institutional transition.

The transfer from detailed negative evaluation to simplified positive transformation demonstrates what van Dijk [9, p. 30] identifies as ideological compression, where complex political processes are reduced to binary success narratives:

"That we were consigned to history, that a majority at the general election, let alone a landslide majority, was impossible. But we proved those people wrong because we changed our party."

The report aligns the successes to the promises accentuating the achievements:

"Change promised by a Labour government. Change fought for by a Labour government, change delivered by a Labour government."

The speech emphasizes moral values, such as "decency," "fairness," "dignity," and "responsibility" that reflects a wider trend in modern politics, where leaders seek support by presenting themselves as ethical and trustworthy rather than focusing on ideological differences [5, p. 25]:

"To build a fairer country, with dignity and respect, where everyone is seen, everyone is valued."

"Our reputation in the world restored, with Britain once again standing up for decency, respect and the rule of law. Securing trade deals, standing with Ukraine, standing up for our values, and rebuilding our relationship with our allies in Europe."

"Every decision I've taken has been about putting the country I love first."

Pronoun use demonstrates ideological distribution: "I"-pronoun is associated with responsibility, resignation, accountability, while the collective pronoun "We" with success, reform, achievement. This confirms van Dijk's [9, p. 30] ideological square in contemporary leadership discourse:

"I will resign as leader of the Labour Party."

"I will remain in post as Prime Minister until the contest is complete. And I will do everything I can to ensure an orderly handover of power."

"I have heard the answer of my parliamentary party."

"I will also give my successor my full and unequivocal support..."

In the report, success is consistently collectivised and realised with collective pronouns ("we", "our"):

"We proved those people wrong."

"We changed our party."

"And look at what we've achieved in just two years."

"Our reputation in the world restored, with Britain once again standing up for decency, respect and the rule of law."

So, this distribution of pronouns constructs a dual identity structure where the speaker has moral authority and shares success with a collective subject.

Metaphors play a key role [18, p. 5] in simplifying and moralising political transformation. In the following examples, metaphors frame political change as inevitable progression:

"A page in our country's history turned."

By using this metaphor ("The journey to that point was not easy"), the author strengthens the image of a committed leader with much perseverance and encourages the audience to positively evaluate his political service:

"The chance to change the lives of millions of people for the better. That's what I came into politics for. The journey to that point was not easy."

The expression ("ripping out the poison") constructs a metaphor, where the political party is compared with a biological organism and antisemitism as a contaminant. The implication is that internal reform is not political disagreement but purifying:

"Ripping out the poison of antisemitism."

This metaphorical framing aligns with Wodak's [5, p. 25] argument that contemporary political discourse greatly relies on moralisation strategies to stabilise legitimacy.

The speech is characterised by the systematic removal of political antagonism: direct mentioning of conflicts, internal opposition, leadership competition, or policy disagreement. This proves what recent literature describes as "conflict suppression discourse" in elite political communication (Terrana et al. [19, p. 10], [16, p. 190]) and "re-nationalized centrism" in contemporary European politics [1, p. 93; 11, p. 18]. Communication strategies neutralise antagonism to preserve institutional and economic stability, institutional trust, rule of law, and international credibility. The result is a depoliticised narrative of natural and smooth transition rather than political exit with contest:

"The question my party is asking now is whether I am best placed to lead us into the next general election. I have heard the answer of my parliamentary party to that question. And I accept that answer with good grace."

So, the discursive strategies and lexical choices separate political legitimacy from ideological com-

petition to ethical universals. This supports Bennett and Livingston's [2, p. 132] argument that contemporary political communication increasingly relies on moral framing. Resignation is defined not as loss of power but as ethical responsibility that corresponds to Roselle et al. [12, p. 77] statements, who report that political actors increasingly construct exit narratives as part of broader legitimacy strategies. As a result, resignation is presented as a continuation of service-oriented leadership.

Conclusions. The analysis of Keir Starmer's resignation speech was conducted with the application of a Critical Discourse Analysis to understand how political exit discourse helps construct leadership legitimacy. The results of the study demonstrate that resignation speeches operate as strategic events where political actors construct how their leadership will be remembered and evaluated. The research demonstrates that Starmer's speech creates a narrative of political transformation in which the Labour Party is an institution that has transitioned from the crisis to the stability under his leadership. Positive self-presentation, strategic pronoun distribution, met-

aphorical framing, and selective omission of political conflict construct the legitimising discourse that represents successful governance and responsible resignation.

At the text level, such linguistic means as evaluative adjectives ("stronger," "fairer") and moralised vocabulary ("decency," "respect") positively represent political actions. At the discursive level, the resignation is presented as a democratic transition period, not as a consequence of political pressure and conflict. At the social level, the resignation speech demonstrates ideological assumptions about leadership as service and governance as moral responsibility.

The article highlights discursive silence as a part of political meaning. Omitting of leadership contestation and policy failures is a deliberate strategy of depoliticisation that helps create a narrative of the speaker's legacy.

Future research may focus on studies of political systems or leaders to research how resignation reports differ in legitimacy and political identity construction.

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