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Language Weaponization in Political Discourse: An Exploration of Ideologies and their Implications for Peaceful Co-Existence in Kenya.

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aimed to investigate how language is weaponized in Kenya political discourse and the implications this has for peaceful coexistence in the country.

Methodology: A qualitative research design was adopted with analysis focusing on a purposively selected sample of 30 political speeches made between 2017 and 2025 by high-profile Kenyan politicians. Data was collected from audiovisual archives and transcribed media sources, analyzed using AntConc and QDA Miner Lite through thematic and discourse-analytic techniques.

Findings: The findings revealed that weaponization of language is constructed through adverbial labeling, polarizing pronoun usage, lexical aggression, and emotionally charged appeals. Political actors frequently employed group versus out-group framing, metaphors of conflict, and veiled threats to mobilize support and delegitimize opponents. Ideological narratives embedded in the discourse included populism. Anti-elitism, religious justification, nationalism. While some language promoted unity and inclusion, much of the discourse was divisive, contributing to social tension, ethnic polarization, and diminished civic trust.

Recommendations: The study recommends civic education to enhance public awareness of manipulative rhetoric, stronger regulatory enforcement to curb hate speech, and the promotion of inclusive political communication that emphasizes national unity and democratic stability.

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a medium of communication but a powerful social instrument through which ideologies, identities, and power relations are constructed and contested. In political contexts, language is particularly influential, functioning as a tool of persuasion, mobilization, and identity construction while also serving as a means of manipulation and control (Fairclough, 1995; Beard, 2000). The concept of language weaponization captures this phenomenon, referring to the deliberate use of discourse to incite divisions, consolidate political power, and provoke emotional responses that fracture societies (Bryan & Gerald, 2020; Pascale, 2019). In ethnically diverse contexts such as Kenya, political rhetoric often transcends mere communication, shaping perceptions of belonging, amplifying cleavages, and influencing the fragile equilibrium of peaceful coexistence.

Kenya's political history underscores the dangers of divisive speech. Episodes of electoral violence, most notably the 2007–2008 post-election crisis, illustrate how inflammatory rhetoric intertwined with ethnic polarization can destabilize communities and undermine national unity (Anderson & Lochery, 2008). While reforms such as the 2010 Constitution and statutory mechanisms like the National Cohesion and Integration Act (2008) sought to mitigate these risks, political leaders continue to exploit language as a tool of soft violence. Contemporary political speeches frequently deploy coded threats, populist narratives, and inflammatory expressions under the guise of freedom of expression. These utterances, although not always overtly violent, carry significant implications for social harmony by normalizing hostility and fostering mistrust. The persistence of such rhetoric highlights the limitations of legal safeguards and reveals the urgent need for critical analysis of political discourse.

The challenges facing Kenya mirror global patterns where language has been instrumental in shaping conflict and peace. From Donald Trump's divisive rhetoric in the United States (Ott, 2017), to the role of speech in apartheid South Africa, and the tragic orchestration of the Rwandan genocide through radio propaganda (Des Forges, 1999), examples abound of how discourse can sustain cycles of division or reconciliation. Against this backdrop, the Kenyan case demonstrates how political leaders--by invoking populism, nationalism, and religious appeals--shape public opinion and reinforce socio-political divisions. Despite institutional interventions, weaponized language remains an underexplored threat to Kenya's democratic stability and inter-ethnic coexistence.

This study, therefore, investigated the linguistic strategies and ideological patterns employed by Kenyan political leaders between 2017 and 2025, with the aim of uncovering how language is mobilized as a weapon in political discourse. By integrating Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with Corpus Linguistics methods, the study analyzed political speeches to reveal hidden meanings, rhetorical devices, and the ideological underpinnings of seemingly

ordinary utterances. The overarching objective is to describe the linguistic features of political discourse and assess their implications for peaceful coexistence in Kenya. In doing so, the research contributes to the ongoing conversation on responsible political communication and offers insights for policymakers, peace practitioners, and the broader public on safeguarding national unity against the subtle but potent dangers of linguistic manipulation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Weaponized language radicalizes political discourse and undermines the middle ground required for compromise and negotiation. Polarization is particularly dangerous in a divided nation like Kenya, where social cohesiveness relies on intergroup collaboration. Political communication that divides people into "with us or against us" categories discourages participation and marginalizes moderate perspectives (Cheeseman et al., 2020).

Ideology in political speech refers to the views, values, and principles that influence political discourse and leadership behavior. For Eagleton (1991), ideology is apparent and implicit in language, influencing what people observe and do about the sociopolitical reality. Political language in Kenya is periodically damaged by ideological conceptions such as ethnic identification, historical injustices, socioeconomic stratification, and national or populist feelings.

Most likely, the most prevalent philosophy in Kenyan politics is ethno-nationalism—the belief that political power and national identity should be linked to ethnic groups. Ethno-nationalism has significant roots in Kenya's political history, stretching back to colonial times when ethnic groups were established for administrative purposes (Kagwanja, 2013).

Ethno-nationalism spreads through speech emphasizing ethnic pride, historical grievance, and shared destiny. Rulers appeal to ethnic solidarity by emphasizing shared ancestry, shared experiences, and cultural differences (Jalata, 2003). Terms like "mtu wetu" (our person) demonstrate how political loyalty is commonly expressed in ethnic terms. Political competition is thus presented as an ethnic fight for survival and representation, rather than an ideological one.

Historical injustice and marginalization play an important part in Kenyan political rhetoric. Political leaders frequently invoke historical injustices—such as land dispossession, delaying development, or election manipulation—to legitimize their current ambitions. This ideological technique appeals to collective memory and calls for redress, particularly among communities that see themselves as historically disadvantaged.

However, this ideological construction risks polarizing society, primarily when different groups compete to be victims. When political elites frame their aspirations as rectifying historical injustices, they can undermine the legitimacy of others' demands, causing tension and conflict. Furthermore, the repeated appeal to marginalization narratives without actual policy change risks becoming a cynical rhetorical ploy rather than an accurate tool for justice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was anchored in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Corpus Linguistics Theory, which provide a robust analytical framework for examining political discourse. CDA, as developed by Fairclough (1992, 1995), Wodak (2015), and Van Dijk (1998), views language as both socially shaped and socially constitutive, highlighting its role in reflecting and reinforcing power relations and ideologies. Fairclough's three-dimensional model—textual analysis, discourse practice, and socio-cultural practice—was applied to examine how Kenyan political leaders deploy language to construct ideologies, mobilize support, and create distinctions of inclusivity and exclusivity that affect peaceful coexistence. This framework emphasizes that discourse is not merely a reflection of social structures but also an active agent in shaping them, making it particularly useful for analyzing the weaponization of language in political contexts.

Complementing CDA, Corpus Linguistics Theory offers a methodological and theoretical foundation for uncovering recurring linguistic patterns through large bodies of authentic text (Sinclair, 1991; Stubbs, 1995). Corpus-based techniques such as word frequency analysis, collocational studies, and statistical measures like Mutual Information and t-score (Hunston, 2002) provide empirical evidence of how language is patterned and structured in political discourse. By integrating corpus methods with CDA, the study grounds its interpretations in quantifiable linguistic data, ensuring that the analysis of language's ideological and political functions is systematic and evidence-based. This interdisciplinary approach enhances the validity of findings and illuminates how language functions as a powerful tool in shaping political realities and influencing social cohesion in Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), complemented by corpus-based methods. The target population comprised political utterances delivered between 2022 and 2025 by Kenyan political leaders, including the President, presidential candidates, governors, members of parliament, senators, and political party leaders. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select utterances exhibiting violent language weaponization characteristics. Selection criteria focused on inflammatory rhetoric, ideological bias, and distinctive linguistic patterns suggesting attempts to provoke, divide, or influence political attitudes.

Data collection involved sourcing political speeches from YouTube in both Kiswahili and English. Audio and video recordings were downloaded, transcribed, and compiled into an electronic corpus. The integration of Corpus Linguistics Theory and CDA guided the analysis: Corpus Linguistics provided an empirical foundation for identifying statistically significant linguistic patterns. At the same time, CDA offered a critical lens for interpreting their socio-political and ideological implications. The data were analyzed using AntConc software, facilitating word frequency and collocational analyses

to uncover recurring lexical and semantic patterns. These findings were further subjected to thematic content analysis to explore how political discourse reinforced or challenged power dynamics, thereby illuminating the weaponization of language in Kenya's political landscape.

DISCUSSION

Ideological Underpinnings of Political Utterances

The intellectual foundations of political speech represent a global trend in modern politics. According to Laclau's (2005) theory of populist reason, the Kenyan political landscape has numerous examples of the "empty signifier," which are abstract concepts such as "people," "dynasties," or "deep state" that are infused with varied meanings by different groups. These signifiers elicit support precisely because of their ambiguity and symbolic versatility. Furthermore, claiming religious authority, as in "Mungu ameamua" (God has decided), lends divine credibility to political assertions, a phenomenon studied by Fairclough (2013) as a type of interdiscursive appropriation in which political speech borrows from religious genres to boost moral weight. The theoretical technique of Critical Discourse Analysis was used to investigate how language reflects, maintains, and challenges societal power relations and ideologies.

Populist collection

The ideology of populist collectivism was firmly inscribed in political speech via the frequent use of inclusive pronouns and collective identity markers. In various speeches, politicians used terms like "wakenya wote" ("all Kenyans"), "ndugu zetu Wakenya" ("our fellow Kenyans"), and "sisi kama wananchi" ("we as citizens") to convey a sense of national unity and shared struggle.

A notable example is the saying "Kenya hii siyo ya watu wachache... Kenya hii ni ya wakenya wote chini ya Mwenyezi Mungu" ("This Kenya does not belong to a few people... This Kenya belongs to all Kenyans under God"). The use of *sisi* ("we") and *watu* ("people") in expressions such as "tutawaambia ni watu" ("we will tell them it's the people") and "it's about the people" emphasizes the ideological framing of power as coming from the collective. Furthermore, the frequent use of grassroots characters like *mama mboga* (market woman), *boda boda* gentlemen, and hustlers fosters a populist ethos that bases political legitimacy on regular individuals' daily hardships. The contrast of "people" vs "system" or "deep state" reinforces the speaker's identification with the underprivileged and economically downtrodden, rather than elites or institutions. This alignment with "the people" helps to break down hierarchical barriers and create a conceptual equivalency between the political leader and the average citizen.

Anti-Elitism and Political Antagonism

The speech corpus purposefully built anti-elitist emotion and political antagonism by repeatedly opposing entities seen as powerful, inaccessible, or corrupt. This ideological viewpoint was commonly articulated through references to the "deep state," "system," "watu wachache" ("a few people"), and nameless elites accused of undermining democratic institutions. One example from the data reads: "Kenya hii siyo ya watu wachache, Kenya hii siyo ya deep state na system" ("This Kenya does not belong to a few people; it does not belong to the deep state and the system"), a framing that clearly contrasts ordinary citizens' interests with those of shadowy elites. The rhetoric creates an adversarial dichotomy in which "they" (*wao*) symbolize hidden, manipulative powers acting against the desires of "the people".

The line "they said we will not be here in 2022; we are here in 2022" exemplifies how opposition gets personalized and emphasized. Using "they said" is a common discursive tactic for externalizing blame and positioning the speaker as both victim and victor in a struggle for legitimacy. Similarly, the phrase "freedom is coming on Tuesday; the people of Kenya will prevail over the deep state" elevates political debate to a moral war between freedom and suppression. The elite or political rival is portrayed as a dangerous foe in democratic discourse, rather than a genuine counterpoint—a term used subtly but firmly.

The adversarial framing is also represented in economic contrasts, where political adversaries are accused of pursuing "positions" and "power". At the same time, the speaker claims to fight for "jobs for the youth" and "empowerment of ordinary citizens". This ideological contrast depicts the adversary as self-serving and elite-focused, whereas the speaker is portrayed as people-serving and reform-oriented. The cumulative impact is a discursive environment characterized by confrontation, distrust of institutional power, and rejection of political elites as illegitimate custodians of the common good.

Moral and Religious Justification

The speeches in the corpus relied heavily on moral and theological rhetoric to justify political viewpoints and acts. Lexical terms like "Mungu" ("God"), "shetani" ("Satan"), "haki" ("justice"), and "maovu" ("evil") were commonly used, placing political discourse in a spiritual and ethical context. One prominent excerpt is: "Hii vita si ya kawaida, hii ni vita ya haki na maovu. Lakini Mungu, yuko upande wetu. ("This is no ordinary struggle; it is a conflict between justice and evil. "But God is on our side." This formulation portrays the speaker as morally righteous and spiritually endorsed, whereas political opponents are considered ethically aberrant or evil.

Religious themes were prevalent when speakers emphasized national destiny or personal political resilience. Statements like "Shetani ashindwe!" ("Let Satan be defeated!") and "Tunaomba Mungu atuletee haki" ("We pray to God to bring us justice") were not only emotional appeals, but also intellectual statements, implying divine alignment with the speaker's political agenda. The use of prayer and faith rituals also served to sanctify political struggle, as evidenced in "Wakenya waombee nchi yao." "Haki ya Mungu, itashinda." ("Kenyans should pray for the country. "God's justice will prevail."

This integration of political and religious speech increased the validity of the speaker's message by situating it within a moral universe. It also established a dichotomy in which opposing political actors were portrayed as morally weak or spiritually bankrupt, rather than just policy or ideological opponents.

The sentence "They want to rule by fear; we stand with God and the people" demonstrates how this language combines populist and religious ideals to create a story about divine resistance and moral superiority.

Furthermore, this moral posture frequently preceded or accompanied demands for peace, unity, or reform, lending hallowed weight to otherwise secular political goals. In this way, religion functioned as an integrated rhetorical force, shaping political statements' legitimacy, urgency, and moral clarity.

Nationalism and Territorial Solidarity

Nationalistic appeals and sentiments of territorial solidarity were common themes in the speeches, as shown by the frequent use of geographical markers and collective identity phrases. References to "Kenya", "taifa letu" ("our nation"), and geographical deixis such as "hapa" ("here"), "katika nchi yetu" ("in our country"), and "Wakenya wote" ("all Kenyans") were used to establish ownership of the national space and create unity across political or ethnic differences. One speaker, for example, said: "Hii nchi si ya watu wachache; ni ya Wakenya wote kutoka kila pembe ya taifa letu" ("This country does not belong to a few; it belongs to all Kenyans from every corner of our nation"). Such statements define the nation not only as a political entity, but also as a moral and emotional home.

Territorial unity was further strengthened by a clear rejection of exclusionary politics, as in "Hakuna Mkenya atafukuzwa katika nchi yake" ("No Kenyan will be chased from their own country"). In this context, spatial belonging becomes associated with citizenship and dignity, establishing national identification as both a right and a protective border. The discourse defined national belonging as unconditional, to break down ethnic or political barriers by reinforcing a unified Kenyan identity.

Furthermore, the expression "kuijenga Kenya mpya" ("building a new Kenya") was frequently used, combining futurity and collective agency. Such expressions not only expressed national pride but also established a teleological narrative in which the people, rather than the government or elite, are positioned as the genuine agents of national rebirth. The linguistic choices related to Kenya's territorial scope—for example, "hii nchi" ("this country"), "kila sehemu ya Kenya" ("every part of Kenya"), and "eneo hili" ("this region")—anchored political messaging in physical space, emphasizing the common claim to land and sovereignty.

This discourse of national inclusion was frequently used with ideological narratives of peace and reconciliation, particularly in post-election circumstances. Speakers highlighted that political competition should not split "Wakenya kama ndugu" ("Kenyans as brothers and sisters"), reinforcing a view of the country as a family and an indivisible one. To summarize, nationalism in these speeches was not abstract; it was linguistically expressed through spatial grounding, collective pronouns, and statements of shared ownership and destiny.

FINDINGS

This study analyzed the weaponization of language in Kenyan political discourse and its broader implications for peaceful coexistence and social cohesion. This research employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and qualitative coding to systematically examine political speeches delivered by presidents, presidential candidates, governors, senators, members of parliament, and political party leaders from 2022 to 2025. The study examined rhetoric characterized by ideological manipulation, polarization, and provocation, revealing that political communication serves not only to persuade but also to shape collective identities and reinforce socio-political boundaries. The integrated application of CDA facilitated a thorough examination of how language mirrors and perpetuates unequal power dynamics, while qualitative thematic coding permitted the identification of recurring discursive patterns related to Kenya's political landscape and electoral context.

The findings indicate that Kenyan political discourse during this period was characterized by strong ideological elements, with politicians employing various rhetorical strategies to garner support and undermine their opponents. Campaign and leadership speeches prominently featured clear narratives of populism, anti-elitism, religious framing, and nationalism. The narrative of "hustlers vs dynasties" was employed to create a dichotomy between ordinary citizens and political elites, articulating class-based grievances that resonated with grassroots supporters. Religious references like "Mungu ameamua" ("God has decided") were utilized to legitimize political outcomes and invoke spiritual authority, thereby reinforcing the moral significance of political agendas. Nationalist rhetoric, as illustrated by slogans like "Kenya ni yetu sote" ("Kenya belongs to all of us"), highlighted themes of unity and belonging, while also delineating boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. These discursive practices illustrate the dual role of language in the Kenyan political context, serving as a mechanism for both unification and division—mobilizing citizens while exacerbating ideological divides that hinder peaceful coexistence.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that political discourse in Kenya is deeply embedded with linguistic strategies that serve both communicative and ideological purposes. Language is not merely a vehicle for persuasion but a potent mechanism for constructing social realities, defining group identities, and shaping political antagonism. The findings underscore that lexical choices, particularly those that are emotionally charged, aggressive, or metaphorical, function to polarize, mobilize, and, at times, threaten public order.

Political speech in Kenya is ideologically saturated, with dominant narratives reflecting populist dichotomies, anti-elitist sentiment, religious legitimization, and nationalist appeals. These ideological strands are communicated not through overt argumentation but through subtle discursive patterns

that resonate with socio-economic grievances, historical marginalization, and communal identity. The cumulative effect of these ideologies is the reinforcement of social divisions and the moral absolutism of political claims.

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