

CONSTRUCTING FEMALE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN MILITARY SPACE: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CNN'S REPORTING ON KAMALA HARRIS

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Abstract

This study investigates how CNN International constructs political discourse surrounding Vice President Kamala Harris becoming the first woman to deliver a commencement address at the United States Military Academy at West Point. Using Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, this research analyzes three interrelated dimensions: textual structure (macrostructure and microstructure), social cognition, and social context. The data consist of a CNN International online news article reporting Harris's commencement speech delivered on May 27, 2023. A descriptive qualitative method was employed through documentation, identification, classification, and interpretation of discourse elements. The findings indicate that the news text strategically emphasizes historical achievement, democratic ideology, and global leadership narratives. Through lexical choices, thematic organization, and rhetorical strategies, CNN constructs Harris as both a symbolic figure of gender progress and a legitimate representative of U.S. global authority. The study demonstrates how media discourse reinforces dominant ideological positions while simultaneously promoting gender inclusivity within elite political and military institutions.

Keywords – *critical discourse analysis, political discourse, gender representation*

Introduction

In the era of globalization, the rapid development of digital technology has significantly transformed the way information is produced, distributed, and consumed. The internet, in particular, has enabled mass media to disseminate news more efficiently and reach wider audiences across geographical boundaries. As a result, online news platforms have become a primary source of information for many individuals. Mass media, however, is not a neutral channel; it operates within economic and political structures that shape how information is constructed and delivered (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Therefore, analyzing news discourse is essential to uncover how language reflects and reproduces power, ideology, and social relations.

Indonesia represents a significant context for examining digital media consumption, as it is among the countries with the largest number of internet users globally. With more than 200 million users, digital media has become deeply embedded in daily life, influencing how people access and interpret information. This widespread use of online platforms has encouraged media institutions to optimize digital channels for news dissemination. Among these platforms, CNN International is widely recognized as a credible and influential source of global news, making it a relevant object for discourse analysis.

One prominent figure frequently represented in international media discourse is Kamala Harris, the Vice President of the United States. As the first woman, the first Black woman, and the first person of Asian descent to hold this position, Harris symbolizes a significant shift in political representation. Her leadership and public appearances often generate diverse responses and interpretations, particularly in relation to gender, race, and political power. One such instance is the CNN International news article titled “Harris Becomes First Woman to Deliver Commencement Address at West Point” (Wright, 2023), which highlights both her symbolic and political significance.

To critically examine how such representations are constructed, this study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is an interdisciplinary approach that investigates the relationship between language, power, and ideology in discourse (van Dijk, 1998; Haryatmoko, 2017). It allows researchers to explore how social realities are shaped and maintained through linguistic practices. In particular, van Dijk’s model of CDA provides a comprehensive framework consisting of three interconnected dimensions: text, social cognition, and social context. The text dimension focuses on structural elements such as macrostructure, superstructure, and microstructure, while social cognition examines the mental processes of discourse production and interpretation. The social context dimension, meanwhile, addresses broader societal influences, including power relations and ideological structures (Eriyanto, 2009; van Dijk, 1998).

This study aims to analyze the CNN International news article using van Dijk’s CDA framework to uncover how discourse constructs the representation of Kamala Harris in a political and social context. Specifically, the study focuses on: (1) the textual structure of the news, including macro and micro elements; (2) the social cognition underlying the production of the text; and (3) the broader social context influencing its discourse. By doing so, this research contributes to the understanding of how international media frames female political leaders, particularly those from minority backgrounds.

Previous studies have applied van Dijk’s CDA model to various media contexts, including political news, social media discourse, and television programs (e.g., Winingsih et al., 2022; Sarah, 2020; Payuyasa, n.d.). However, limited research has focused on international online news platforms such as CNN and their representation of female political figures. Therefore, this study offers a novel contribution by examining global media discourse through a critical linguistic lens, particularly in relation to gender, power, and ideology.

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design to explore how meaning, ideology, and power relations are constructed within online news discourse. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study as it focuses on interpreting linguistic features and uncovering underlying meanings embedded in textual data (Gunawan, 2016). Through this approach, the analysis emphasizes depth of interpretation rather than numerical measurement.

The primary data source of this research is an online news article published by CNN International titled “Harris Becomes First Woman to Deliver Commencement Address at West Point” (Wright, 2023). This article was selected based on its relevance to contemporary political discourse, its representation of a prominent female political figure, and its significance as a widely circulated international news report. Additionally, the topic gained substantial public attention, making it suitable for critical discourse analysis.

Data were collected using a documentation method, which involves systematically identifying, selecting, and recording written materials relevant to the research focus (Arikunto, 2013). The researcher accessed, read, and archived the news text as the primary unit of analysis. Note-taking techniques were applied to extract relevant linguistic elements, such as lexical choices, sentence structures, and thematic patterns.

The data analysis technique employed in this study is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) based on van Dijk's framework, combined with qualitative content analysis procedures. The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, the text dimension was examined, including macrostructure (global themes) and microstructure (lexical choices, syntax, and stylistic features). Second, the social cognition dimension was analyzed to identify the underlying mental models, knowledge, and ideologies that may influence the production of the text. Third, the social context dimension was explored to understand the broader socio-political context in which the discourse is situated (van Dijk, 1998; Eriyanto, 2009).

The analytical process involved three main steps: data identification, classification, and interpretation. In the identification stage, relevant textual elements were selected from the news article. These elements were then classified according to van Dijk's analytical categories. Finally, the data were interpreted to reveal how discourse structures contribute to the representation of Kamala Harris and reflect broader ideological and power relations.

Finding and Discussion

This study analyzes the CNN International news article "Harris Becomes First Woman to Deliver Commencement Address at West Point" using van Dijk's (1998) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, which consists of three dimensions: text, social cognition, and social context.

Text Dimension

At the macrostructural level, the global meaning of the text is constructed around two dominant and interconnected themes: gender representation and U.S. global leadership. The headline explicitly foregrounds Harris's identity as "the first woman to deliver a commencement address at the graduation ceremony at the US Military Academy", emphasizing a historic milestone. This phrase does not merely report an event but frames it as a breakthrough in gender representation within a traditionally male-dominated institution. Simultaneously, the macrostructure extends beyond symbolic representation into geopolitical discourse. This is evident in Harris's warning that graduates are entering "an increasingly unsettled world where long standing principles are at risk." This statement introduces a broader narrative of global instability, positioning the United States and by extension Harris, as a stabilizing force. Thus, the macrostructure integrates identity politics with international political authority.

The superstructure of the text follows a conventional inverted pyramid model, beginning with a headline and lead paragraph that highlight the most newsworthy elements. The lead combines Harris's historic achievement with geopolitical concerns, immediately linking gender representation with global leadership.

The body paragraphs develop this narrative through carefully selected quotations. For instance, Harris asserts that "America plays a singular role of leadership" and that "global security and global prosperity depend on the leadership of the United States of America." These statements are strategically placed early in the body to establish authority and reinforce the central argument of U.S. indispensability. Subsequent paragraphs introduce

external actors, such as Russia and China, thereby expanding the discourse into international relations. The article states that Russia's actions are "an unprovoked invasion" and "an attack on international rules and norms," while China is described as "threatening both the freedom of the seas and rules of international commerce." The placement of these statements after the affirmation of U.S. leadership creates a contrastive structure that legitimizes the U.S. position. The concluding section shifts to background information, noting that Harris "previously made history in 2021 as the first woman to give a commencement address at the US Naval Academy." This reinforces the theme of continuity in gender progress and solidifies her symbolic role.

At the microstructural level, the lexical analysis reveals a clear ideological pattern through evaluative language. The United States is consistently represented with positive and authoritative terms such as "leadership," "democratic ideals," and "indispensable to the world." For example, Harris states that "a strong America remains indispensable to the world," which reinforces the perception of the U.S. as a necessary global actor. In contrast, opposing nations are framed negatively. Russia is associated with "unprovoked invasion" and "attack," which carry strong moral condemnation. Similarly, China is depicted as "modernizing its military" and "threatening...rules of international commerce," suggesting instability and aggression. This lexical contrast reflects van Dijk's (1998) concept of ideological polarization, where discourse emphasizes positive self-representation and negative other-representation.

The text employs predominantly declarative and assertive sentences, which contribute to an authoritative tone. For instance, the statement "America plays a singular role of leadership" is presented as an unquestioned fact rather than an opinion. Additionally, the use of direct quotations enhances credibility and authenticity, allowing Harris's voice to dominate the narrative. Repetition is also used as a rhetorical strategy, particularly in motivational directed at the graduates: "You are ready. And you are ready because you are true leaders of character." This repetition reinforces confidence and authority while simultaneously constructing the audience (cadets) as aligned with national values.

The text utilizes several rhetorical strategies to strengthen its message. The phrase "the greatest fighting force the world has ever seen" serves as a hyperbolic expression that elevates the U.S. military's status. Additionally, contrastive framing between "America" and external threats creates a binary opposition that simplifies complex geopolitical realities into a moral dichotomy.

At the microstructural level, the lexical choices reveal clear ideological positioning. The United States is described using positive and authoritative terms such as "leadership," "democratic ideals," and "indispensable," while opposing actors are framed negatively. Russia is associated with "unprovoked invasion" and "attack," whereas China is depicted as "threatening" and engaging in "malign practices." This contrast reflects what van Dijk (1998) identifies as the strategy of positive self-representation and negative other-representation. Furthermore, the frequent use of direct quotations from Harris strengthens the perceived credibility and authority of the discourse, while repetitive and assertive sentence structures reinforce a persuasive and motivational tone.

Social Cognition Dimension

The social cognition dimension reveals the underlying mental models and ideologies that shape the production of the text. The discourse reflects a strong orientation toward the ideology of American exceptionalism, as evidenced by statements emphasizing the United States' "singular role of leadership" and its indispensability in maintaining global security

and prosperity. Such representations indicate a shared cognitive framework that positions the United States as a central and legitimate global authority.

In addition, the text constructs a narrative of gender progress by repeatedly emphasizing Harris's identity as the "first woman" to achieve this milestone. This framing aligns with broader societal values related to gender equality and representation, presenting Harris not only as a political leader but also as a symbol of social advancement.

The journalist's selection of themes, quotations, and geopolitical references further reflects an institutional perspective aligned with mainstream Western media. By prioritizing issues such as democracy, global security, and international conflict, the discourse reinforces dominant political narratives associated with the current U.S. administration. As van Dijk (1998) suggests, such cognitive structures influence how events are interpreted and presented to the public.

Social Context Dimension

The discourse is closely connected to broader social and political contexts. Politically, the text is situated within ongoing global tensions, particularly the Russia-Ukraine conflict and strategic rivalry between the United States and China. The inclusion of these issues within Harris's speech serves to legitimize U.S. foreign policy positions and reinforce the narrative of defending democratic values. Additionally, the timing of the report, in the context of President Joe Biden's anticipated re-election campaign, suggests that the discourse may also function to support broader political messaging.

From a social perspective, the representation of Kamala Harris reflects evolving discussions on diversity and inclusion, particularly regarding gender and race in positions of power. By highlighting her role as the first woman in this context, the text contributes to the normalization of women's leadership in traditionally male-dominated institutions such as the military and politics.

Furthermore, the role of media as a producer of discourse is evident in this text. Consistent with Herman and Chomsky's (1988) argument, the news does not merely report events but actively constructs reality through selective representation. CNN, as a global media institution, participates in shaping public perception by reinforcing dominant ideologies related to democracy, leadership, and international order.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that CNN's reporting on Kamala Harris's commencement address at West Point constructs female political leadership through a dual discourse of symbolic representation and institutional authority. Using van Dijk's (1998) Critical Discourse Analysis framework, the findings reveal that Harris is positioned not only as a "first woman", a marker of gender progress, but also as a legitimate actor within a traditionally masculine and militarized space. The textual analysis shows that this representation is reinforced through strategic lexical choices, structural emphasis, and the inclusion of authoritative quotations that highlight U.S. global leadership and democratic values. At the level of social cognition, the discourse reflects dominant ideologies such as American exceptionalism and gender equality, while at the level of social context, it is embedded within contemporary geopolitical tensions and domestic political narratives.

Overall, the study confirms that media discourse does not merely report events but actively constructs meanings about leadership, gender, and power. In this case, CNN's coverage simultaneously normalizes the presence of women in military and political domains while reinforcing existing hegemonic structures of global authority. Thus, female leadership is framed as both progressive and compatible with established political and military ideologies.

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