Rhetorical Strategies and Discursive Construction of Ideology:
Critical Discourse Analysis of Nelson Mandela's Speeches

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Abstract

This study examines the ideological evolution in Nelson Mandela's oratory, tracing his transition from resistance leader to unifying statesman. Although much is written about Mandela's moral authority, less is understood about how his political ideology was discursively constructed and shifted over time. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this paper analyzes six major speeches from 1962 to 1999, representing three phases: trials and imprisonment, post-release leadership, and presidency. The findings reveal a clear discursive trajectory: from confrontational, dichotomous discourse to inclusive, reconciliatory rhetoric aimed at forging a new national identity. Key markers include shifts in pronoun use (from "I" to "we"), metaphorical framing, and changing modality and argument structures. The study contributes to discourse studies, political communication, and postcolonial studies by showing how ideology is not static but is performed and transformed through language, especially in transitional political contexts.

Keywords: Nelson Mandela; Political Ideology; Critical Discourse Analysis; Rhetorical Strategies; Reconciliation; Discourse; Metaphor; Pronominal Choice

Introduction

Nelson Mandela is widely acknowledged not only for his extraordinary moral courage and unwavering commitment to political struggle but also for his iconic status as a key figure in the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. Much of the existing scholarship has predominantly focused on the content of his beliefs, the actions he took throughout his life, and the reasons why he continues to inspire people globally. His legacy as a symbol of resistance, reconciliation, and leadership has been thoroughly examined from historical, biographical, and ethical perspectives. However, comparatively less scholarly attention has been given to the process by which Mandela's political ideology was actively constructed, communicated, and evolved over time—particularly through the strategic use of language in his speeches. Exploring how Mandela's ideology was discursively shaped provides deeper insight into the dynamic nature of his leadership and the powerful role of rhetoric in political transformation. This approach reveals not only the substance of Mandela's ideas but also the evolving linguistic and communicative strategies he employed to influence public consciousness, build collective identity, and negotiate the transition from apartheid to democracy.

This paper addresses this gap by asking:

How did Mandela's discursive strategies evolve over historical phases?

Which linguistic features—especially pronouns (I/we), metaphor, modality, and argumentation—reveal shifts in his ideological orientation?

How did his rhetorical evolution mirror, respond to, and perhaps shape the transition from apartheid to democratic South Africa?

To answer these questions, six landmark speeches of Mandela (1962–1999) are analyzed using critical discourse analysis CDA. This longitudinal approach allows tracing not just content but linguistic strategy over changing political, social, and historical conditions.

Method and Material
Speech Selection
Six speeches were selected to capture key turning points in Mandela's ideological path:

Phase 1	Black Man in a White Man's Court (1962); I Am Prepared to Die (1964)
Phase 2	Speech on Release from Prison (1990); Address to the UN General Assembly (1993)
Phase 3	Inauguration Speech (1994); Freedom Day Speech (1999)

Analytical Procedure
Conduct close reading of texts: identify instances of pronominal choices, metaphors, modality, argument structure.
Code these features for each speech. Compare across speeches (within and between phases) to identify continuities and shifts.
Situate discourse in its socio-historical context: political moment, audience, purpose.
Triangulate with recent scholarly work (e.g., Al Afnan & Dishari, 2023; Proctor & Su, 2018; Musolff, 2022; Stengel, 2020).
Apply the CDA Framework (see Section 3 below) to the data thus collected.

Analytical Foci
To detect ideological shifts, four linguistic/rhetorical features are central:

Pronominal Choice: How use of "I," "we," "us," "them" constructs identities, authority, inclusion/exclusion. Proctor & Su (2018) show how "we" can be a site of negotiation of political identity, especially in crises.

Metaphor & Figurative Language: Use of metaphor to frame struggle, unity, journey, reconciliation. Musolff (2022) emphasizes metaphor as central in crisis discourse—how the framing via metaphor shapes perception and political possibility.

Modality & Agency: Modal verbs ("must," "shall," "will," "should," etc.) and who is agent/acted upon signal moral load, obligation, possibility.

Argument Structure & Binary Oppositions: How us/them divides are structured, maintained, or dissolved; how adversarial vs reconciliatory frames emerge.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis
CDA treats language as social practice and holds that discourse is both shaped by and shapes power, ideology, and identity (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Key in this framework is understanding how discourse constructs in-groups and out-groups, represents power relations, and legitimates certain social orders over others.
Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a powerful methodological and theoretical toolkit for exploring how discourse constitutes, negotiates, and transforms ideology. Rooted in the view that language is a form of social practice, CDA holds that discourse both reflects and shapes social structures, power relations, and identities (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). This study draws on a multi-stranded CDA framework — synthesizing the work of Norman Fairclough, Teun A. van Dijk,

Ruth Wodak (with Michael Meyer), and Paul Chilton — to examine how Nelson Mandela's public rhetoric discursively constructed ideology over time. This integrated approach enables a systematic tracing of Mandela's discursive strategies across different socio-political contexts, from anti-apartheid resistance to democratic governance and global statesmanship.

Discourse as Social Practice: Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model
Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional model conceptualizes discourse at the levels of (i) textual analysis (linguistic features and choices), (ii) discursive practice (production and consumption of texts), and (iii) social practice (broader social and institutional structures). This tripartite model allows for a multi-layered reading of Mandela's speeches — linking linguistic choices (e.g., metaphors, pronouns, modality) to the socio-historical context in which they were produced and received.
Fairclough emphasizes that discourse does ideological work by making particular representations of the world appear natural and commonsensical. He differentiates between power in discourse (how power is enacted in specific interactions) and power behind discourse (the structural conditions that determine which discourses are legitimized or marginalized). For a figure like Mandela, whose rhetorical career spanned resistance, negotiation, governance, and global diplomacy, this model enables us to analyze how his discourse participated in the legitimation of new social orders — from dismantling apartheid to fostering national unity.

Ideology as Social Cognition: Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach
Teun A. van Dijk's (2013) socio-cognitive model extends the CDA toolkit by incorporating the cognitive dimension of ideology. He defines ideologies as socially shared belief systems that shape and are shaped by discourse. Central to his framework is the "ideological square" — a set of discursive strategies that emphasize the positive attributes of the in-group and the negative attributes of the out-group, while downplaying or mitigating in-group shortcomings and out-group strengths.
In Mandela's case, van Dijk's model helps reveal how his rhetoric constructed in-groups (e.g., the oppressed Black South African majority, later the reconciled South African nation) and out-groups (e.g., the apartheid state, colonial forces, or later, social injustices like poverty or corruption). This approach also allows analysis of how Mandela's mental models — his cognitive representations of freedom, justice, reconciliation — evolved over time and were discursively externalized in his speeches. As van Dijk notes, these models underpin ideological reproduction and contestation in discourse.

History and Legitimacy: Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach
Wodak and Meyer's (2016) Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) offers tools for analyzing how discourse is embedded in, and shaped by, its historical and institutional contexts. Wodak defines ideology as "the representation and construction of society which reproduce unequal relations of power" and proposes a range of discursive strategies — including nomination (naming actors), predication (ascribing qualities), and argumentation (justifying actions) — to uncover how power is legitimized or contested through discourse.
Applied to Mandela, DHA enables the tracking of how his discourse changed in response to shifting historical contexts: from pre-imprisonment resistance, to prison

letters, to post-release negotiations, presidential addresses, and international speeches. The approach draws attention to how Mandela's rhetoric enacted legitimization strategies, such as appeals to shared history, moral authority, and inclusive identity — especially important in his effort to build a post-apartheid "rainbow nation." Wodak's focus on identity construction is also crucial, as Mandela discursively fashioned himself as freedom fighter, reconciler, and global elder statesman at different moments.

Political Discourse and World-View Projection: Chilton's Rhetorical Tools
Paul Chilton (2025) brings a rhetorical and cognitive-pragmatic lens to political discourse, focusing on how speakers construct discourse spaces — including spatial, temporal, epistemic, and evaluative dimensions — to project particular worldviews. Chilton's work is especially relevant for analyzing Mandela's rhetorical evolution, as it helps us understand how Mandela framed political reality for different audiences across time and space.

Chilton's framework draws attention to the use of modality (e.g., must, can, will), metaphor, and evaluation as key strategies of political persuasion For example, Mandela's use of metaphors such as "long walk to freedom," "rainbow nation," or "healing the wounds of the past" functioned not just as poetic devices but as tools for cognitive framing and ideological positioning. Chilton also provides tools to analyze how Mandela's speeches shifted in tone and focus — from adversarial resistance to reconciliatory nation-building to global humanitarianism — each projecting different political and moral realities.

Discourse, Power, and Ideology are the three pivotal notions that underlie all CDA frameworks and analyses. Power is exercised through discourse:
Ideology refers to systems of belief and values that are reproduced or contested through discourse, often reflecting underlying power structures (van Dijk, 1998).
Discourse is never neutral; it legitimates, resists, or reshapes power.

Analysis & Findings: Trajectory of Mandela's Discourse
Phase 1: Defiance, Dichotomy, and "I"
Nelson Mandela's early rhetorical style, especially in his trial and imprisonment speeches such as Black Man in a White Man's Court (1962) and I Am Prepared to Die (1964), is characterized by a pronounced use of the first-person singular pronoun "I," coupled with stark binary oppositions that underscore his ideological positioning. These binaries—oppressed versus oppressor, moral versus immoral, just versus unjust—establish a clear dichotomous worldview that situates Mandela simultaneously as the victim of systemic injustice and as a defiant, morally upright agent committed to radical change. This linguistic and ideological construction functions not only as a declaration of personal conviction but also as a powerful rhetorical strategy that legitimizes the anti-apartheid struggle on both moral and political grounds.
In I Am Prepared to Die, delivered at the opening of the Rivonia Trial in 1964, Mandela powerfully asserts his lifelong dedication to the liberation of the African people and the moral necessity of the struggle against oppression. He declares:
During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live

together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

This passage exemplifies Mandela's consistent use of the "I" pronoun, centralizing his agency and moral responsibility. The modality is unequivocal; the verbs "must," "cannot," and "ought to" — though not always explicit in this excerpt — permeate the speech as markers of moral necessity. For instance, Mandela emphatically states:

I have no hesitation in saying that I am prepared to die.

The use of "no hesitation" intensifies the modality of certainty and resolve, while the binary opposition of "life" and "death" underlines the existential stakes of his commitment. The speech constructs a narrative of heroic individualism, where Mandela's personal sacrifice symbolizes the collective yearning for justice.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, this centralization of "I" operates on multiple levels. At the textual level (Fairclough, 1992), the frequent deployment of "I" alongside modal verbs of necessity creates a linguistic texture that highlights Mandela's moral certainty and unyielding agency. At the cognitive and ideological level (van Dijk, 1998), this serves to delineate a clear in-group/out-group division: Mandela and oppressed Africans as the morally justified in-group, versus the apartheid regime as the unjust out-group. The ideological square, which van Dijk (1998) describes as emphasizing positive traits of the in-group while negating these in the out-group, is vividly enacted. Mandela's discourse frames the apartheid regime as the embodiment of injustice, while presenting himself as the moral agent fighting for freedom and equality.

The historical and contextual layers (Wodak, 2001) provide critical grounding: these speeches were delivered in the fraught context of apartheid South Africa's legal system, during the Rivonia Trial that threatened Mandela and his comrades with death sentences. The trial itself was a spectacle designed to delegitimize the anti-apartheid movement. Mandela's rhetorical strategy, therefore, serves to reclaim the narrative, transforming the courtroom into a stage for articulating a powerful ideological stance of resistance.

Rhetorically, as Chilton (2004) observes, Mandela's speeches from this period construct a narrative of principled self-sacrifice and moral heroism. His repeated use of "I" and modal necessity verbs effectively frame him as the subject of history—a figure willing to endure imprisonment and even death to embody and advance the ideals of freedom and equality. This narrative construction is designed not only to inspire domestic supporters but also to appeal to international audiences, invoking universal values of justice and human dignity.

Further empirical research has substantiated the ideological significance of this phase. Aldosari (2020) conducts a detailed CDA of Mandela's early speeches, demonstrating how linguistic features such as modality, pronoun use, and metaphor form a cohesive narrative of resistance. Aldosari argues that the frequent binaries and moral imperatives constitute a discursive strategy aimed at legitimizing the anti-apartheid struggle as a just and necessary fight against tyranny. Similarly, AlAfnan and Dishari (2024) analyze the cohesive devices and textual strategies in Mandela's trial speeches, revealing how these linguistic elements create a coherent and persuasive narrative of principled defiance and personal sacrifice.

Sarwat et al. (2022) add a further dimension by exploring how Mandela employed Aristotelian pathos alongside metaphorical framing to amplify the emotional impact of his defiance. For instance, the metaphor of "prepared to die" invokes a sacrificial

imagery deeply embedded in both cultural and religious traditions, positioning Mandela's struggle within a narrative of martyrdom and transcendence. This metaphorical framing, combined with his direct and authoritative use of "I," intensifies the affective power of the speeches, fostering solidarity and emotional resonance among listeners.

The lexical choices in these speeches also reinforce the ideological dichotomies. Mandela contrasts "white domination" and "black domination," highlighting his rejection of all forms of racial subjugation, including any authoritarianism within black communities themselves. This nuanced stance elevates his ethical positioning beyond mere racial opposition to a broader commitment to justice and equality. This is illustrated in the statement:

I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society…

The parallel structure and repetition of "I have fought" serve as a rhetorical device reinforcing his active agency and moral consistency.

Moreover, the modality and pronoun use establish a didactic tone, with Mandela instructing not only the apartheid authorities but also inspiring the oppressed masses. The use of "I" here does not signify self-centeredness but rather embodies the role of a representative voice, a symbolic individual standing in for the collective struggle. This is evident in statements such as:

I have tried to find ways in which my people can live in freedom and dignity.

The singular "I" is thus emblematic of collective aspirations, amplifying Mandela's rhetorical ethos as both individual hero and communal leader.

The interplay of modality, binary opposition, and pronoun use in Mandela's early rhetoric reflects a broader ideological pattern characteristic of resistance discourse. The moral framing establishes the legitimacy of the anti-apartheid cause as an ethical imperative, while the dichotomous worldview mobilizes listeners by identifying clear adversaries and justifying militant resistance. In this sense, Mandela's rhetoric functions as both a political manifesto and a moral declaration, intertwining personal conviction with collective liberation.

In summary, Phase 1 of Mandela's rhetorical evolution is marked by a deliberate and strategic use of "I" to assert personal agency and moral responsibility within a dichotomous framework of oppression and resistance. Through modal necessity and binary lexical oppositions, Mandela constructs a compelling ideological narrative that legitimizes the anti-apartheid struggle and galvanizes support. Empirical CDA research corroborates this reading, highlighting the intricate linguistic and rhetorical devices that underpin Mandela's early speeches as foundational texts in the discourse of liberation.

Phase 2: Transition: Inclusive "We", and Metaphors of Journey

With Nelson Mandela's release from prison in 1990, his rhetoric undergoes a profound transformation that mirrors South Africa's own turbulent transition from apartheid toward democratic governance. This second phase is characterized by a significant shift in pronominal choice, moving from the emphatic individualism of "I" to the inclusive collective pronoun "we." This linguistic pivot symbolizes an ideological and strategic reorientation from personal sacrifice to collective nation-building, reflecting Mandela's evolving role as a unifying leader. The discourse also witnesses a concomitant transformation in metaphorical framing, modality, and

argumentation style, moving away from confrontation and necessity toward invitation, hope, and partnership.

The pronoun "we" becomes a central discursive tool that facilitates a sense of shared identity and collective responsibility. Khurshid and Janjua (2022) note that Mandela's strategic deployment of "we" works to dissolve the rigid dichotomies of "us versus them" that marked his earlier resistance rhetoric. Rather than emphasizing binaries that isolate groups, the use of "we" broadens the conceptual in-group to encompass all South Africans, cutting across racial, ethnic, and political divisions. This shift signals a move from adversarial struggle to inclusive nation-building, foregrounding a vision of reconciliation and common purpose.

In Mandela's Speech on Release from Prison (11 February 1990), this shift is palpable. He addresses the nation with an appeal to unity and mutual responsibility:

I stand here before you not as a prophet but as a humble servant of you, the people. I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not ended.

Here, Mandela's pronouns shift fluidly from "I" to "you" to "we," encapsulating a dialogic relationship with his audience. The metaphor of "a long road to freedom" or "long walk" becomes a defining symbolic frame during this period, emphasizing the ongoing, collective nature of the struggle. Rather than positioning himself as a solitary hero, Mandela presents himself as a "humble servant" of the people—a rhetorical self-effacement that signals a leadership style rooted in humility, service, and shared endeavor.

The metaphor of journey here is rich with connotations of effort, endurance, and forward movement. It encapsulates both historical continuity and hopeful futurity, situating the nation on a path toward reconciliation and renewal. The imagery of hills to climb and vistas to behold conveys the challenges ahead while simultaneously inspiring hope and vision. This metaphorical framing resonates deeply with the transitional moment South Africa faced—emerging from decades of repression into a fraught but promising future.

This shift in metaphor is accompanied by a corresponding transformation in modality. Where Mandela's earlier rhetoric was marked by necessity and moral imperative— verbs such as "must," "cannot," and "ought to" dominating the discourse—the transition speeches adopt a more invitational and aspirational modality. Modal verbs like "can," "will," and "shall" predominate, signaling possibility, capability, and collective agency. For example, in his 1993 Address to the United Nations General Assembly, Mandela appeals to shared responsibility and global partnership:

The distance we still have to travel is not long. Let us travel it together. We can overcome the legacy of apartheid. We will build a society based on justice, equality, and peace.

Here, "we can" and "we will" convey a hopeful and inclusive future, emphasizing collaborative effort rather than isolated obligation. The tone is optimistic and invitational, seeking to mobilize citizens and international allies alike to participate in the ongoing journey.

From a CDA perspective, this linguistic and rhetorical evolution can be analyzed

across multiple layers. At the textual/linguistic level (Fairclough, 1992), the increased use of "we" marks a pronoun shift that redefines agency from the singular to the collective. This shift is complemented by the introduction of journey metaphors such as "walk," "travel," and "path," which replace the combative and conflictual metaphors of "battle" and "fight" dominant in earlier speeches. Modal verbs expressing ability and future possibility ("can," "will") further reflect this transformation toward inclusivity and hope.

At the cognitive/ideological level (van Dijk, 1998), the in-group broadens significantly. Mandela's "we" now encompasses the entire South African populace and, implicitly, the international community committed to ending apartheid. The out-group, previously clearly identified as the white supremacist regime and its agents, becomes less overtly named and more structurally implied—manifested in legacies of division, inequality, and systemic injustice rather than direct antagonism. The ideological square shifts accordingly: positive traits are attributed inclusively to the entire nation, while negative elements are reframed as challenges to overcome together.

Historically and contextually (Wodak, 2001), this phase aligns with South Africa's complex and delicate negotiations during the early 1990s. Mandela's discourse functions as a legitimating tool for the transitional political order, fostering national cohesion and international support. The rhetoric acknowledges past grievances while emphasizing a forward-looking agenda of reconciliation and rebuilding.

Rhetorically and pragmatically (Chilton, 2004), Mandela's identity work evolves from defiant revolutionary to reconciliatory statesman. His use of inclusive pronouns and metaphors of journey signals a leadership style aimed at bridging divides and fostering unity. This is not a call for blind unity but an invitation to collectively face the unfinished business of freedom and equality.

Further empirical analyses support this understanding. Sarwat et al. (2022) emphasize how the combination of journey metaphors and pathos enhances the emotional appeal of Mandela's transitional rhetoric. By invoking shared movement and collective effort, these metaphors resonate deeply with audiences, reinforcing the vision of a united "rainbow nation." Khurshid and Janjua (2022) provide quantitative evidence of increased "we" usage in Mandela's post-release speeches, linking this pronominal shift with strategic inclusivity.

Additionally, Stengel (2020) describes Mandela's evolving persona as that of a "bridge-builder" who uses language as a means of reconciliation. This aligns with Mandela's own articulation of his role not as a prophet or a messianic figure, but as a servant to the people, entrusted with guiding South Africa through its most pivotal historical transition.

The discourse in this phase also shows an important tension between acknowledging the weight of historical injustice and affirming a hopeful future. For example, Mandela's admission in the 1990 release speech:

I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.

This recognition of imperfection and ongoing struggle humanizes Mandela and fosters credibility, avoiding grandiosity while maintaining resolve. The metaphorical "hill" evokes struggle and perseverance, but its framing as part of a collective journey softens the earlier binaries and sharp oppositions.

Moreover, Mandela's call for responsibility is no longer the uncompromising

imperative of the trial speeches but a shared burden:

With freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not ended.

Here, "responsibilities" are collective, an implicit "we" that is foundational to the discourse of transition and nation-building. This rhetorical move invites participation rather than demanding submission, aligning with democratic principles of inclusion and dialogue.

In sum, Phase 2 marks a critical discursive turning point in Mandela's rhetoric. The transition from "I" to "we," from battle metaphors to journey metaphors, and from necessity to hopefulness reflects not only Mandela's personal evolution but the broader sociopolitical shift in South Africa. This phase's rhetoric functions as a unifying force, seeking to overcome entrenched divisions through inclusive language, shared agency, and visionary metaphors. Empirical CDA studies and rhetorical analyses confirm the sophistication of Mandela's strategies, underscoring their effectiveness in shaping the discourse of transition and legitimizing a new, democratic national identity.

Phase 3: Reconciliation, Unity, and Symbolic Nation-Building

Nelson Mandela's presidency (1994–1999) and subsequent global statesmanship usher in a third and final rhetorical phase distinguished by themes of reconciliation, unity, and symbolic nation-building. This phase reflects Mandela's transformation from a freedom fighter and transitional leader into a statesman tasked with healing a deeply fractured society and forging a shared national identity for a diverse South Africa. The discursive strategies employed during this period demonstrate a marked shift from the oppositional binaries and personal agency prominent in his earlier rhetoric to a collective, inclusive, and future-oriented vision.

One of the most striking features of Mandela's presidential rhetoric is the persistent use of the inclusive pronoun "we," which consolidates the discursive focus on national unity and shared purpose. This linguistic choice is not merely a stylistic preference but serves a critical ideological function—constructing a national in-group that transcends racial, cultural, and political divisions. Through this collective "we," Mandela frames South Africa as a "rainbow nation," a metaphor that has become iconic and emblematic of post-apartheid identity.

In his Inauguration Speech (10 May 1994), Mandela powerfully articulates this vision:

Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another. …

We enter into a covenant that we shall build the society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity – a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world.

This passage exemplifies several key rhetorical strategies. The repetition of "never" emphatically repudiates apartheid and its legacy, establishing a moral and historical boundary that defines the new nation's values. The metaphor of a "covenant" evokes solemn commitment and mutual obligation, framing nation-building as a sacred and collective enterprise. The "rainbow nation" metaphor encapsulates diversity, harmony, and inclusivity, projecting an aspirational identity that embraces difference while fostering unity.

The metaphoric repertoire of this phase extends beyond "rainbow nation" to include

images of "healing wounds," "bridging chasms," and "building a new house," all of which signal the discursive pivot from historical grievance toward future-oriented collective purpose. For instance, in his Freedom Day Speech (27 April 1999), Mandela reflects:

The time for the healing of the wounds has come. The moment to bridge the chasms that divide us has come. The time to build is upon us.

These metaphors of healing and construction emphasize restoration and forward momentum, framing reconciliation not as mere forgiveness but as an active process of societal transformation and collective endeavor. The wounds and chasms represent the historical traumas and divisions wrought by apartheid; the discourse underscores their continued significance while insisting on the necessity of overcoming them.

Modality in this phase shifts toward collective commitment and aspirational pledges. Modal verbs such as "shall," "will," and "must" express obligation and determination, but crucially, these are framed not as authoritarian commands but as shared national commitments. For example:

We shall build a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights. … We must work together to ensure a better life for all our people.

Here, modality functions to articulate a collective agenda imbued with moral seriousness and forward-looking ambition. The repeated "we" disperses agency across the nation, underscoring mutual responsibility and partnership.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) standpoint, this phase reveals significant shifts across the analytical layers. At the textual and linguistic level (Fairclough, 1992), the inclusive pronouns and metaphors of covenant and healing dominate. Modal verbs reflect futurity and obligation framed as aspirational rather than punitive. The language is less confrontational and binary, moving toward reconciliation and positive identity construction.

At the cognitive and ideological level (van Dijk, 1998), the in-group expands definitively to include all South Africans, irrespective of race, ethnicity, or background. The out-group, previously foregrounded as oppressive white rulers, becomes increasingly symbolic and historical—the apartheid system and its legacies are acknowledged but not personalized or demonized. The ideological square thus reorients: positive qualities are attributed inclusively, and negative elements are recast as collective challenges to overcome. This reframing reflects the practical necessities of governing a deeply divided society in transition.

Historically and contextually (Wodak, 2001), this phase corresponds with South Africa's nascent democratic order, a period marked by both optimism and the daunting realities of socio-economic inequality and political reconciliation. Mandela's rhetoric functions as a legitimating discourse, fostering national cohesion, moral renewal, and global engagement. It serves to manage the symbolic reconstruction of national identity while addressing the socio-political complexities of the post-apartheid era.

Rhetorically and pragmatically (Chilton, 2004), Mandela's identity work reaches its apogee. He evolves from a heroic freedom fighter and defiant prisoner to a father of the nation and global icon of reconciliation. His speeches deploy rhetorical devices such as repetition, metaphor, and collective modality to emphasize unity, shared purpose, and moral renewal. The narrative shifts from conflict to covenant, from division to collective destiny.

Scholarly analyses support these observations. Sarwat et al. (2022) highlight how

Mandela's metaphors in this phase serve visionary leadership, linking linguistic framing with transformative political objectives. Al-Latif (2021) emphasizes how Mandela's later rhetoric legitimized the post-apartheid democratic order, situating language as a tool for shaping social reality and power relations. Diko (2024) critiques and contextualizes Mandela's legacy within cultural expressions such as Brenda Fassie's song "Black President," demonstrating how the rhetoric of unity permeates broader social and cultural narratives.

Mandela's rhetorical strategy during this phase also exemplifies a sophisticated balancing act. While promoting reconciliation and unity, he does not shy away from acknowledging the enduring challenges South Africa faces. His discourse maintains a forward-looking optimism tempered with realism. For instance, in his Inaugural Address, he acknowledges:

The road ahead is not easy. There are obstacles, some old and some new, but they will not deter us.

This acknowledgment signals an awareness of ongoing difficulties while reinforcing collective determination to overcome them. The use of "us" and "we" here reinforces solidarity and shared agency in confronting these obstacles.

The depersonalization of agency also marks a significant discursive shift. Unlike the earlier "I" of the trial speeches, where Mandela personally embodied resistance and moral clarity, the presidency speeches distribute agency among the collective "we." The phrases "we dedicate ourselves," "we shall build," and "we act together" highlight this diffusion of responsibility and partnership. This collective agency is essential for fostering national ownership of the democratic project and mitigating perceptions of authoritarianism or paternalism.

Moreover, the rhetorical framing in this phase aligns with Mandela's global role as a statesman and symbol of reconciliation worldwide. His speeches increasingly address international audiences, situating South Africa's experience within a broader discourse of human rights, peace, and democracy. For example, in his 1993 address to the United Nations General Assembly, Nelson Mandela expressed a similar message of hope, reconciliation, and shared humanity. One fitting example is:

The future of our country will be determined by the outcome of the struggle now taking place between the forces of democracy and those that seek to perpetuate apartheid. We are confident that democracy will triumph because it is the will of the people of South Africa, and indeed, of the peoples of the world.

This international dimension enhances Mandela's rhetorical stature and amplifies the symbolic power of the "rainbow nation" metaphor as a model for peace and transformation globally.

In conclusion, Phase 3 of Mandela's rhetoric is characterized by a sustained emphasis on reconciliation, unity, and symbolic nation-building. Through inclusive pronouns, metaphors of healing and covenant, and aspirational modality, Mandela crafts a discourse that seeks to transcend past divisions and mobilize collective commitment to democratic transformation. Critical discourse analyses affirm the ideological reconfiguration from oppositional binaries to inclusive national identity and the legitimization of the post-apartheid order. This phase represents not only Mandela's rhetorical maturity but also the discursive foundation of South Africa's fragile but hopeful democracy.

Discussion and Conclusion

Nelson Mandela's political ideology evolved not only in its substantive content but also, and perhaps more crucially, in the form and discourse strategies through which it was communicated. A defining marker of this evolution is the pronominal shift from the singular "I" to the inclusive "we," which signals a significant transition from an emphasis on individual resistance to the construction of a collective identity. This linguistic transformation functions to broaden the scope of agency and solidarity, reflecting Mandela's changing role from a solitary freedom fighter to a unifying leader of a diverse nation. Parallel to this pronominal shift, Mandela's metaphorical repertoire underwent a reframing—from vivid metaphors of struggle and confrontation toward more hopeful and constructive metaphors of journey and reconciliation. Early metaphors of resistance and combat gave way to images of a shared journey, rebirth, and ultimately, covenantal unity, thus enabling the reimagining of South Africa's ideological future in terms of collective healing and nation-building.

Modality and argumentation within Mandela's rhetoric similarly demonstrate a progressive movement. Initially characterized by necessity, moral imperative, and confrontation—exemplified by modal verbs such as "must" and "cannot"—Mandela's later discourse adopts a tone of invitation, shared responsibility, and aspirational commitment, using modal forms like "can," "will," and "shall." This progression encapsulates a discursive shift from a position of resistance against oppression to one of constructive engagement aimed at forging a democratic, inclusive society founded on reconciliation and mutual respect. Such rhetorical strategies underscore not only changes in political context but also the deliberate repositioning of ideological claims and collective identity.

This discursive evolution resonates strongly with broader findings in contemporary discourse studies. For instance, Proctor and Su (2018) highlight the significance of pronominal use in crisis negotiation contexts, demonstrating how shifts from "I" to "we" serve to reframe agency and responsibility, thereby facilitating collaborative problem-solving and identity reconstruction. Similarly, Musolff (2022) emphasizes the role of metaphor in crisis discourse, showing how metaphorical framing helps rhetoricians manage social anxieties and rearticulate collective goals during times of upheaval. These frameworks are directly applicable to Mandela's rhetoric, illustrating how language functions as a powerful tool for ideological repositioning in transitional moments. Al Afnan and Dishari's (2023) critical discourse analysis of Mandela's I Am Prepared to Die speech confirms that early discursive choices not only constructed a narrative of resistance but also established Mandela's moral authority and visionary leadership—foundations upon which his later inclusive rhetoric was built. Furthermore, Stengel's (2020) interpretive work enriches this understanding by foregrounding how Mandela's core personal virtues—courage, forgiveness, empathy—are deeply embedded in his rhetorical style, thus reinforcing the ideological transition from defiance to reconciliation.

Together, these findings underscore the dynamic nature of ideological construction in political discourse. Mandela's speeches did not merely reflect the socio-political realities of apartheid and its aftermath; rather, they actively shaped the political possibilities and collective identities of South Africans as the nation moved toward democracy. Through his evolving discourse, Mandela performed a form of ideological leadership that continually negotiated between past injustices and future aspirations,

crafting a narrative that both legitimized the new democratic order and inspired a shared sense of purpose and unity. This highlights the profound power of discourse as a tool for social transformation, illustrating how language and ideology co-construct political realities in contexts of profound change.

This paper has demonstrated that Nelson Mandela's political ideology was discursively constructed and evolved through a range of strategic linguistic devices, including shifts in pronoun use, metaphorical framing, modality, and argument structure. These discursive strategies were not static but dynamic, reflecting Mandela's changing socio-political context and leadership goals. Initially, his discourse emphasized individual defiance and moral resistance against apartheid oppression, foregrounding a strong, personal commitment to justice and equality. As his role transformed from a revolutionary prisoner to a unifying national leader, his language shifted toward more inclusive pronouns such as "we" and "our," signaling a collective identity and shared responsibility. Eventually, his rhetoric embraced themes of reconciliation, healing, and nation-building, employing metaphors of unity and peace to foster a cohesive post-apartheid society. This progression illustrates how Mandela's discourse strategically adapted to meet the evolving needs of his audience and the political moment, enabling him to embody transformational leadership through language.

The implications of this study are multifaceted. For scholars in political communication, discourse studies, and related fields, this analysis underscores the importance of examining not only the content of political speech but also the linguistic forms and rhetorical strategies that shape meaning and influence audience perception. Ideological change is not merely a matter of what ideas leaders express but how they express them—through subtle shifts in language that construct collective identities, social norms, and shared imaginaries. For practitioners, especially leaders in transitional societies grappling with conflict and reconciliation, Mandela's discourse offers a powerful example of how rhetoric can serve as a tool to reshape social realities, promote healing, and foster inclusive nationhood. This suggests that language is not simply a medium of communication but an active force in political transformation and social cohesion.

Looking forward, future research could extend this study in several promising directions. Comparative analyses involving other transformational leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., or Aung San Suu Kyi would offer valuable insights into common discursive patterns and unique rhetorical adaptations across different cultural and political contexts. Additionally, leveraging larger and more diverse corpora—including media coverage, public speeches, interviews, and audience feedback—would enable researchers to quantify discursive shifts more systematically, explore interaction effects between language and context, and test the generalizability of findings across different audiences and time periods. Integrating multimodal analysis, examining visual and performative aspects of political communication, could also enrich understanding of how ideology is constructed beyond verbal language alone. Ultimately, this line of inquiry promises to deepen our grasp of the relationship between discourse, leadership, and social change in both historical and contemporary settings.

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