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**Critical Discourse Analysis of President George W. Bush's 20th September 2001 Speech By Means of Fairclough's Model for Analysis of Discourse.**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study presents a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of U.S. President George W. Bush's historic speech delivered on September 20, 2001, in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Utilizing Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the paper examines the discourse across three interrelated levels: textual description, discursive interpretation, and social explanation. Textually, the analysis demonstrates how the speech relies on stark binary oppositions (e.g., good vs. evil, freedom vs. fear), strategic pronoun usage ("we" vs. "they"), high-modality verbs, religious undertones, and powerful metaphors to build absolute narrative certainty. Discursively, it highlights the use of historical intertextuality—drawing parallels to Pearl Harbor, Cold War dichotomies, and the American frontier myth—to ground the crisis within established national narratives of resilience and exceptionalism. Sociophysically, the study explains how these rhetorical devices successfully naturalized the "War on Terror," manufactured national unity, and reinforced American global hegemony. Ultimately, the paper underscores how the speech effectively precluded diplomatic alternatives, laid the ideological groundwork for major domestic and foreign policies (such as the USA Patriot Act and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq), and established a simplistic, enduring framework for post-9/11 global relations.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Norman Fairclough, George W. Bush, Political Discourse, Binary Oppositions, Intertextuality, War on Terror, American Hegemony

**1. Introduction**

Discourse, or communication, whether written or spoken, is one of the main ways by which humans and institutions make sense of the world around us. So too in political communication. The study of the political discourse or text within the area of political communication is particularly relevant. The purpose of political communication is for politicians to communicate to the public so as to explain their policies and actions. Communication within a political context is different from all other contexts because it is through such communication that politicians are able to perform many political acts which can have far reaching effects. Political discourse within times of crisis (such as in the aftermath of a national disaster) can in particular have long lasting effects upon the public's perception of a political leader. This article shall analyze a speech by U.S.A. President George W. Bush. Mr. Bush delivered the following address on the 20th September 2001 to a joint session of the U.S. Congress. Furthermore the majority of the U.S.A. public were able to receive the address via their television sets. In summary, Mr. Bush's speech to

Congress on 20th September 2001 was intended to state his intentions in respect of his war against terrorist organizations.

This analysis of the text is conducted using Norman Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) at three interrelated levels: 1) the level of Textual Analysis (Description) of the speech as a written text, 2) the level of Discursive Practice (Interpretation) of the way in which the text was produced, distributed and interpreted as spoken discourse within the sociopolitical context of the moment of its delivery, 3) the

### **1. Textual Analysis (Description)**

### **2. Discursive Practice (Interpretation)**

**3. Social Practice (Explanation)** – an explanation of the relationship between the discourse studied and the relevant ideological, institutions and power structures.

This discourse analysis aims to describe and explain how Bush in his speech from 20 September 2001 uses specific linguistic features, how he refers to previous historical events (intertextuality) and how he uses certain ideological structures in order to legitimize war, to bring about national unity and to manifest American hegemony.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses:**

#### **Research Question 1:**

How does President George W. Bush's September 20, 2001 speech construct and reinforce a binary ideological framework to justify military intervention.

#### **Hypothesis 1:**

The speech employs binary oppositions (e.g. good vs. evil, freedom vs. fear, America vs. terrorists) to create a moral imperative for going to war by setting up a polarized or 'binary' way of viewing geopolitical issues and thus legitimizing war.

#### **Research Question 2:**

What rhetorical and linguistic strategies are used in Bush's speech to shape public perception, construct national identity, and reinforce U.S. hegemony?

#### **Hypothesis 2:**

By utilizing pronoun usage (we/us vs. they/them), repetition, high-modality verbs, religious references, and historical intertextuality, the speech unifies the American public by constructing a collective identity, it demonizes the enemy through dehumanization and exclusionary rhetoric, and it positions the U.S. as the moral leader of the "civilized world." As a result, the speech reinforces U.S. hegemony and justifies global military intervention.

1. To unite the American public in a common identity.
2. Demonize the enemy through dehumanization and exclusionary rhetoric.

3. Position the U.S. as the moral leader of the "civilized world," reinforcing hegemonic power structures and justifying global military intervention.

1. Textual Analysis (Description)

> Lexical Choices and Rhetorical Devices

> Binary Oppositions and Moral Framing

The speech also uses a number of different devices to emphasize the contrast between good and evil. For instance, it sets up a number of different contrasts between opposing pairs of concepts (e.g. freedom/fear, justice/cruelty, America/terrorists, the civilized world/ the enemies of humanity). Chilton (2004) observed that using such 'binary oppositions' is a typical feature of political discourse. It allows for simplistic moral analogies to be created between real world events (e.g. in order to justify going to war), and therefore to bring about powerful emotions in people (Benarose, 2024). In this way, the speech creates the impression that the action of going to war is not only inevitable but also just.

- *Freedom vs. Fear*
- *Justice vs. Cruelty*
- *America vs. Terrorists*
- *Civilized World vs. Enemies of Humanity*

Bush' ways of constructing opposing forces in the discourse is in line with how Chilton (2004) comments upon the use of binary oppositions in political discourse. They create a very strong impression upon the recipients. They simplify and reduce complex geopolitical matters. He argues that there are often emotionally engaging as well as powerful moral implications drawn from such contrasts. The binary oppositions presented in the quote by Bush above portrays the U.S. and its allies as the just forces of the world, engaged in a struggle of freedom against fear, of justice against cruel oppression, while the "terrorists" and their allies represent the evil forces in the world. They are presented as enemies of humanity, enemies of the free world and of the civilized world. In this way Bush presents a clear moral argument in favor of military actions to fight against terrorism.

Pronoun Usage: National Unity vs. Enemy Othering:

Bush strategically employs pronouns to construct a collective national identity while simultaneously distancing the enemy:

- The frequent use of 'we' together with 'our' and 'us' creates the impression of a unified nation that faces a crisis or threat together (Billig, 1995: 139). It stresses the aspects of community, responsibility and strength in the face of adversity.
- "They," "them," and "the terrorists" create an other, an enemy that is dehumanized, excluded, and viewed as a threat to human existence in general and to the United States in particular (Dijk, 2008, p. 84).

This strategy is also in line with Bhatia's (2005) observations concerning political discourse constructing 'imagined communities' and thus reinforcing a national identity which is often cast in a positive light to that of an 'other' which is negatively constructed and often excluded from membership of the constructed 'imagined community'.

### **Repetition and Reinforcement of Key Themes**

Bush employs repetition to reinforce key messages:

- "We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail" (Bush, 2001). The above mentioned sentence is a form of a tripartite repetition, thus it has a rhythmic and emphatic quality of perseverance.
- The repeated use of the phrase 'justice will be done' was a declarative reassurance to the American public that justice would be done in regard to the actions which led to the attacks on the World Trade Centre.

As Charteris-Black (2005) states, Bush's repetition is part of his strategy to reinforce key messages to his audience in order to create a lasting impression of them.

### **Metaphors and Symbolism**

The speech in which this example is highly metaphorical. There is metaphor for war, metaphor for morality, and metaphor for a national identity under attack.

- "...a wound to our country" – A wound to the nation's body is a severe, lasting injury to its collective life and creates a state of pain and vulnerability to future harm (Lakoff, 1991).
- "Dark threat" – This metaphor produces images of evil in the minds of the receivers and thus terror is presented as a new, in civilizations terms, "dark" threat to humanity.
- "Justice will be done" — This sentence presents an attack by the US as a process of "justice being done" to counterbalance the image of the US launching an aggressive attack.

This metaphorical framing of policies as narratives that evoke emotions plays a crucial role in political persuasion, according to George Lakoff (1991).

### **Religious References: Moral and Divine Legitimacy**

- 'God bless America' and 'the prayers of a nation' in order to morally legitimize the cause of the U.S. (Bhatia, 2005).
- The speech moreover suggests that the USA's fight against terrorism is a war that has to be fought, because it is God's will, and thus it is sanctioned by a higher power.

This is consistent with Chilton (2004)'s comments on political leaders drawing on religious discourse in order to obtain more legitimacy.

### **Sentence Structure and Modality**

Bush employs high modality language to convey certainty:

- Declarative Sentences: ‘America will never forget.’ These sentences are of high modality as they present certain information about a subject or events and are typically presented in a matter of fact manner (Fairclough, 2001).
- Ilse De Gruyter (ed.) in Chilton & Schäffer (2006), reprinted from Chilton (2004): the leader’s speech is further enhanced by a number of non-negotiable imperative sentences, such as: ‘Deliver to U.S. authorities all the leaders of al Qaeda’. The overall effect is to preclude any possibility of further negotiation, and to transfer responsibility for the desired action to the recipient of the speech (Hmouma, 2024).
- High Modality Verbs: The use of must, shall and will to further emphasize commitment to course of action.

Fairclough (2001) noted that in political discourse, modality is used to remove doubt from a message in order to create a hegemonic discourse that stifles any opposing views.

## 2. Discursive Practice (Interpretation)

This level of analysis is used to study the process of the production, distribution and interpretation of speech in a sociopolitical context.

### Context and Intended Audience:

This discourse was delivered nine days after the 9/11 attacks, when emotions throughout the U.S. and the world were at their peak. The principal addressees in this discourse are the American public; the allies of the U.S. around the world; and other governments throughout the world, particularly those in the Islamic world and particularly in Afghanistan where the Taliban regime is in power.

- The American public – to unify the nation and mobilize support for military intervention.
- International allies – to secure the support of other countries in the War on Terror.
- Foreign governments, especially the Taliban regime in Afghanistan – to issue an ultimatum to them.

### Intertextuality: Drawing from Historical Narratives

Bush’s speech deliberately echoes past wartime rhetoric:

- Pearl Harbor (WWII): Linking 9/11 to Pearl Harbor by stating that 9/11 was an unprovoked attack, therefore we are at war, in order to garner support and to relate to a previous war in which the U.S. entered after being attacked (Zarefsky, 2007).
- Cold War Rhetoric: The speech writer’s use of the famous phrase “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” is reminiscent of the simplistic ideological dichotomies of the Cold War, such as “with us or against us” that were used to portray communism in a uniformly evil light (Hodges, 2011).
- The American Frontier Myth: The rhetoric of justice, resilience, and moral duty aligns with the frontier myth of American exceptionalism (Biesecker, 2002).

As Fairclough (2003) points out in order to create these connections to past representations of social reality an individual uses intertextuality, and this can serve to legitimize the current representations or indeed the social practices which are being presented by that individual to the audience.

### 3. Social Practice (Explanation)

Viewed at a more macro level the speech is working to reinforce certain basic ideologies.

Legitimizing Military Intervention and U.S. Hegemony

- The speech constructs the “War on Terror” as a moral necessity, making military intervention appear inevitable (Fairclough, 2003).
- The speech reinforces the U.S.’s position as the global leader of freedom.
- Military force is portrayed as the only means to bring about change and therefore alternative options, such as diplomacy, are ruled out.

Shaping Post-9/11 Policies and Public Discourse

The speech outlined a number of post-9/11 policies and helped shape their accompanying public discourse.

- The USA Patriot Act (2001): This act allows the government to carry out greater surveillance and to use additional methods to counter terrorism.
- Declare war on Afghanistan in October 2001 against the Taliban.
- The Iraq War (2003) The moral justification of using preemptive war as outlined in Bush’s 9/11 speech was extended to include an invasion of Iraq in 2003.

### Conclusion:

This speech was a singularly powerful and effective document that enabled George W. Bush to lay out policy in the aftermath of 9/11, to the American people and to the world, and it had a profound effect on all of them. Using the model provided by Fairclough (1995; 2001) of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), I shall explore its various strategies in more detail. Specifically, I shall examine the textual, discursive and ideological aspects of this unique document.

Textual analysis focuses on the specific speech and the particular language choices that were used in order to create meaning. Bush utilized a number of binary oppositions that worked to frame the War on Terror in a positive, moral manner. By setting up good as opposed to evil, freedom against fear, “we” against “they,” the President worked to create a black and white discourse of good vs. evil rather than a more complex geopolitical strategy. Other features of the text, such as the use of pronouns, repetition, high modality, and metaphor, work together to create a discourse of absolute certainty that makes it seem inevitable that the War on Terror will continue until total victory. All of these features together create a sense in which there is no room for any other alternative reading of the events of 9/11.

Discursively, the speech drew upon historical intertextuality between the present moment of 9/11 and earlier moments of conflict and crisis, including World War II, the Cold War, and the American

mythology of its own 'exceptionalism'. Thus, Bush was able to draw upon the well-established US discourse of its own 'resilience' in the face of adversity, of 'justice' in its dealing with other nations, and of 'righteous' retaliation against those who had first attacked the US. The historical intertextuality drew upon the well-established representation of earlier conflicts, in which the US had fought for democracy and freedom, and in which it had emerged victorious. Thus, terrorism represented yet another existential threat to the US, one that demanded a decisive and uncompromising response. Indeed, the historical intertextuality drew upon a discourse that legitimized military intervention in order to protect freedom and to fight against evil. In this sense, the War on Terror was constructed as simply another battle in the long history of conflict between the forces of good and evil.

Speech functions at the social level, in that it naturalized war, and legitimized military action as the only course of action. It provided the basis of subsequent legislation, for example the USA Patriot Act of 2001, which increased the powers of surveillance of government, and provided the justification for the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. The ideology that it promoted was also extended to the justification of the war in Iraq in 2003, and is now having a long-term impact on U.S. foreign policy.

On another hand, the speech influenced global public discourse by introducing simple and clear-cut to the world of international relations: either you are with us against terrorism or you are with terrorists. This black and white approach resulted in a number of unilateral military interventions and in deterioration of many diplomatic relations. Global security issues have also changed dramatically.

However, whilst this speech went down very well with the majority of Americans it has also been subjected to considerable criticism, much of it centering on the simple way in which the President portrayed the situation. Bush's black and white terms have been seen by many as simplifying very complex geopolitical events thus leading to increased Islamophobia, worldwide militarization and the justification of what has come to be termed as 'preventive' warfare. Such a simplistic moral stance has, as yet, failed to prompt much in the way of opposing discourse regarding the root causes of terrorism, foreign policy, and the likely effects of interventions into other countries.

In summary, Bush's speech was not just a reaction to 9/11, but a powerful and innovative rhetorical effort. It has fundamentally changed the ways in which foreign policy is conducted and perceived by the American public. This speech has influenced not only American perceptions of national identity in times of crisis but also how global security and politics are generally reported. An in-depth analysis of the speech by means of Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model reveals the tremendous power that language holds: it is not merely a means of communication but also a tool of power. The present study therefore aims to contribute to an understanding of the above-mentioned ongoing effects of the speech and of the need for a critical analysis of political discourse in crisis situations.

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## Appendix

### The Speech (Full Text):

Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation

8:30 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Good evening. Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts. The victims were in airplanes, or in their offices; secretaries, businessmen and women, military and federal workers; moms and dads, friends and neighbors. Thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror.

The pictures of airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning, huge structures collapsing, have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness, and a quiet, unyielding anger. These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat. But they have failed; our country is strong.

A great people has been moved to defend a great nation. Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.

America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining.

Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature. And we responded with the best of America - with the daring of our rescue workers, with the caring for strangers and neighbors who came to give blood and help in any way they could.

Immediately following the first attack, I implemented our government's emergency response plans. Our military is powerful, and it is prepared. Our emergency teams are working in New York City and Washington, D.C. to help with local rescue efforts.

Our first priority is to get help to those who have been injured, and to take every precaution to protect our citizens at home and around the world from further attacks.

The functions of our government continue without interruption. Federal agencies in Washington which had to be evacuated today are reopening for essential personnel tonight, and will be open for business tomorrow. Our financial institutions remain strong, and the American economy will be open for business, as well.

The search is underway for those who are behind these evil acts. I've directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and to bring them to justice. We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.

I appreciate so very much the members of Congress who have joined me in strongly condemning these attacks. And on behalf of the American people, I thank the many world leaders who have called to offer their condolences and assistance.

America and our friends and allies join with all those who want peace and security in the world, and we stand together to win the war against terrorism. Tonight, I ask for your prayers for all those who grieve, for the children whose worlds have been shattered, for all whose sense of safety and security has been threatened. And I pray they will be comforted by a power greater than any of us, spoken through the ages in Psalm 23: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me."

This is a day when all Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace. America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time. None of us will ever forget this day. Yet, we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world.

Thank you. Good night, and God bless America.