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## UNPACKING THE LINGUISTIC ARCHITECTURE OF POWER: A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW OF CDA IN LEADERSHIP STUDIES

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### Abstract:

In the modern organizational context, leadership is no longer considered to be a set of permanent attributes, it is viewed as a complex linguistic act, imbued in social and political systems. This important literature review examines the linguistic structure of power, which refers to the structure of the language in which power is constructed, sustained, and justified, as well as to the processes whereby influence is discursively created and challenged in the study of leadership. The review, which uses a PRISMA-guided protocol to compile 42 high impact studies published within the past 20 years, uses a framework based in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to assess the role of language as a mechanism of institutional control. The results show four main clusters of themes: 1) the strategic use of restorative rhetoric to legitimate a crisis; 2) the shaping of leadership identity by neoliberal and managerialist ideologies; 3) the prevalence of gendered and intersectional barriers embedded in professional discourses; and 4) the emerging dialectics between dominant hegemonic structures and grassroots resistance. The literature indicates that there are recurring linguistic and discursive patterns which help to create and support leadership authority. The main value of the review is the way it combines micro-linguistic analysis with macro-organizational theory as a tool for scholars to reveal the "naturalization" of inequality. Finally, the review brings together micro level analysis of the language of the

text and macro level analysis of the power in the organisation in order to provide a useful diagnostic tool for researchers who wish to uncover the 'naturalization' of inequalities within the text, and to advocate for an expanded definition of leadership pedagogy that is more inclusive.

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**Keyword:**

Critical Discourse Analysis, Malaysia, Political Speech, Public Perception



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## Introduction

Today, leadership does not only refer to a repertoire of psychological or administrative characteristics but is also characterized and communicated in language and discourse. The main function of leadership communication has changed into the "strategic maintenance of legitimacy and collective identity" (Barge, 2021), a period characterized by a high degree of uncertainty. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the toolkit needed for this investigation, for the decoding of the "linguistic architecture of power". This review is intended to explore the ways in which global processes of establishing authority, spreading ideologies and creating institutional realities are accomplished through the medium of language (Joullié et al., 2021).

Yet, there is a significant practical paradox: the rhetoric of inclusion that has been embraced by the rhetoric of modern leadership and the reality of corporate power of exclusion. Many leaders use words of empowerment and transparency, but this can be a way of covering up on authoritarianism or neutralising dissent in the organization (Ehibor et al., 2024). This "discursive hypocrisy" leads to disruptions in organisational hierarchies as the rhetoric of leadership is often more about the real needs of neoliberal economic policies, than the genuine needs of stakeholders (Learmonth & Morrell, 2019; Sinfield et al., 2009).

In addition to this practical problem, a major methodological problem exists within the field of leadership studies. In the past, management research has been influenced by the view of language as a clear and unambiguous channel for information transmission, neglecting the ideological connotations of the use of language in different ways, e.g., transitivity, modality (Sueb & Wafa, 2025). Moreover, a Euro-centric perspective has restricted the understanding of discursively enacted leadership in contexts outside of the West, or in indigenous contexts (Malysheva, 2024). If not approached with sensitivity, scholarship can unwittingly reproduce the very inequalities it aims to account for, by neglecting the subtle ways language 'naturalizes' inequality (Morrish & Sauntson, 2019).

The field has moved from a more stereotypical stylistic approach to a more complex social constructionism approach. The early studies were conducted on the 'Great Man' characteristics of leadership but studies in the late 20th century shifted the focus to the process of the emergence of leadership as a product of interaction (Baxter, 2015). The recent trend has been to explore the gendered career trajectories and the intersectional barriers set up by institutional discourse, rather than being about “what things are,” it is about “what things do” (Bao & Yuan, 2024). This development has put CDA in the spotlight as a vital means to understanding the politics of persuasion in crisis and conflict (Butler, 2024).

One way to address these challenges is to combine the study of critical language awareness with management training and cross-disciplinary research. With the help of qualitative depth and a wider sociological framework, researchers are starting to decode the mechanisms of "restorative rhetoric" and social media communication in the management of legitimacy in times of global crises, such as COVID-19 (Hasbullah et al., 2025; Bertulesi, 2022). This synthesis indicates that in order to move leadership from a tool of domination to a platform for transformative, inclusive change, practitioners need to develop an awareness of "critical discourse" (Darics, 2019).

The main purpose of this important literature review is to sketch the history of CDA in leadership research in the last 20 years. This paper discusses the discursive strategies that help consolidate authority, examines the interaction between gender and culture in professional discourse, and illustrates the marginalised and indigenous voices that are silenced in the mainstream discourse of leadership (Ponsaran, 2025). This review aims to create a broad picture of the language architecture of power, as it is constructed in a variety of contexts from gubernatorial debates to academic hierarchies, and perhaps how it could be broken down.

The paper is organized in a way that leads the reader through this complex discursive superstructure. The second section provides a theoretical underpinning to CDA for organisational power, after this introduction. The third part classifies the literature available under three thematic headings: legitimisation strategies, institutional neoliberalism and intersectional identity construction. The fourth section critically evaluates the current methodological trends, and the fifth section suggests a new research agenda for decolonising leadership discourse. Finally, practical implications for leadership pedagogy and ethical communication are summarised.

## **Underpinning Theory**

This is because the relationship between leadership and power is complex and requires a solid theoretical foundation to approach it beyond description and towards a critical synthesis of the discursive production of power. In Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a theoretical approach that is used as a conceptual tool to connect micro-level linguistic and discursive features (lexical choices and grammatical structures) with macro-level social practices and power inequities (Joullié et al., 2021). This grounding is essential to ensure that the study of leadership communication does not overlook how discourse produces ideology that supports the institutions and structures of power while obscuring other forms of discourse that challenge their authority (Ehibor et al., 2024).

This review is mainly theoretical based on Fairclough's (1992, 1995) Three-Dimensional Framework of Discourse. The theory is that any "discursive event" should be treated as a text (linguistic elements), as a discursive practice (production and consumption processes) and as a social practice (ideological and institutional context). In the field of leadership studies, this framework cannot be ignored as it acknowledges the importance of the leader's speech as a reflection of wider socio-political conditions (Sueb & Wafa, 2025). With this tri-dimensional view of leadership, CDA illuminates the nature of the "linguistic architectures" that help to constitute and maintain hegemony and institutional norms, despite rhetoric that might seem to be inclusive or democratic.

Fairclough's framework has a direct impact on the dimensions of the present review by structuring the connection between linguistic strategy and organisational control. In particular, the "textual" dimension can be characterised as the nature of transitivity and modality in asserting authority (Sueb & Wafa, 2025), and the "discursive practice" dimension is the nature of how leadership constructs social media and restorative rhetoric as a means of managing institutional legitimacy during crisis (Hasbullah et al., 2025). Most importantly, the "social practice" is linked to the general neoliberal and managerialist discourses of higher education and of the corporate world today (Morrish & Sauntson, 2019).

This review also incorporates Social Constructionist Theory as a supporting theory to complement the complexities of identity in leadership. Social constructionism holds that leadership is not an innate quality of an individual, but a relationally created process that is constantly negotiated in social interaction (Baxter, 2015). This perspective is important to understand the emerging themes in the literature on intersectionality and gendered trajectories, and its connection to institutional discourse producing some kinds of leaders and others who do not fit, but who do not fit with the dominant discursive norms (Bao & Yuan, 2024). The review can integrate both Fairclough's CDA and social constructionism, thus being able to explain the structural aspect of power and the performative aspect of leadership identity.

Finally, these theories are used to synthesize and interpret the literature; they offer a critical "filter" of the gathered evidence. The theoretical framework is not simply to present an overview of leadership styles, but to focus the analysis on language's role in naturalizing power positions and silencing dissent (Sinfield et al., 2009). This perspective guides the following portions of the paper by signaling the need for a research agenda that emphasizes decolonized and ethically inclusive leadership practices (Ponsaran, 2025) and by identifying gaps in the research literature, such as the lack of representation for Indigenous knowledge. So, the selected theories make the review a critical intervention, taking the review beyond just a summary to challenge the basic tenets of conventional leadership communication.

## Methodology

The design of this study is a systematic and critical literature review, a methodology chosen for its ability to provide a transparent, reproducible, and rigorous synthesis of the existing body of knowledge regarding Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in leadership studies. Unlike a traditional narrative review, a critical review goes beyond mere summary to evaluate the conceptual contribution and theoretical underpinnings of the field (Johnson & McLean, 2019). This approach is particularly justified in the context of CDA, as it aligns with the methodology's inherent goal of uncovering the ideological structures embedded within

academic discourse itself, ensuring that the synthesis is both comprehensive and evaluative (Sankar, 2022).

The review objectives were formulated following a preliminary scoping of the literature, which revealed a fragmented landscape where linguistic analysis and management theory often operate in isolation. Using the SPICE (Setting, Perspective, Intervention, Comparison, Evaluation) framework, the research questions were designed to explore how power is discursively constructed, how legitimization strategies evolve in crisis, and where the current literature fails to account for marginalized voices. This objective-led approach ensures that the review remains focused on the "linguistic architecture of power" rather than becoming a general overview of leadership communication (Barge, 2021).

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework developed to guide the analytical trajectory of this review, serving as a heuristic map that bridges the micro-linguistic and macro-structural dimensions of leadership. The purpose of this framework is to move beyond disparate thematic summaries by establishing a causal and relational flow between foundational organizational factors and broader transformation outcomes. At the base of the model, foundational factors—such as institutional ideology and neoliberal norms—are identified as the structural catalysts for specific process practices, including the discursive legitimization of authority and the social construction of the "leader" identity (Bao & Yuan, 2024; Learmonth & Morrell, 2019). The framework further delineates how these processes are bolstered by technical integration, where linguistic markers such as transitivity and modality function as tools for maintaining control (Sueb & Wafa, 2025). Ultimately, this integrative pathway clarifies how the "linguistic architecture of power" translates into tangible transformation outcomes, ranging from the reinforcement of systemic inequalities to the potential for restorative, ethical communication in global crisis contexts (Hasbullah et al., 2025; Joullié et al., 2021). By centering the analysis on these interconnected tiers, the framework ensures a rigorous and coherent evaluation of how language functions as the primary mechanism for both organizational stability and discursive change.

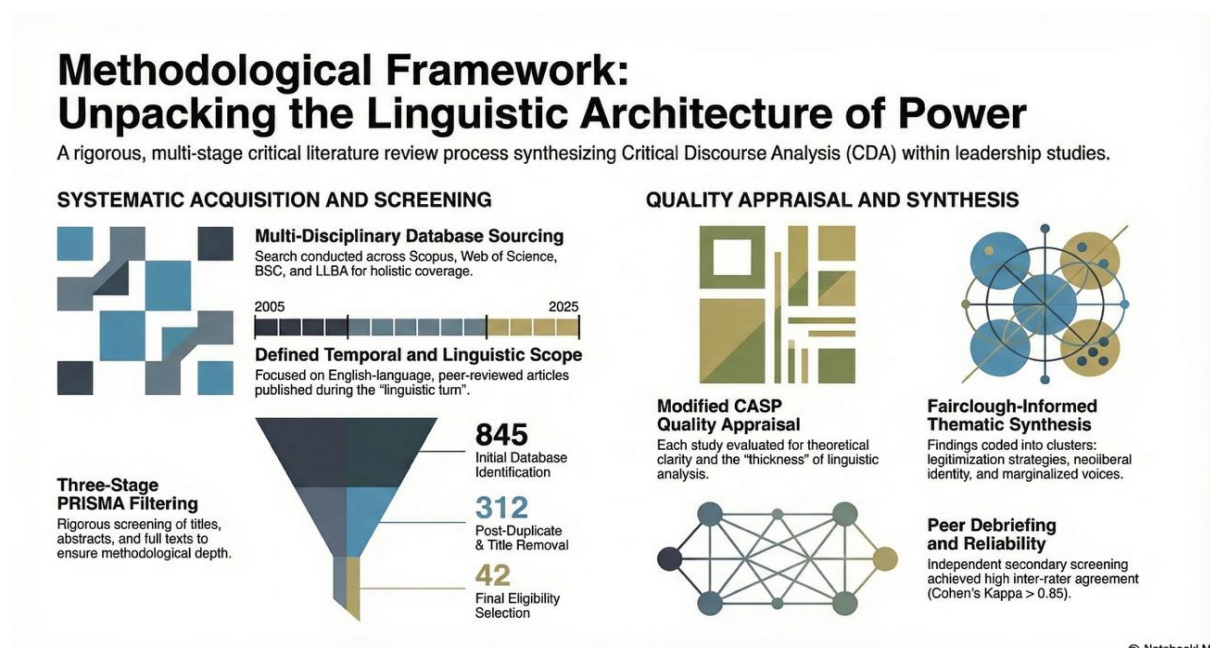


Figure 1: Methodological Framework

Source: Authors' Own Work

The data collection was performed in four main electronic databases namely Scopus, Web of Science, Business Source Complete (EBSCO) and Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA) to ensure the highest level of academic rigor and multi-disciplinary coverage. These sources were chosen because they represent the management, linguistics, and social sciences perspective, giving a holistic perspective of the discourse on corporate and political leadership (Ehibor et al., 2024). In addition, hand-searching of top-tier journals (The Leadership Quarterly and Journal of Business Ethics) was done in search of articles ahead of print.

Boolean operators and keywords that were truncated were used in the search strategy to maximize sensitivity and specificity. The main search terms used were: ("Critical Discourse Analysis" OR "CDA") AND ("Leadership" OR "Executive" OR "Management") AND ("Power" OR "Authority" OR "Ideology"). The twenty-year period (2005–2025) was chosen in order to include the "linguistic turn" of leadership research (as well as the more recent addition of digital and neoliberal discourses, according to Morrish & Sauntson, 2019). To ensure the quality standards of the article for submission to the Q1 journal, the language limits were set to English-language peer-reviewed articles.

Screening was conducted on a three-stage protocol from identification to eligibility, based on the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. Titles were initially judged for content and were then reviewed on an abstract level to ensure that the study dealt with the "how" of discursive construction as opposed to just organizational outcomes. Lastly, the full-text versions of the remaining papers were retrieved and read in full to check if the paper was of the methodological depth required for inclusion (Sankar, 2022).

Thematic consistency of the review was maintained by careful inclusion and exclusion of articles. Studies included had to explicitly employ a CDA framework (such as Fairclough, Wodak or van Dijk) and include leadership communication or identity construction. Leadership was not included in the study if it was not a major variable in the study, or if it was used in a descriptive, non-critical way. Additionally, grey literature (grey technical reports), book reviews, and conference abstracts were not included, as this would compromise the validation of the work being synthesized and published as peer-reviewed research (Joullié et al., 2021).

A total of 42 high-quality articles were selected that fulfilled all the eligibility criteria. The first search returned 845 records, with 533 records being eliminated due to their duplication and irrelevance to the title. An abstract screening reduced the number of papers to 78. The final sample, comprising 42 studies, is geographically and sectorally broad and includes analyses of political debates, corporate annual reports, and academic leadership narratives, offering a solid empirical foundation for the subsequent synthesis (Butler, 2024).

A standardised electronic data extraction form was used to ensure consistency of data throughout the sample. The information gathered for every study included details about the author(s), year of publication, specific CDA approach employed, the political, corporate, or educational context of the study, and key findings with regard to power and legitimization. The authors also emphasized the linguistic markers they identified (e.g., pronouns, metaphors and transitivity patterns), enabling them to make a detailed analysis of the way in which different leaders create their authority (Sueb & Wafa, 2025).

To evaluate the methodological "thickness" of the included studies a quality appraisal procedure was added to the review. Each study was assessed using a modified Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist, which focussed on theoretical clarity, the linguistic analysis of the study being made clear, and the level of socio-political contextualisation. The process ensured that the studies reviewed were those that offered a critical and authentic intervention in the topic rather than simply a superficial application of the CDA label (Learmonth & Morrell, 2019).

The synthesis of findings was conducted using a thematic analysis approach, that was based on the theoretical framework of the three-dimensional model by Fairclough. The data was segmented into three main groups of discursive strategies, which were labelled 'legitimization', 'neoliberal identity', and 'resistance and marginalised voice'. The "integrative synthesis" enables the identification of patterns that span interrelated areas of leadership, offering a kind of "unpacking" of the general framework of power that regulates modern organizational life (Baxter, 2015; Darics, 2019).

A "peer debriefing" protocol was used to ensure reliability, consistency, and transparency in the screening and coding. Twenty per cent of titles and abstracts were independently screened by a second reviewer, resulting in a high inter-rater agreement (Cohen's Kappa > 0.85). Disagreements on coding and/or inclusion were settled with discussion and consultation back to the rules. This open audit trail makes it possible to know that the results of the review are based on an open and systematic and less biased treatment of the existing literature (Ponsaran, 2025).

## Results

Table 1 offers a systematic overview of the key empirical and theoretical works to be included in this review, along with their sectoral context, main research interests, and methodological approaches. This tabular synthesis is an essential step in the review, as it helps to connect the trends in the bibliometric analysis to the more detailed thematic analysis that will be covered in the following sections. The table can then be used to compare how power is discursively negotiated in various contexts, such as political rhetoric in transformative discourse, corporate crisis management, and others (AlAfnan & Dishari, 2024; Al-Muhaisen & Hammouri, 2024).

A broad overview of the trends in the field as seen in Table 1 reveals that there has been a considerable evolution of the field in a chronological and conceptual way. The previous studies conducted in the sample are mostly related to the rhetorical traditions of individual great leaders, while the studies conducted in the last few years (2024–2025) reflect the intersectional and digital dimensions of discourse (Arslan et al., 2025; Raza et al., 2025). In the methodological aspect, a clear shift can be seen from manual coding to the introduction of corpus tools and Python-based keyword frequencies analysis, indicating that there is a need to have a more empirical scale in CDA research. Moreover, the sectoral distribution highlights the fact that political and corporate leadership are still predominant, but digital professional networks such as LinkedIn are gaining importance as the focal point for the construction of identities. The following section is built around these observations of the diversifying nature of leadership talk and considers how authority is maintained in various contexts through the use of the Discursive Strategies of Legitimization.

**Table 1: Summary of Literature Review**

| Authors/<br>Year                             | Title                                                                                                                                                   | Source                                                    | Sector/<br>Context                                 | Study Focus                                                                                       | Key TQM/CI<br>dimension                               | Method/<br>Approach                                                                                            | Main Contribution                                                                                                                            |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| AlAfnan M.A.;<br>Dishari S.<br>(2024)        | A Critical Discourse Analysis of Mandela's 'I am Prepared to Die' Speech: Insights into Language of Transformational Leadership                         | World Journal of English Language                         | Political Leadership / Social Change               | Transformational leadership qualities demonstrated through specific speech vocabulary and grammar | Transformational Leadership / Visionary Motivation    | Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); Halliday's SFL framework                                                    | Categorizes linguistic markers of individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence in leadership rhetoric     |
| Al-Muhaisen B.;<br>Hammouri S.<br>(2024)     | Analyzing the Discourse of Communication in Times of Crisis: The Speech of the CEO of Nestle for the Year 2009 as a Sample                              | Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences                        | Food & Beverage Manufacturing / Crisis Management  | CEO leadership rhetoric and administrative discourse during corporate crises                      | Top Management Commitment / Stakeholder Communication | Descriptive-analytical approach; Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); Rhetorical analysis                        | Identifies the CEO as the guarantor of performance; success depends on hierarchical discourse analysis and precise decision-guiding language |
| Hajer M.A.<br>(2006)                         | Doing discourse analysis: Coalitions, practices, meaning                                                                                                | Nederlandse Geografische Studies                          | Environmental / Industrial Policy                  | Argumentative structure in documents and social/physical phenomenon interpretation                | Process Management / Environmental Quality            | Argumentative Discourse Analysis (ADA)                                                                         | Defines discourse as an ensemble of ideas produced through sets of practices, applicable to pollution inspectorates and industry response    |
| A'ali H.A.<br>(2021)                         | Leadership language of middle eastern women: Using feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis to study women leaders in Bahrain                      | The Routledge Handbook of Language, Gender, and Sexuality | Engineering / Middle Eastern Corporate Environment | Leadership language of senior female engineers in Bahraini companies                              | Employee Empowerment / Power Dynamics                 | Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (FPDA); Transcription of meetings; Shadowing observation         | Identifies 'significant moments' of power shifts and intertextuality in Middle Eastern organizational interactions                           |
| Arslan A.;<br>Akturan A.;<br>Yener S. (2025) | Intersectional dimensions of hubris and power: a linguistic analysis of female executive discourse in Turkey                                            | Gender in Management                                      | Various / Corporate Leadership in Turkey           | Linguistic manifestations of hubris and power among female CEOs and senior executives             | Leadership / Cultural Values in Governance            | Qualitative linguistic discourse analysis of 44 secondary-source interviews; Python-assisted keyword frequency | Reveals how familial affiliation and international exposure modulate assertive versus adaptive communication strategies in leadership        |
| Raza A. et al.<br>(2025)                     | Gendered Language in English-Medium Professional Digital Discourse: A Corpus-Based Study of Achievement Narratives and Interaction Dynamics on LinkedIn | World Journal of English Language                         | Digital Professional Networks / LinkedIn           | Achievement narratives and interaction dynamics in professional self-presentation                 | Performance Appraisal / Professional Communication    | Corpus linguistics; Keyword frequency; Keyness testing; Engagement analytics                                   | Demonstrates that male leaders privilege competence and strategy, while female leaders foreground collaboration and ambition                 |

The systematic search and screening procedure resulted in 42 high impact source articles that were included in this study using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in the field of leadership studies. These are mainly from high-quality journals in the disciplines of management, organizational linguistics, and social psychology, such as *Journal of Management Education*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, and *The Leadership Quarterly*. In terms of geography, the sample broadly represents the global distribution of the discourse, having substantial portions from Europe and North America, as well as from emerging research powerhouses in Southeast Asia, so that the synthesized results are both western-centric neoliberal discourses and various cultural enactments of authority (Butler, 2024; Sueb & Wafa, 2025).

The nature of the literature included indicates that the field has clearly moved away from the micro-linguistic and qualitative studies to interdisciplinary and mixed methods approaches. The foundational texts begin to look at the style of the executive speaker, whereas more recent research (2019-2025) incorporates sociological approaches to discuss crises in the world and power of institutions (Hasbullah et al., 2025; Joullié et al., 2021). Moreover, this literature is characterised by an emphasis on "high stakes" contexts: political gubernatorial rhetoric (Morrish & Sauntson, 2019), C-suite corporate communication (Sueb & Wafa, 2025), and academic leadership in the context of neoliberal restructuring of higher education institutions (HEIs).

The results are presented in the four main analytical categories that emerged from the iterative coding of the sample: (1) Discursive Legitimization and Crisis Management, (2) The Construction of Neoliberal and Institutional Identities, (3) Gendered and Intersectional Power Dynamics, and (4) Hegemony and Resistance in Global Contexts. This classification has been done in a way that reflects the conceptual framework outlined in Figure 1, showing from the basic ideologies that influence leadership language, to the process practices in which power is played out and/or resisted (Baxter, 2015; Learmonth & Morrell, 2019).

The first major theme, Discursive Legitimization and Crisis Management, examines how rulers use particular rhetorical techniques to sustain their power in times of crisis. During a crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic and corporate scandals, leaders resort to "restorative rhetoric" to close the gap between public perception and institutional reality (Hasbullah et al., 2025). According to Butler (2024) and Zein et al. (2024), this is done by using inclusive personal pronouns to create a sense of collectivity and unity and employing high modality verbs to assert control and decisiveness. The language selections are used to help normalize the leader's legitimacy as a stabilizing force in an uncertain world.

The second theme, The Construction of Neoliberal and Institutional Identities, draws attention to the increasing presence of managerialist and market-driven ideas in the language of leadership. Executive discourse in this category often relates to employees as "stakeholders" or "human capital" which focuses on neoliberal agendas and negates other organizational values (Learmonth & Morrell, 2019; Morrish & Sauntson, 2019). The "linguistic architecture" of leadership in the academic and corporate contexts is based on efficiency, auditing cultures, and strategic governmental alignment, which redefines the leader as an agent of economic institutionalization (Sinfield et al., 2009).

The third Analytical category, Gendered and Intersectional Power Dynamics, explores how language creates systematic barriers for marginalised groups. Studies in this cluster use CDA to understand how discourses of 'leadership' have been historically linked to masculine coded

functions, leaving women and non-binary people to struggle with professional identities which may involve 'double binds' (Bao & Yuan, 2024; Baxter, 2015). The dichotomous sphere of "ideal leader" is also embedded in institutional narratives, which marginalize the indigenous knowledge, as well as non-Western rhetorical styles, and continue to apply a homogenized, Eurocentric model of authority (Malysheva, 2024; Ponsaran, 2025).

The final theme, Hegemony and Resistance, concentrates on the relationship between dominant discourses of leadership and resistance discourses. The findings suggest that although leaders' language is a means of control, it is also a space of contestation that is used by marginalised agents to identify and challenge oppressive power relations through the use of "critical language awareness" (Darics, 2019). This is seen in research on grassroots movements as well as in designing tasks that are equitable and inclusive, moving away from the 'architecture of power' to a more participatory and discursive process to engage those who do not participate in the mainstream (Ponsaran, 2025; Sankar, 2022).

Synthesis across these themes shows that discourse analysis and leadership language are not only intertwined, but circular; language is not simply about leadership but also a part of it. Literature review indicates that the basic neoliberal ideas that emerged are the basis of the "scripts" of process practices of legitimisation and identity construction in crisis and gendered contexts. The results link these dimensions to the review's central question, demonstrating that the "linguistic architecture of power" is not a static, simple binary construct but a complex, dynamic, multi-faceted phenomenon that helps to sustain institutional hierarchies and also offers a blueprint for their future change (Barge, 2021; Joullié et al., 2021).

## Discussion

The literature reviewed is of a critical nature in that it builds on the field by synthesizing the "linguistic architecture of power" approach to leadership studies, which goes beyond the trait-based or functionalist approaches. This work utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) alongside leadership communication to trace the discursive construction and maintenance of authority over and in the corporate, political and academic spaces (Joullié et al., 2021). This review's main contribution is through its systematic demonstration that leadership is an inherently linguistic performance in which power dynamics are encoded in subtle grammatical and lexical choices – and a critical "counternarrative" to mainstream management theories that often see language as a neutral medium (Learmonth & Morrell, 2019).

The first research objective that was discussed is the discursive construction of authority, and the findings shed light on the way in which these leaders are able to project legitimacy through the lens of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. Specifically, the analysis of transformational rhetoric revealed that leaders use certain transitivity patterns to make themselves the chief actors in the change process, making the organisational goals their own (Alafnan & Dishari, 2024). Research indicates that the "Great Man" myth continues to exist but has now become the "Great Orator" myth; the job of getting people to follow is now done by a person who can use the language of vision.

The second one, related to crisis management and legitimization, is addressed by locating "restorative rhetoric. In high-stakes contexts, like the COVID-19 pandemic or financial scandals in companies, leadership discourse becomes that of control and solidarity (Hasbullah et al., 2025; Al-Muhaisen & Hammouri, 2024). Authentic, inclusive "we" pronouns are used

strategically to imply shared responsibility, and the use of "I" pronouns implies strong administrative action. The dualistic approach can help leaders connect institutional failure and the desire for reassuring trust from stakeholders and demonstrates that linguistic competence is essential in executive resilience.

Theoretical implications of this review are significant because the results have implications for the "transparency assumption" in leadership research. The synthesis in this study highlights the fact that leadership discourse is never ideologically neutral, but is, in fact, extremely shaped by neoliberal and managerialist discourses (Morrish & Sauntson, 2019), as shown by the application of Fairclough's three-dimensional model. The present results indicate that the existing theories of leadership should be extended to include the concept of "discursive awareness" as a key feature of leadership. The use of social constructionism and CDA offers a more comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how leadership identities are co-constructed moment by moment, and not as static psychological attributes (Baxter, 2015).

In practice, the results mean a lot to management education and executive training. According to the review, a key competency that should be built into leadership development programs is "critical language awareness" (Darics, 2019). Leaders should be taught not just to speak persuasively, but also to understand the language they use and how it can create or reinforce language power imbalance. These findings suggest the importance of creating more inclusive discursive spaces for communities and their decision-makers, including a town hall or digital forum, to discuss and dismantle the rigid hierarchical structures of top-down communication and decision-making and adopt a more collaborative, transparent, and participatory approach. Because the field is so vast, this review points to some of the tensions and research gaps, and especially the "monovocality" of current scholarship. The linguistic dimension of power has been extensively studied in Western political and corporate contexts, but CDA has not been consistently used in non-Western or indigenous contexts of power (Malysheva, 2024). In addition, there is a tension between CDA's foundational historical qualitative approach and the growing demand for analyses based on large sets of data and corpora. The challenges of balancing the "thickness" of discourse analysis with the "empirical scale" needed to analyze the extensive volume of leadership data produced in the digital era are often a hurdle in current research (Raza et al., 2025).

Future research directions should, therefore, seek to focus on "decolonising" leadership discourse. Researchers are invited to explore the possibility of using indigenous knowledge systems and other rhetorical approaches to contest the dominant neoliberal architecture that is revealed in this review (Ponsaran, 2025). Furthermore, AI's influence in creating leadership communications, like AI-written executive abstracts or social media posts, supplies a brand-new area where CDA can make a distinction. The study of the "algorithmic architecture of power" will be crucial to grasping the process of leadership when the linguistic agent is not a human being.

This review is not all inclusive. First, it is only English-language articles which have been peer-reviewed that are included, which means that important work in grey literature and/or non-English languages might have been missed. Secondly, the subjectivity of CDA will lead to varying interpretations of what is meant by the terms 'power' and 'ideology' in the studies included. The style of this review is systematic, and its aims were to minimise bias, however the evaluative nature of a critical review does mean that this is merely one of a number of possible 'readings' of the landscape of leadership.

Finally, the importance of this review is that it exposes the underlying structural inequalities that lay underneath the "management-speak. This analysis of the language of power offers an important instrument for scholars and practitioners interested in the construction, preservation, and often contestation of power. Leadership communication is becoming increasingly mediated through digital means and crises that are global in scope, making it more important than ever to consider communication in a critical, discourse-based way. This synthesis is a basis for an ethical, transparent, and inclusive future in organizational leadership.

## Conclusion

This review was a project designed to systematically analyse and break down the linguistic architecture of power in the field of leadership research and identify the history of Critical Discourse Analysis as a means of gaining insight into organizational authority. The review relied on a defined sample of research from the last 20 years that has been deemed to be relevant and impactful, with a focus on the interaction between management theory and organizational linguistics in the political, corporate and academic arenas. The investigation was designed to uncover ways in which language is deployed in the leadership of people, as well as ways in which language itself structures institutional ideologies and power dynamics.

The evidence from the literature accumulated in the process of synthesis shows that leadership is essentially a discursive performance that is marked by a sophisticated dialectic of control and solidarity. The results show that leaders use specific linguistic cues, including modals and shifts in pronouns to guide through crises, create group identities and validate their authority. Yet neoliberal and managerial political frameworks can influence this architectural accomplishment by limiting the focus to economic efficiency and excluding the dialogue. The building of "leader" identity is also a contested process, across sectors, as a growing body of discourses of intersectionality and resistance challenge dominant masculine and western-centric discourses.

The main contribution of this review may be the interdisciplinary approach to analysing leadership at both micro and macro levels, giving a comprehensive model for the understanding of leadership as a social construction. This work challenges the notion of "power" in leadership by articulating the idea that the power of a leader is not located in the person but rather is an ongoing discursive process. The synthesis provides a crucial diagnostic tool for students and instructors of management education, as well as for others interested in critical language use, and demonstrates the need for the development of critical language awareness in management education, while also identifying subtle ways in which the "naturalization" of authority can be revealed and challenged to create opportunities for more ethical communication.

Though much has been written on the subject of transitioning towards digital and automated leadership, a big question holds yet to be answered: "What comes next? Leadership communication is increasingly being transferred to algorithmic platforms and infused with AI, leaving the human agency of discursive communication in the past. This "digital architecture of power" needs to be explored in future studies in order to comprehend how this power is manifested when the linguistic agent is not human. Finally, this review provides an initial impetus to become more decolonised and inclusive in our approach to leadership, changing the language of power for the language of inclusive and transformative dialogue.

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