Editon Consortium Journal of Literature and Linguistic Studies [ISSN: 2663 – 9297]

Issue no: 01 | **Vol no:** 07 | **October** 2025: 27-32

Linguistic Features that Reflect Power: A Case Study of Heads of Institutions' Discourses in Imenti North Sub-County, Kenya

Betty Mwende Birithia

Tharaka University, Kenya.
Main author email: birithiamwende15@gmail.com

Article History
Received: **2025.08.22**
Accepted: **2025.09.20**
Published: **2025.10.23**

Cite this article in APA
Birithia, B. M. (2025). Linguistic features that reflect power: A case study of heads of institutions' discourses in Imenti North Sub-County, Kenya. *Editon consortium journal of literature and linguistic studies 7(1),* 27-32. https://doi.org/10.51317/ecjlls.v7i1.638

Abstract
This article examines the linguistic features through which Kenyan high school principals enact, sustain, and legitimise authority. Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, supplemented by Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory, the study analyses twenty principals' speeches delivered in Imenti North Sub-County. The analysis identifies the use of modality, transitivity, pronouns, repetition, speech acts, rhetorical questions, biblical and cultural allusions, politeness strategies, and discourse markers as central strategies for regulating student conduct and reinforcing institutional hierarchies. By combining direct commands with persuasive and culturally grounded appeals, principals embed authority in ordinary communication. These linguistic resources not only transmit institutional expectations but also normalise authority and discipline by embedding them in everyday discourse. The analysis reveals that principals' language is more than administrative; it is ideological, shaping student identity, moral values, and institutional culture. The study argues that educational leadership discourse is a critical site for the reproduction of broader social ideologies, including discipline, meritocracy, religious morality, and nationalism. Findings demonstrate how principals' discourse reflects larger societal structures of power, shaping not only institutional order but also students' sense of self and citizenship. The article contributes to critical discourse scholarship by highlighting how language in school leadership is not a neutral medium but a powerful tool of governance, persuasion, and ideological control. In doing so, it extends CDA applications into African educational contexts, emphasising the significance of studying everyday institutional speech as a mechanism through which broader social structures are reproduced.

Key words: Critical discourse analysis, institutional authority, linguistic features, power, principals' discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Language is not an impartial means of communication but a key resource through which power is enacted, maintained, and legitimised in social institutions (Fairclough, 1989, 2015). In educational contexts, principals' speeches are particularly significant because they regulate conduct, transmit institutional values, and construct collective identities. These speeches extend beyond the transmission of information; they performatively establish authority, define acceptable behaviour, and reproduce institutional hierarchies. As Gee (2014) and Van Dijk (1998) observe, discourse is not merely descriptive but constitutive of social relations, embedding ideology in everyday practice.

In Kenya, principals occupy powerful symbolic and administrative positions, serving as custodians of both discipline and academic achievement. Their speeches, often delivered in public forums such as school assemblies, prize-giving ceremonies, and disciplinary meetings, are crucial moments where institutional values are reinforced. Through linguistic choices, principals present themselves as authoritative figures who define student identities in terms of obedience, discipline, respect, and ambition. The repeated emphasis on values such as hard work and moral uprightness aligns school discourse with broader national goals of productivity, patriotism, and cultural preservation.

While research in Western and Asian contexts has extensively examined the relationship between language and leadership (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003; Sharndama, 2015), African educational discourse has received less attention. Where studies exist, they often emphasise leadership effectiveness, administrative challenges, or policy outcomes rather than linguistic mechanisms of power (Michira, 2014). This study aims to address this gap by analysing Kenyan high school principals' speeches as sites of power and hierarchy reproduction. In doing so, it interrogates how linguistic resources not only manage institutional life but also reflect broader sociopolitical contexts, including religious values, neoliberal pressures of performance, and nationalistic ideals.

To achieve this, the article applies Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA, examining principals' speeches at the textual, discursive, and social practice levels. At the textual level, the focus is on linguistic features such as modality, pronouns, transitivity, repetition, rhetorical questions, biblical and cultural allusions, speech acts, politeness strategies, and discourse markers. At the discursive practice level, the analysis considers how speeches are produced and interpreted within the institutional setting of schools. At the level of social practice, the study situates principals' discourse within broader ideological contexts such as discipline, morality, neoliberal meritocracy, and national development.

By highlighting how principals' everyday language choices embed power relations and ideologies, the study underscores the importance of discourse as a mechanism of governance. The findings reveal that school leadership is not enacted solely through administrative policies, but through subtle and strategic linguistic practices that normalise institutional hierarchies. The article therefore contributes to both discourse analysis and educational leadership scholarship, particularly in African contexts where such research remains underdeveloped.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language, Power, and Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis conceptualises language as a form of social practice through which power and ideology are enacted and reproduced (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2001). Rather than being a transparent medium, discourse actively shapes social reality, embedding relations of dominance and resistance in everyday communication. Van Dijk (1998) argues that ideologies are reproduced through discourse in ways that make them appear natural or commonsensical. In institutional contexts such as schools, language becomes a primary mechanism through which authority is legitimised and compliance is normalised. Principals' speeches thus represent not merely administrative communication but discursive practices that reproduce institutional order.

Foucault's (1977) concept of power as diffuse and relational, operating through surveillance and disciplinary practices, is particularly relevant. Schools embody what Foucault termed disciplinary institutions, sites where control is achieved not only through formal sanctions but also through subtle regulation of conduct and thought. Principals' discourse mirrors this dynamic: through speeches that define norms, evaluate conduct, and prescribe behaviour, principals enact discursive surveillance. Similarly, Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony highlights how authority is sustained not only through coercion but through consent, achieved by

embedding dominant values in everyday discourse. In school contexts, this consent is garnered through repeated slogans, moral appeals, and cultural allusions that naturalise discipline and respect.

Apple (2004) further reminds us that schools are not ideologically neutral; they are sites where dominant social values are reproduced under the guise of neutrality. Principals' discourse reflects this dynamic by embedding ideologies of discipline, meritocracy, nationalism, and religious morality within everyday speech. Thus, CDA provides a powerful framework for understanding how principals' discourse functions as a site of ideological reproduction.

Modality and Institutional Authority

Modality provides a means for speakers to express necessity, obligation, and certainty. In educational discourse, modal verbs such as *must*, *should*, and *have to* transform instructions into binding obligations, presenting them as inevitable rather than negotiable (Fairclough, 1995; Leeuwen, 2008). Through high-modality expressions, principals frame rules and expectations as categorical. The phrase "You must respect your teachers" presents respect not as a matter of personal choice but as a mandatory institutional demand. By making rules appear undebatable, modality naturalises hierarchical authority.

Transitivity and the Allocation of Agency

Halliday's systemic functional grammar highlights how transitivity assigns responsibility by positioning subjects as active agents or passive recipients (Halliday, 1994). In principals' discourse, transitivity determines whether students are depicted as active agents responsible for their behaviour or as passive recipients of disciplinary actions. Active constructions such as "You will complete your assignments" directly attribute agency to students, reinforcing accountability. Passive constructions like "Mistakes will be punished" conceal institutional agency, making discipline appear impersonal and inevitable. This linguistic asymmetry shifts responsibility onto students while minimising the visibility of institutional power.

Pronouns and the Negotiation of Solidarity and Authority

Pronoun choice is another resource through which principals balance solidarity and authority. The inclusive *we* fosters identification, portraying the school as a collective entity united by common goals. Statements such as "We are a disciplined school" invoke group identity, creating a sense of belonging. In contrast, the directive *you* individualise responsibility and mark authority: "You must follow the rules." This strategic oscillation aligns with Planken's (2005) idea of rhetorical alignment, where speakers alternate between identification and differentiation to achieve persuasive ends.

Repetition and the Normalisation of Values

Repetition is a powerful rhetorical device for reinforcing institutional values. Phrases such as "Discipline is the key to success" recur across speeches, transforming them into ideological mantras (Tannen, 1989). Through repetition, institutional norms are normalised and presented as universal truths. Van Dijk (1995) argues that repetition helps embed ideologies in memory, making them appear natural and unquestionable. In Kenyan schools, repetition ensures that values like obedience and hard work are continually reinforced.

Speech Acts as Instruments of Power

Speech Act Theory gives a useful framework for understanding how principals' words do not merely describe reality but perform actions (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Directives such as commands, warnings, and instructions are performative acts that regulate behaviour. Assertives present institutional values or achievements as facts, while expressives evaluate student conduct, either praising or condemning. In this way, principals' speech acts carry institutional force, shaping behaviour in real time.

Politeness Strategies and the Management of Authority

While principals frequently use direct commands, they also employ politeness strategies to manage authority and reduce face threats. Positive politeness strategies such as inclusive appeals ("Together we can achieve success") foster solidarity. Negative politeness strategies such as indirect phrasing ("Let us try to be punctual") soften directives. These strategies reflect the dual nature of authority: coercive yet relational. Brown and Levinson (1987) note that politeness serves to balance imposition with rapport, a dynamic clearly observable in school leadership discourse.

Biblical and Cultural Allusions as Legitimation

Intertextuality strengthens institutional authority by linking rules to broader cultural and religious frameworks (Fairclough, 1992; Charteris-Black, 2004). Kenyan principals often draw on biblical verses ("Honor your father and mother") or cultural proverbs ("A child who respects elders prospers") to justify school rules. By framing discipline as aligned with divine will or cultural wisdom, principals make compliance appear morally incontestable. Such strategies reveal how institutional discourse invokes shared values to legitimise authority.

Rhetorical Questions and Persuasive Framing

Rhetorical questions function as persuasive tools that guide students toward predetermined answers (Athanasiadou, 1991). When a principal asks, "Do you want to succeed in life?" the presupposed answer is yes, making obedience the logical path to success. Such questions simulate dialogue but actually constrain responses, illustrating how persuasion and coercion intersect in institutional discourse.

Discourse Markers and Control of Interaction

Discourse markers such as *now*, *so*, and *therefore* structure principals' speeches by signalling transitions and directing attention (Fraser, 1999). While they serve a cohesive function, they also reinforce authority by controlling interaction. For example, "Now let us settle down" is both a transition and a command, underscoring the principal's control over the flow of communication.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative discourse analytic approach to explore linguistic markers of power in high school principals' speeches within Imenti North Sub-County, Kenya. Data were gathered from twenty speeches delivered by principals across twelve schools, encompassing boys', girls', and mixed institutions to reflect diverse socio-economic contexts. Speeches were audio-recorded during school assemblies, prize-giving ceremonies, and disciplinary meetings, in natural settings where principals publicly reinforced institutional values. Verbatim transcriptions captured linguistic details like pauses and discourse markers, supplemented by field notes documenting non-verbal cues and audience reactions.

Principals were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, school type, and geographical location, with stratified random sampling applied to balance representation across the twelve schools. This approach ensured a varied yet accessible sample for analysing discursive practices. The analytical framework primarily utilised Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model, examining speeches at textual (linguistic features like modality and pronouns), discursive practice (text production and interpretation), and social practice (ideological and institutional contexts) levels. Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) was employed to analyse utterances as performative acts of authority, while Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) explored how principals balanced authority with face-saving strategies. This triangulated approach provided a comprehensive analysis of both coercive and relational dimensions of discourse, capturing the interplay of power in principals' speech.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of principals' speeches revealed that language operated as a powerful instrument for legitimising authority and regulating institutional life. Across the twenty speeches, a consistent pattern emerged in which linguistic features worked together to construct a discourse of discipline, compliance, and institutional pride.

Modality

One striking feature was the consistent use of high-modality expressions such as *must*, *should*, and *have to*. These modal verbs transformed institutional expectations into categorical obligations. For instance, statements like "*You must respect your teachers*" or "*You have to be on time*" framed obedience as inevitable. This echoes Fairclough's (1995) observation that modality naturalises authority by presenting institutional rules as common sense.

Transitivity

Choices in transitivity further shaped responsibility and accountability. Active constructions such as "*You will complete your assignments*" positioned students as active agents responsible for their conduct. Passive forms such as "*Rules will be enforced*" obscured institutional agency, making discipline appear automatic. This shifting of agency reflects broader institutional strategies: students are individualised as responsible actors, while the institution remains abstract, shielded from scrutiny.

Pronouns
Pronoun use reinforced these dynamics. The inclusive *we* was strategically used to foster solidarity, "*We are a disciplined school*", while the directive *you* individualised responsibility "*, You must follow the rules*". This oscillation balanced persuasion with coercion.

Repetition
Repetition was employed to engrain institutional values. Phrases such as "*Discipline is the key to success*" recurred in multiple speeches, transforming them into ideological slogans. Such repetition created the impression that these values were universal and unchallengeable, embedding them in students' consciousness.

Speech Acts
Speech acts were central to the enactment of authority. Directives such as "Stop making noise" and "Obey your teachers" carried institutional force, shaping behaviour immediately. Assertives like "Our school is the best in discipline" reinforced institutional identity, while expressives such as "I am disappointed in your behaviour" evaluated students morally.

Politeness Strategies
Although principals frequently issued direct commands, they also employed politeness strategies to balance authority with rapport. Positive politeness strategies included inclusive appeals, "Together we can succeed", and expressions of appreciation ", I am proud of you". Negative politeness strategies appeared in softened directives, "Let us try to be punctual".

Biblical and Cultural Allusions
Intertextual references to religion and culture provided powerful legitimation. Statements such as "The Bible says, respect your elders" and "A child who obeys grows into a respected adult" linked school rules with moral and cultural traditions. By invoking religion and culture, principals situated their authority within frameworks that students already considered sacred and unquestionable.

Rhetorical Questions
Rhetorical questions served as subtle tools of persuasion. Phrases such as "Do you want to succeed?" presupposed agreement and positioned obedience as the logical path to success.

Discourse Markers
Discourse markers such as *now*, *so*, and *therefore* were used to organise communication and assert authority. For example, "Now let us settle down" simultaneously signalled transition and issued a directive.

Ideological Implications
Beyond regulating behaviour, these linguistic features reflected broader ideological currents. Emphasis on discipline revealed authoritarian tendencies, while appeals to hard work and performance echoed neoliberal meritocracy. Biblical references reinforced religious morality, and cultural allusions strengthened national identity. Thus, principals' discourse was not only institutional but ideological, embedding values that extended beyond the school.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion
Beyond regulating behaviour, these linguistic features reflected broader ideological currents. Emphasis on discipline revealed authoritarian tendencies, while appeals to hard work and performance echoed neoliberal meritocracy. Biblical references reinforced religious morality, and cultural allusions strengthened national identity. Thus, principals' discourse was not only institutional but ideological, embedding values that extended beyond the school.

This study has demonstrated that the linguistic features embedded in principals' speeches modality, transitivity, pronouns, repetition, speech acts, politeness strategies, rhetorical questions, cultural and biblical allusions, and discourse markers function collectively as mechanisms of power within the school setting. Rather than serving merely as communicative devices, these features regulate conduct, construct collective identities, and legitimise institutional hierarchies.

From a CDA perspective, the findings illustrate how micro-level linguistic choices reproduce macro-level power relations by presenting institutional authority as natural and unquestionable. The alternation between solidarity and coercion, encouragement and surveillance, shows how authority is maintained through both dominance and consent. In the Kenyan educational context, principals' discourse reflects broader social ideologies, including discipline, neoliberal meritocracy, religious morality, and nationalism.

The implications of this study extend beyond Kenyan schools. By analysing principals' speeches, it becomes clear that educational leadership is enacted not only through policies and administrative actions but also through language. Everyday discourse is thus a crucial site for understanding how ideology and power operate in education. For policymakers and practitioners, this underscores the need to critically reflect on the language of leadership, recognising its role in shaping student identities, values, and citizenship.

Recommendations: Future research could build on this study by comparing discourse practices across regions or countries, exploring gendered dimensions of leadership discourse, or conducting longitudinal studies to examine how principals' discourse evolves over time. Such research would deepen understanding of the relationship between language, power, and education in diverse contexts.

REFERENCES

Apple, M. (2004). *Ideology and curriculum.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203487563

Athanasiadou, A. (1991). *Constructions in verbal irony production: The case of rhetorical questions.* Cambridge University Press.

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words.* Oxford University Press.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage.* Cambridge University Press.

Charteris-Black, J. (2004). *Corpus approaches to critical metaphor analysis.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power.* Longman.

Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change.* Polity Press.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language.* Longman.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison.* Vintage Books.

Fraser, B. (1999). What are discourse markers? *Journal of Pragmatics, 31*(7), 931–952. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(98)00101-5

Gee, J. P. (2014). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (4th ed.). Routledge.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks.* International Publishers.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar* (2nd ed.). Edward Arnold.

Holmes, J., & Stubbe, M. (2003). *Power and politeness in the workplace.* Pearson.

Leeuwen, T. van (2008). *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis.* Oxford University Press.

Michira, J. (2014). Leadership and school performance: The role of principals in Kenya. *Journal of Education and Practice, 5*(4), 150–157.

Planken, B. (2005). Managing rapport in lingua franca sales negotiations: A comparison of professional and aspiring negotiators. *English for Specific Purposes, 24*(4), 381–400.

Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language.* Cambridge University Press.

Sharndama, E. C. (2015). Critical discourse analysis of selected political speeches of Barack Obama. *European Journal of English Language and Linguistics Research, 3*(3), 12–24.

Tannen, D. (1989). *Talking voices: Repetition, dialogue and imagery in conversational discourse.* Cambridge University Press.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society, 4*(2), 249–283. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002006

Van Dijk, T. A. (1995). Discourse semantics and ideology. *Discourse & Society, 6*(2), 243–289.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach.* Sage Publications.

Wodak, R. (2001). What CDA is about—A summary of its history, important concepts and its developments. *Sage Publications.*