



A Critical Discourse Analysis of UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer's Immigration Speech

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Abstract

This qualitative study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine Keir Starmer's speech on migration, exploring how language is used to shape public perceptions, reinforce ideologies, and legitimize policy directions. By integrating Teun A. van Dijk's ideological square (2006, 2011, 2012) and Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model (1989, 1992, 1995, 2015), it considers both the micro-level textual features of the speech and the broader discursive (meso) and social (macro) practices that influence its meaning. The analysis reveals rhetorical and linguistic strategies that frame migration as both an economic necessity and a potential threat to national cohesion, subtly constructing a conditional 'Us vs. Them' narrative in which migrants are welcomed only if they integrate and contribute economically. Fairclough's meso- and macro-level analysis shows how this discourse naturalizes tighter immigration policies as pragmatic and morally justified, aligning with wider post-Brexit anxieties and centrist political trends. This study highlights the value of integrated CDA frameworks for uncovering how seemingly moderate political discourse can still reinforce dominant ideologies and shape public debates on migration.

Key words: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Keir Starmer, immigration, Fairclough, Van Dijk.*

1. Introduction

Migration has become one of the most contested political issues in the United Kingdom, drawing increasing attention to the rhetoric employed by political leaders. In recent years, nationalist sentiment and anti-immigrant narratives have grown significantly, influencing mainstream political discourse (Cable, 2025). Political leaders often use language deliberately to shape public perceptions of migration, expressing ideological viewpoints that affect how the issue is framed and discussed. Through careful word choice, experienced politicians and policymakers influence the way migration is understood and debated. As van Dijk (2008) notes, "discourse lies at the core of 'racism', particularly in modern societies." (p. 34). This observation underscores the pivotal role of discourse in shaping how immigration is framed, ultimately influencing both public perception and policy decisions.

Much of the existing scholarship on UK immigration discourse emphasizes historical or policy-oriented analyses, with limited attention to the real-time critical examination of newly delivered political speeches, which this article fills by analyzing Starmer's address as it actively shapes contemporary debates. The contribution of this study lies in its application of Fairclough's and van Dijk's critical discourse frameworks to Keir Starmer's most recent immigration speech, focusing on contemporary political discourse, real-time language use, and the ideological construction of immigration in the UK. The article's novelty lies in its incorporation of Starmer's most recent immigration speech as primary textual evidence, thereby offering an original and contemporaneous study of

political discourse that remains underexplored within the existing scholarly literature. To date, the author is not aware of any peer-reviewed studies that have applied Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to Starmer's speeches on migration in the UK, highlighting a gap in the literature.

1.2 Research Problem

While much focus has been placed on right-wing figures, the language used by opposition leaders such as Labour Party leader Keir Starmer also warrants close examination. The current Labour government, led by Prime Minister Keir Starmer, has taken a firm approach to immigration, emphasizing stronger border enforcement and the tightening of legal migration routes (Dobbernack, 2025; Stears & Tryl, 2025). However, Starmer's immigration policies have sparked significant public debate and protest, particularly among groups calling for tougher border controls. On May 12, 2025, Starmer delivered a speech amid public concern over small boat crossings and rising net migration numbers (Bonansinga & Forrest, 2025; Sumption et al., 2025). In this address, Starmer frames migration as a matter of national security, making it a key text for analysing how political discourse on immigration is constructed.

1.3 Research Objectives

Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional framework (1989, 1992, 1995, 2015) and van Dijk's ideological square (2006, 2011, 2012), the study explores how language, power, and ideology interact in Starmer's speech, shaping public perception and influencing policy debates on migration. More specifically, it investigates textual

features at the micro level, alongside the processes of production, distribution, and consumption at the meso level. By integrating these approaches, we gain a better understanding of how language reflects and shapes power, and ideology, within discourse. Ultimately, this study not only contributes to the literature on critical discourse but also provides insights into the ongoing impact of Starmer's rhetoric on immigration.

This study holds significance for multiple audiences. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) scholars benefit from its contribution to understanding how language shapes power relations and ideology, while researchers in political communication gain insights into the rhetorical and strategic choices embedded in discourse. Policy readers can also draw on the findings to recognize underlying assumptions, power dynamics, and potential biases in language, thereby supporting more critical and informed decision-making.

1.4 Research Questions

Based on the previous explanation, the study addresses the following questions:

1. What linguistic choices and rhetorical maneuvers does Starmer employ to frame immigrants, and in what ways do these choices support his persuasive objectives?
2. In what ways do his discursive and social practices reflect wider ideological and political perspectives on immigration?

2. Literature Review

To establish the novelty of this study, a systematic review of the literature was conducted across academic databases

including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, utilizing keywords such as “UK immigration discourse,” “Labour Party rhetoric,” “Starmer immigration speech,” and “critical discourse analysis,” with an emphasis on publications from 2000 to 2025.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an analytical framework focused on examining and exposing how power, inequality, control, and dominance are reproduced through language in texts and discourse (van Dijk, 2001). The role of critical discourse analysts is to uncover the implicit ideologies embedded within texts and make them visible to the public (Fairclough, 1995).

According to Trask (2007), CDA seeks to answer critical questions such as: Why was this text created? Who is it meant for, and what is it trying to achieve? Does the writer or speaker have hidden motives? What unspoken assumptions, biases, or ideologies shape the message? Van Dijk (2001) adds that CDA looks closely at how language is used to create, maintain, or challenge social power, dominance, and inequality in political and social contexts (p. 352). In other words, CDA not only shows how language reflects and reinforces power structures but also how it can be a tool to question and resist them.

CDA works on three main levels of analysis: micro, meso, and macro. The micro level focuses on the linguistic elements of discourse, such as adverbs, pronouns, verbs, metaphors, syntax, lexical choices, and rhetorical strategies, offering a detailed examination of how meaning is constructed (Strauss & Feiz, 2014). In contrast, the macro level situates discourse within broader social, political, and ideological contexts, exploring

how language reflects and reproduces power relations, dominance, and social inequality (van Dijk, 2001, p. 354). This level is concerned with how discourse sustains or challenges existing societal structures and ideologies. Bridging these two levels, Fairclough's three-dimensional model introduces a meso level, which focuses on discursive practices—namely, the processes of text production, distribution, and consumption (Fairclough, 1995). The meso level enables a deeper understanding of how discourse operates within institutional and social frameworks. By focusing on these processes, the model provides a comprehensive understanding of how language operates within society and contributes to the reproduction or transformation of broader social practices and power dynamics.

2.2 Van Dijk's Ideological Square

Van Dijk (2011) explains that ideology influences how some groups are shown positively, while others are shown negatively. Politicians and the media often use language that presents the SELF as positive and good, while portraying OTHERS as negative and bad. In other words, the in-group is shown positively, while the out-group is shown negatively. The principles of the ideological square are as follows: (1) say positive things about US, (2) say negative things about THEM, (3) do not say negative things about US, and (4) do not say positive things about THEM.

This framework exposes how ideologies are embedded in discourse and reproduced socially, shaping group identities and promoting in-group bias while marginalizing

others (van Dijk, 2012). Dijk's ideological square helps explain how ideologies are shown in language. Within this framework, van Dijk (2006, 2011, 2012) identifies various strategies and techniques for analysing ideological discourse. While van Dijk's framework outlines several categories, this study will focus on the following:

- number game: Politicians resort to use numbers and statistics in order to persuasively achieve credibility and objectivity (van Dijk, 2006).
- repetition: In media and political discourse, repetition can serve as a powerful ideological strategy to positively represent the in-group members and negatively represent the out-group members (van Dijk, 2006).
- metaphors: show some groups as negative and others as positive (van Dijk, 2006).
- actor description: how people describe certain groups in an ideological way. In-group members are shown as good and positive, while out-group members are shown as bad and negative (van Dijk, 2006).
- evidentiality: referencing authoritative sources or institutions to add credibility and an appearance of objectivity to a speaker's statements and claims, thereby increasing the perceived trustworthiness of their argument (van Dijk, 2006).
- lexicalisation: the deliberate choice of words that reflect ideological positions in discourse. Van Dijk (2006) says that choosing certain adjectives, nouns, and verbs can create biased views of groups or events by highlighting the good qualities of "us" and the bad qualities of "them."

- syntax: the structural arrangement of words and sentences that can subtly express ideological meaning. While syntax is often perceived as neutral or purely grammatical, van Dijk (2012) argues that sentence structure can influence how responsibility, agency, and emphasis are assigned in discourse. For example, active sentences clearly show who is responsible, while passive sentences can hide the actor and reduce accountability. These syntactic choices allow speakers or writers to shape perceptions of events and social actors in ways that support or mask ideological positions.
- polarization: to the discursive strategy of dividing people into opposing groups—typically presenting the in-group positively (“us”) and the out-group negatively (“them”). Van Dijk (2006) highlights how this tactic reinforces group identity, justifies exclusion, and supports ideological positions.

2.3 Fairclough's Three-dimensional Model of Discourse

Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis model divides discourse analysis into three theories: Text Analysis (Microstructural) is related to cohesion and coherence, grammar, vocabulary, metaphors, pronouns, and diction (Fairclough, 1995). Production Practice Analysis (Mesostructural) is a dimension related to the text production process, text dissemination, and text consumption. It includes analysing the roles of the producers and consumers of the text, the context in which it is produced and received, and how texts are circulated and disseminated (Fairclough, 1989). Social

Cultural Practice Analysis (Macrostructural) is related to the broader socio-political and cultural contexts in which the text and discursive practices are embedded (Fairclough, 1989).

2.4 Related Studies

Analyzing political speeches under CDA framework attracted the attention of many linguists all over the years. The studies have been grouped by (theory/method).

2.4.1 Studies Using Fairclough's Three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis

Faiz et al. (2020) employ Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis to examine Donald Trump's remarks at the Israel Museum. Their qualitative analysis highlights how Trump's emphasis on the city's religious significance and his support for Israel's claims implicitly endorse Israel's contested position on East Jerusalem. They conclude that the speech reinforces ideological and religious alignments, demonstrating how language can be strategically used in political discourse to advance particular ideas, similar to the approach observed in Starmer's speech.

Similarly, Hermawan and Hamdani (2023) explore how Indonesian online media portrays the arrival of Rohingya refugees. Using Fairclough's three-part framework, the authors find that news reports often use negative language and selectively quote social media to create a biased view of the refugees. Editorial decisions and wider social attitudes contribute to this portrayal, reinforcing stereotypes and influencing public opinion in ways that marginalize the Rohingya

community. The study shows how media language reflects and supports deeper cultural and political beliefs. This research provides a useful comparison by also applying Fairclough's model to analyze how language is used strategically in migration discussions.

2.4.2 Studies Using van Dijk's Ideological Square

Shebani (2023) analyzes how Biden used language to shape public views during an international crisis. Using Van Dijk's ideological square, the study presents how Biden presented the U.S. and its allies as defenders of democracy, while portraying Russia and Putin negatively. His careful word choices aimed to promote unity, support Ukraine, and justify a strong response. This research offers a useful comparison by applying Van Dijk's model to show how political language influences the way global events are understood.

In line with this idea, Salih (2023) investigates how the media influenced public views on immigrants during Trump's campaign. Using Van Dijk's framework, the study suggests that media often employed dramatic language and negative metaphors to depict immigrants as threatening or unwelcome. These language choices, along with story framing and sourcing, reflected deeper social and political anxieties. The research demonstrates how this rhetoric shaped public opinion and reinforced wider narratives of nationalism and exclusion. This approach aligns with the current study, which also examines how Starmer's language supports existing power structures in political communication.

Together, these studies highlight how CDA frameworks have been applied to political speeches and media texts to reveal the strategic use of language in shaping ideology. Unlike previous work that has focused on historical or policy-oriented analyses, the current study applies these approaches to a contemporary British context, examining how Starmer's language on immigration reinforces existing power structures in political communication.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research approach to explore how Starmer constructs his arguments on immigration, focusing on language, discourse strategies, and ideology. This approach provides a deeper understanding of Starmer's rhetoric and contributes to political discourse analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). It employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine Keir Starmer's speech on immigration.

3.2 Corpus and Selection

Lasting approximately ten minutes and comprising 1,137 words, the address unveiled the government's Immigration White Paper during a press conference attended by national journalists, government officials, and senior ministers, at Downing Street, London, on 12 May 2025. The speech was selected for its pivotal role in shaping contemporary UK immigration discourse, as it explicitly engages themes of migration, cultural identity, and national security. The speech consisted of 13 quotations as was sourced. It was further segmented into clauses without any

exclusions, ensuring a comprehensive examination of how immigration, policy proposals, and the portrayal of migrants and the public are constructed through discursive strategies such as polarization, metaphor, and evidentiality, in line with Fairclough's and van Dijk's frameworks.

3.3 Coding & Reliability

The entire speech was selected for coding to ensure a comprehensive and systematic analysis of all discursive strategies. This full-text approach allows both frequent and subtle rhetorical strategies, such as metaphors, lexical choices, and actor descriptions to be captured, enhancing transparency and minimizing selective bias.

While coding every clause is time-intensive and risks overemphasizing minor linguistic features, it ensured that all relevant discursive strategies were systematically recorded, providing a complete dataset for analysis. This method also strengthens the study's rigor, as it allows for a holistic understanding of how meaning, power, and ideology are constructed throughout the speech.

A simple codebook was developed to guide the systematic examination of Starmer's immigration speech. Table 1, and 2 present selected codes with definitions and sample excerpts.

However, not every individual code was analyzed in isolation. Instead, codes were aggregated into broader categories, such as metaphors, actor descriptions, and lexical items, allowing patterns to emerge across the discourse. Representative excerpts were then

selected to illustrate these patterns and support interpretive claims.

For ensuring reliability, a second reader independently reviewed a subset of the coded clauses, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and reflection notes.

3.4 Data Analysis

By integrating Teun A. van Dijk's ideological square and Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the study examines both the micro-level textual features of the speech and the broader discursive (meso) and social (macro) practices shaping its interpretation. By integrating these theoretical frameworks, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between language, power, and ideology within discourse. The speech was analysed in detail, examining vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and rhetorical devices to reveal underlying patterns and strategies. The analysis follows van Dijk and Fairclough's frameworks: first describing the textual features, then examining the discursive practices of production, distribution, and reception, and finally interpreting how the speech connects to and shapes wider socio-cultural and political contexts.

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Table 1: *Codebook for Van Dijk's Identity Square*

Category	Definition	Example from Speech
Number Game	Using numbers and statistics in order to persuasively achieve credibility and objectivity.	"net migration quadrupled...reached nearly 1 million, which is about the population of Birmingham."
Repetition	Recurrent use of words or phrases to emphasize a point or ideology.	"control" / "take back control" repeated throughout the speech.
Metaphor	Figurative language used to frame concepts or groups.	"island of strangers" to describe a nation without integration.
Actor Description	How individuals or groups are portrayed (positively/negatively).	"previous Government...was the complete opposite" (negative portrayal).
Evidentiality	Use of evidence, statistics, or examples to justify claims.	"That's why some of the policies in this White Paper go back nearly three years."
Lexical Items	Specific word choices that convey ideology or bias.	"broken system," "fair rules," "cheap labour."
Syntax	Sentence structure used to emphasize points or influence interpretation.	Complex conditional: "If we do need to take further steps...then mark my words – we will."
Polarization	Dividing people into opposing groups.	Presenting the in-group positively ("us") and the out-group negatively ("them").
Cohesion	How sentences and ideas are linked using connectors or repetition.	"But at the same time, we do have to ask why..." connects ideas across clauses.
Coherence	Overall sense and logical flow of the text.	Speech moves from a critique of past policies, to rationale for White Paper, and finally to future actions.
Grammar	Use of tense, modality, voice, and sentence forms to convey stance.	Use of modal verbs: "we will finally honour what 'take back control' meant."
Vocabulary	Choice of words to convey ideology or social meaning.	"fair," "control," "privilege that is earned, not a right."

Table 2: *Codebook for Discursive and Social Practices*

Category	Definition	Example from Speech
Discursive Practice	How the text is produced, distributed, and consumed to shape understanding.	Public press conference used to communicate and legitimize the White Paper.
Social Practice	The broader social, political, and cultural context influencing the discourse.	Framing migration as a national issue tied to fairness, economic contribution, and national identity.

3.5 Ethics & Availability

This study did not involve human participants or sensitive data; it analyzes a publicly available political speech. Therefore, formal ethical approval was not required. The

full transcript of Keir Starmer's immigration speech is publicly accessible. The speech transcript was sourced from the official website of the UK government to ensure its accuracy and reliability, the title was also

copied and passed as it is (Prime Minister's Office, 2025).

4. Findings and Discussion

In this section, I present the analysis of [13] quotations taken from Starmer's speech. The full script is listed in Appendix A.

4.1 Textual Analysis

In quotation [1], authority is established through institutional credibility, with the "*White Paper*" functioning as evidentiality (Fairclough, 1992). Starmer uses ideologically charged language that, through van Dijk's ideological square, highlights his positive role while framing previous policies negatively. Polarization distinguishes the positive self-presentation of the new policy ("*Plan for Change*") from the negative portrayal of the past ("*squalid chapter*") (van Dijk, 1998). Starmer's rhetoric contrasts a failed past with a hopeful future, presenting Starmer as the leader capable of change.

Metaphors such as "*take back control*" and "*close the book on a squalid chapter*" frame immigration as both a sovereignty issue and a moral crisis (van Dijk, 2006).

Fairclough's (1989) text dimension is evident in the use of inclusive pronouns such as "*our*," which create a sense of shared identity and collective responsibility, aligning the audience with the speaker as part of the same in-group. This framing portrays immigration as a collective concern, normalising stricter policies as logical and necessary while subtly positioning migrants as an external out-group and potential threat. Together, these strategies construct an "*us vs. them*" narrative that legitimises tighter immigration control and reinforces political authority.

In quotation [2], Starmer applies van Dijk's (2011) ideological square by referencing the previous government's slogan "*Take back control*." Here, the in-group consists of Starmer and those who reject the slogan, while the out-group includes the former government and its supporters. This reflects van Dijk's idea of highlighting the out-group's negative traits to shape public perception.

Starmer also uses van Dijk's (2006) "number game" strategy by citing precise figures, such as "*net migration quadrupled*," "*nearly 1 million*," and the comparison with *Birmingham's population*, to add credibility and present his argument as evidence-based rather than opinion. These statistics emphasise the scale of migration, potentially raising concerns about the UK's capacity to manage it. Polarisation is further reinforced through lexicalisation, with charged terms like "*chaos*" and "*not control*" embedding negative connotations in the portrayal of the out-group.

Actor description aligns the speaker with the public ("our country"), in contrast to an untrustworthy political elite (Fairclough, 1992). Overall, the discourse legitimizes critique of past policy by combining statistical authority with moral evaluation, presenting immigration not as control but as disorder.

In quotation [3], Starmer employs van Dijk's (2006) strategy of repetition—"A choice. A choice made..."—to create emphasis and convey certainty. He further applies van Dijk's strategy of polarisation, drawing a clear divide between the in-group ("*you*," representing British citizens and their right to secure borders) and the out-group ("*they*," referring to the previous government and its policies). This aligns with van Dijk's

ideological square, which emphasises the negative traits of the out-group to intensify perceptions of their deliberate betrayal.

Polarization contrasts the previous Government which is accused of deception and irresponsibility (“doing the opposite”) with the current Government, positioned as corrective and aligned with the people’s mandate (van Dijk, 1998). Actor description strengthens this contrast: “they” are framed as dishonest, while “we” and “you” align the speaker with the audience (Fairclough, 1992).

In addition, the phrase “a one-nation experiment” implies that the past government's immigration policy wasn't democratic, but something done to the public. It employs a victimization strategy through positioning the in-group (British citizens) under experiment by the out-group (past government).

Moreover, Starmer's use of language reflects Norman Fairclough's analysis of grammar, particularly by using future tense with strong modality, as seen in the phrase “... *and we will take back control of our borders*”. The modal verb ‘will’ conveys a high degree of certainty, presenting the loss of border control as an inevitable consequence of past government's experiment. This choice of language transforms the claim into an undeniable truth rather than a subjective opinion, enhancing its persuasive power. By framing the future consequences with certainty, Starmer positions restrictive policies as urgent and unavoidable, minimising room for alternative perspectives or debate.

In quotation [4], Starmer appeals to moral credibility to build a persuasive and trustworthy argument on migration, stating, “I

am doing this because it is right, because it is fair, and because it is what I believe in.” Using van Dijk's (2006) concept of positive self-presentation, he positions himself as transparent and trustworthy, appealing more to the audience's emotions than to specific policy details. This strategy also implies that opposing his policies would be equivalent to rejecting fairness and moral responsibility, thereby undermining alternative viewpoints.

The repetition of “*because it is*” reinforces his certainty and conviction, aligning with Fairclough's (1995) idea that language choices can make ideological positions appear natural and unquestionable. By grounding his actions in personal belief and shared values, Starmer frames migration policy not merely as a political or economic issue, but as a moral imperative. Actor description further contrasts self and others: the speaker is morally guided, autonomous, and responsive, while opponents are framed as reactive and self-interested (Fairclough, 1992). Overall, the discourse legitimizes the speaker's authority by emphasizing moral integrity and contrasting it with opportunism.

In quotation [5], Starmer creates a clear ‘Us vs. Them’ divide, showing citizens as vulnerable and needing protection from migrants, who are seen as not respecting shared rules and values. By presenting the in-group as threatened, he stresses the need for urgent action to keep society united. He warns that without rules, society could become an “*island of strangers*.” This fits with van Dijk's (2006) idea that migrants are portrayed negatively as a threat, while citizens are shown as victims of division.

Starmer uses the metaphor “*an island of strangers*” to describe the breakdown of

rules, values, and rights. According to Fairclough (1992), metaphors are powerful tools that help people understand complex ideas by creating strong, emotional images. This metaphor makes the idea of social division more vivid and frightening, encouraging people to see the issue as urgent and serious. By using this figurative language, Starmer makes his argument more convincing, highlighting the need for quick action to protect social unity and preventing society from falling apart.

In quotation [6], repetition emphasizes the critique, especially in “you’re not championing growth, you’re not championing justice,” creating accountability (Fairclough, 1995). Starmer uses words like “*abuse*,” “*pulling our country apart*,” and “*false premise*” to suggest that political leaders are misleading the public about immigration policies. This fits with van Dijk’s idea that word choices carry hidden ideological meanings. His language creates an ‘Us vs. Them’ divide by showing migrants as an economic threat to citizens, increasing social divisions. Starmer frames immigration as giving short-term benefits, like cheaper labor, but hurting long-term goals such as training and employing local workers. This supports the need to control youth unemployment in the UK. By saying that lack of control harms economic growth and political stability, he presents citizens as victims of migrants’ impact. This idea of victimization (van Dijk, 2006) justifies strict immigration policies to protect the economy.

In quotation [7], the speech constructs a polarization between the in-group ‘We’ who believe in “*fairness*” and “*necessity*”, and the out-group ‘others’ who either support high

immigration or don’t prioritize fairness, reinforcing van Dijk’s (2006) theory of ideological discourse that creates the perception of migrants as external threats to national cohesion.

Starmer utilises syntax and pronouns to emphasise a binary division between the in-group and out-group, creating a sense of exclusivity regarding societal identity. Using van Dijk’s strategy of syntax, he constructs an active sentence where the in-group, represented by ‘*we*’, is positioned as the subject who ‘*reduce immigration*’. This syntax assigns agency and authority to the in-group, portraying them as gatekeepers of national identity and societal inclusion while implicitly framing the out-group as passive and less entitled. This aligns with van Dijk’s view that syntax can carry ideological significance, highlighting the active dominance of the in-group over the out-group.

Starmer's deliberate use of pronouns such as ‘*we*’ further aligns closely with Fairclough’s (1989) insights on pronoun usage. This pronoun fosters a sense of relational solidarity within the in-group while excluding the out-group. These linguistic choices construct social identities and relationships, creating a sense of shared authority and unity among the audience. This strategy not only reinforces the in-group’s perceived control over societal inclusion but also enhances the persuasive power of his discourse by fostering a strong connection between the speaker and his audience.

In quotation [8], the speech constructs a polarization between an in-group (Us) ‘our country, our language, and our system’ and an out-group (Them) “*those that do*” [integrate] and “*those that don’t*”. This reflects van

Dijk's (2012) theory of the ideological square, which emphasizes positive self-representation and negative other-representation. When Starmer says "*migrants were part of that... massive contribution today*," he uses positive language to acknowledge migrants' historical and current contributions. However, he also sets conditions for belonging, focusing on integration and language learning. In this view, language and cultural assimilation are key measures of successful integration. It is presented as "fair" to reward those who assimilate and to treat those who do not differently.

Actor descriptions position migrants positively while the speaker assumes authority and fairness, using pronouns like "I" and "we" (Fairclough, 1995). Evidentiality relies on historical and normative assumptions rather than statistical data, as seen in "migrants were part of that" (van Dijk, 1998). Overall, these strategies construct a persuasive discourse that values migrant contributions while asserting social responsibilities.

In quotation [9], metaphors such as "*pull up a drawbridge*," "*addicted to importing cheap labour*," and "*broken system*" convey economic isolation, dependency, and structural failure (van Dijk, 1998). Reflecting van Dijk's theory of ideological discourse, the speech creates a divide between an in-group ("*young people*") and an out-group (policymakers and "*cheap labour*"). This framing supports the idea that migrants are external threats to economic stability. Drawing on van Dijk's (2006) concept of victimization, Starmer presents young people as victims of current policies, while

businesses and policymakers relying on cheap labor are portrayed as causing injustice.

He reinforces this division with emotionally charged words such as "*hurt*," "*addicted*," and "*broken system*," which illustrate van Dijk's concept of lexicalisation by attaching negative connotations to the out-group. Together, these strategies depict immigration as economically necessary but suggest that over-reliance on cheap migrant labor harms fairness and opportunities for young people, making stricter immigration controls appear both reasonable and necessary.

In quotation [10], Starmer's language reflects Fairclough's (1992) analysis of grammar, using future tense with strong modality in the phrase "*every area in the immigration system – work, family, and study – will be tightened up*." The modal verb "*will*" conveys certainty, presenting restrictive measures as inevitable rather than debatable. This framing strengthens the claim's persuasive force by making it appear as an objective truth.

Starmer also uses syntax and pronouns to create a clear in-group/out-group divide. Following van Dijk's view of syntax as ideological, the active construction places "*we*"—the in-group—as the subject exerting control over immigration. This assigns authority and agency to the in-group while implying the out-group is passive and less entitled. Similarly, pronouns like "*we*" foster solidarity within the in-group and reinforce exclusion of the out-group, aligning with Fairclough's insights on pronoun usage.

In quotation [11], metaphors like "*release pressure on housing and our public services*" and "*take back control*" frame migration as a

manageable force and policy as a corrective measure (van Dijk, 1998).

Starmer employs polarization to contrast positive actors, such as migrants who make a “*strong economic contribution*,” with those whose work puts “*downward pressure on wages*,” while contrasting current government actions with the “*chaos of the previous government*” (van Dijk, 1998). This reflects van Dijk’s ideological square, highlighting negative aspects of the out-group and legitimising stricter immigration policies as rational and necessary, subtly constructing migrants as an external threat to social and economic stability.

In quotation [12], Starmer employs a problem-solution structure, a key aspect of Fairclough’s (1995) concept of discourse as social practice. He identifies economic instability and immigration as problems and presents his policies as the solutions. For instance, he contrasts the current immigration debate, which he describes as “*muddled*,” with his vision of a “*controlled, selective, and fair*” migration system. This framing portrays Starmer as a decisive and effective leader. Additionally, actor descriptions assign responsibility to the government, businesses, and immigrants, while “*some people*” are depicted as opposing or misinterpreting the debate (Fairclough, 1995). Migrants are depicted primarily as burdens unless they “*make a contribution*,” ignoring their humanitarian needs. This polarization reinforces the view of migrants as threats to the national economy and justifies stricter immigration controls as reasonable and necessary (van Dijk, 1998).

In quotation [13], the speech creates a division between ‘*the vast majority of people*’

and ‘*some people*’ who oppose migration controls, reflecting van Dijk’s (2000) concept of an in-group (Us) versus an out-group (Them). Polarization is evident in the contrast between the positive reforms of the White Paper and the failures of the previous government. Additionally, the use of the present tense in phrases like “*that works for our national interest, and that restores common sense and control to our borders*” creates a sense of urgency and immediacy. This aligns with Fairclough’s (1995) idea that tense can shape perceptions and normalize certain ideologies, making the proposed immigration system seem reasonable and necessary.

Metaphors like “*repairing our social contract*” and “*restores common sense and control to our borders*” frame the policy as morally and socially corrective, and negative metaphors such as “*chaos and cynicism*” contrast past governance (van Dijk, 1998). Actor descriptions position the public as supportive, the White Paper as authoritative, and the last government as incompetent (Fairclough, 1995).

Moreover, Starmer employs cohesion and coherence in his discourse. According to Fairclough, cohesion ‘can involve vocabulary links between sentences -repetition of words, or use of related words’ (2015, p.145). Starmer uses linguistic techniques such as lexical cohesion, conjunctions, connectives, and references to connect sentences and different parts of the text. He strategically repeats critical phrases such as “*net migration*”, “*control borders*”, “*take back control*”, “*chaos*”, “*economy*”, “*fair rules*”, “*previous government*”, and “*national interest*” to establish lexical coherence,

thereby tying the discourse together and maintaining the reader's focus on the central issue.

Additionally, he incorporates conjunctions like “and”, “but”, and “so” to structure his arguments. To ensure cohesion, he employs referents like “this” and “it” to allude to previous points (anaphora) or foreshadow forthcoming topics (cataphora). Furthermore, Fairclough asserts that “coherence plays a pivotal role in the ideological formation and reformation of subjects in discourse” (1995, p.74). He explains that “coherent text is one in which its component parts... are meaningfully interconnected” (Fairclough, 1992, p.83). Starmer's speech establishes coherence through thematic progression and logical argumentation. Throughout the speech, he consistently expands on the theme of net migration as a fundamental challenge and connects it to economic, cultural, and security issues. Each structured argument builds upon the previous one, leading to a well-organized and compelling presentation. He begins by setting the context, delves into detailing the challenges, and then presents arguments opposing uncontrolled immigration in a logical order that aids the listener's comprehension.

4.2 Discursive and Social Practices

Keir Starmer's immigration speech, delivered ahead of Labour's Immigration White Paper in May 2025, can be understood through Fairclough's discourse and social practice analysis. At the discursive level, the speech reflects Labour's updated immigration policies and aims to appeal to moderate voters and international audiences. Its timing and wide distribution through official channels helped spread the message and increase the

policy's legitimacy, a process that Fairclough (2010) highlights as essential for disseminating ideology.

Phrases like “*We will deliver what you have asked for*” and “*We will take back control of our borders*” are not only motivational but also contribute to what Fairclough (1995) calls “modal authority”—the speaker's ability to assert control and certainty in uncertain times. This stylistic choice bolsters Starmer's image as a capable leader who can restore order while simultaneously emphasizing control.

Reactions to the speech varied. Supporters welcomed its emphasis on “restoring control” and “*fair rules*,” seeing it as a promise to protect citizens' interests. This aligns with Fairclough's (1992) idea of “audience positioning,” where language aligns the speaker's views with those of the audience. However, some critics accused Starmer of divisive language, particularly when he warned the UK might become “*an island of strangers*.” Critics linked this to Enoch Powell's 1968 speech, which portrayed migrants as outsiders who must earn their place, a view seen by some as alienating or stigmatizing. According to Fairclough (2010), such discursive struggles indicate how power is negotiated in society, with different groups attempting to assert control over the narrative. Starmer's speech thus acts both as a tool to gather support and a source of division, highlighting the complex role of political rhetoric in national unity.

At the level of social practice, Starmer's speech reflects wider ideological debates about national identity, economic stability, and post-Brexit sovereignty. His discourse follows a broader European trend where

centrist governments adopt stricter immigration policies while avoiding explicitly exclusionary language. By emphasizing investment in domestic skills and reducing reliance on migrant labour, Starmer tied immigration control to economic reform, subtly reinforcing ideas of competitiveness and self-reliance. This aligns with Fairclough's (1995) concept of naturalization, where repeated messages make certain ideas seem like common sense. Starmer addresses public concerns about "chaotic" immigration, describing recent migration increases as a "*one nation open borders experiment*" that risks creating "*islands of strangers.*" This language creates urgency and draws a line between insiders and newcomers, normalizing stricter immigration rules as reasonable responses to public anxiety. According to Fairclough's (1995) concept of hegemony, Starmer's discourse aligns with widespread desires for stability and security. By linking national security and economic competitiveness with selective migration, his approach appeals to moderate voters and broader public opinion. Starmer's language subtly builds an 'us versus them' division, reinforcing the expectation that migrants must integrate while prioritizing citizens' interests. Fairclough (2010) identifies this as a common feature of political discourse used to maintain power. Ultimately, Starmer's speech sustains existing power relations by defining who belongs and under what terms. By emphasizing integration and shared values, the speech reinforces this 'us versus them' dynamic, legitimizing policy changes and dominant ideas about nationhood and control.

5. Limitations and Implications

This study is limited by its focus on a single speech and its reliance on textual interpretation, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. The absence of audience or media reception data also means the analysis cannot fully capture how the discourse was received or contested. Future research should address these gaps by examining a wider range of texts and incorporating mixed methods to provide a more comprehensive view of political discourse on immigration. Nevertheless, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of discourse in shaping public perceptions of immigration. It underscores the value of applying CDA frameworks to contemporary political communication, offering insights for both scholars of political discourse and policymakers concerned with how language influences debates on migration and national identity.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study used an integrated Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, combining Fairclough's three-dimensional model and van Dijk's ideological square, to examine Keir Starmer's immigration speech. The analysis showed that Starmer framed migration as both an economic necessity and a potential threat to national cohesion. At the micro-level, van Dijk's framework revealed strategies such as lexical choices ("restoring control," "fair rules"), mitigation, and conditional inclusion, which reassured the in-group (citizens) while avoiding direct demonization of the out-group (migrants). Although Starmer avoided the extreme polarization of hardline rhetoric, his focus on integration and responsibility still created an implicit 'Us versus Them' divide.

Fairclough's text analysis highlighted how grammar, modality, and metaphors (e.g., "islands of strangers") framed migration as a sensitive issue requiring control. At the meso- and macro-levels, Fairclough's model showed how the speech fits the broader post-Brexit context, where public anxiety over migration coexists with the demand for skilled labor. By combining Fairclough's and van Dijk's frameworks, the study demonstrated how Starmer's speech both reflects and shapes public debate. It normalizes stricter immigration policies as fair and reasonable while reinforcing dominant ideas about national security, social cohesion, and economic self-reliance. In doing so, the speech guides public opinion and legitimizes policy change without appearing openly exclusionary. This analysis contributes to understanding how political discourse maintains and negotiates power in a polarized environment. Future research could expand this approach with corpus-based methods and compare Starmer's speech with other UK leaders to explore how different ideologies frame migration.

Conflict of Interest:

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Declaration of AI Use

The author declare that they did not use any AI tools in the preparation of this manuscript.

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Appendix A

PM remarks at Immigration White Paper press conference: 12 May 2025

- [1] Good morning. Today, we publish a White Paper on immigration, a strategy that is absolutely central to my Plan for Change. This strategy will finally take back control of our borders and close the book on a squalid chapter for our politics, our economy, and our country.
- [2] “Take back control.” Everyone knows that slogan and what it meant for immigration, or at least that’s what people thought. Because what followed from the previous Government, starting with the people who used that slogan, was the complete opposite. Between 2019 and 2023, even as they were going around our country telling people, with a straight face, they would get immigration down, net migration quadrupled. Until in 2023, it reached nearly 1 million, which is about the population of Birmingham, our second largest city. That’s not control – it’s chaos.
- [3] And look, they must answer for themselves, but I don’t think you can do something like that by accident. It was a choice. A choice made even as they told you, told the country, they were doing the opposite. A one-nation experiment in open borders conducted on a country that voted for control. Well, no more. Today, this [political content redacted] Government is shutting down the lab. The experiment is over. We will deliver what you have asked for – time and

again – and we will take back control of our borders.

- [4] And let me tell you why. Because I know, on a day like today, people who like politics will try to make this all about politics, about this or that strategy, targeting these voters, responding to that party. No. I am doing this because it is right, because it is fair, and because it is what I believe in.
- [5] Let me put it this way: Nations depend on rules – fair rules. Sometimes they’re written down, often they’re not, but either way, they give shape to our values. They guide us towards our rights, of course, but also our responsibilities, the obligations we owe to one another. Now, in a diverse nation like ours, and I celebrate that, these rules become even more important. Without them, we risk becoming an island of strangers, not a nation that walks forward together.
- [6] So when you have an immigration system that seems almost designed to permit abuse, that encourages some businesses to bring in lower-paid workers rather than invest in our young people, or simply one that is sold by politicians to the British people on an entirely false premise, then you’re not championing growth, you’re not championing justice, or however else people defend the status quo. You’re actually contributing to the forces that are slowly pulling our country apart.
- [7] So yes, I believe in this. I believe we need to reduce immigration significantly. That’s why some of the policies in this

White Paper go back nearly three years. It's about fairness.

[8] Migration is part of Britain's national story. We talked last week about the great rebuilding of this country after the war; migrants were part of that, and they make a massive contribution today. You will never hear me denigrate that. But when people come to our country, they should also commit to integration, to learning our language, and our system should actively distinguish between those that do and those that don't. I think that's fair.

[9] Equally, Britain must compete for the best talent in the world in science, in technology, in healthcare. You cannot simply pull up a drawbridge, let nobody in, and think that is an economy that would work. That would hurt the pay packets of working people – without question. But at the same time, we do have to ask why parts of our economy seem almost addicted to importing cheap labour rather than investing in the skills of people who are here and want a good job in their community. Sectors like engineering, where visas have rocketed while apprenticeships have plummeted. Is that fair to Britain? Is it fair to young people weighing up their future to miss out on those apprenticeships, to see colleges in their community almost entirely dedicated to one-year courses for overseas students? No, I don't think it is. And truth be told, I don't think anyone does. And yet that is the Britain this broken system has created.

[10] So, as this White Paper sets out, every area of the immigration system – work, family, and study – will be tightened up so we have more control. Skill requirements raised to degree level. English language requirements across all routes – including for dependents. The time it takes to acquire settled status extended from five years to ten. And enforcement tougher than ever because fair rules must be followed.

[11] Now, make no mistake – this plan means migration will fall. That's a promise. But I want to be very clear on this. If we do need to take further steps, if we do need to do more to release pressure on housing and our public services, then mark my words – we will. But it's not just about numbers. Because the chaos of the previous government also changed the nature of immigration in this country. Fewer people who make a strong economic contribution, more who work in parts of our economy that put downward pressure on wages. So perhaps the biggest shift in this White Paper is that we will finally honour what "take back control" meant and begin to choose who comes here so that migration works for our national interest.

[12] You know, this is where the whole debate is skewed, as if some people think controlling immigration is reigning in a sort of natural freedom rather than a basic and reasonable responsibility of government to make choices that work for a nation's economy. For years, this seems to have muddled our thinking, but let me be clear – it ends now. We will

create a migration system that is controlled, selective, and fair. A clean break with the past that links access to visas directly to investment in homegrown skills so that if a business wants to bring people in from abroad, they must first invest in Britain. But also, so settlement becomes a privilege that is earned, not a right, easier if you make a contribution, if you work, pay in, and help rebuild our country.

[13] Now, some people may even be against that, but I think for the vast majority of

people in this country, that is what they have long wanted to see. An immigration system that is fair, that works for our national interest, and that restores common sense and control to our borders. That is what this White Paper will deliver: lower net migration, higher skills, backing British workers, the start of repairing our social contract, which the chaos and cynicism of the last government did so much to undermine. Thank you.

تحليل الخطاب النقدي لكلمة رئيس الوزراء البريطاني كير ستارمر حول الهجرة

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ملخص البحث:

تتناول هذه الدراسة النوعية خطاب كير ستارمر حول الهجرة باستخدام التحليل النقدي للخطاب، بهدف فهم كيف تُستخدم اللغة في تشكيل تصورات الناس، ودعم الإيديولوجية، وتبرير السياسات. تجمع الدراسة بين نموذج "المربع الأيديولوجي" لتيون فان ديك (2006، 2011، 2012) والنموذج الثلاثي الأبعاد لنورمان فيركلاف (1989، 1992، 1995، 2015)، لتدرس الكلمات والنصوص المستخدمة في الخطاب، وأيضًا السياقات الاجتماعية والسياسية التي تمنحه معناه. يكشف التحليل عن استراتيجيات بلاغية ولغوية تصور الهجرة كضرورة اقتصادية، لكنها أيضًا تهديد محتمل لوحدة الوطن، مما يساهم في بناء سردية ضمنية تميز بين "نحن" و"هم"، حيث يُرحب بالمهاجرين فقط إذا اندمجوا وساهموا اقتصاديًا. ويكشف التحليل الأوسع كيف يساهم هذا النوع من الخطاب في تقديم السياسات الصارمة للهجرة على أنها منطقية وأخلاقية، بما يتماشى مع المخاوف السائدة بعد البريكست والتيارات السياسية الوسطية. وتؤكد الدراسة على أهمية استخدام مناهج تحليلية متكاملة لفهم كيف يمكن للخطابات السياسية المعتدلة أن تدعم أفكارًا مهيمنة وتؤثر في النقاش العام حول قضايا الهجرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تحليل الخطاب النقدي، كير ستارمر، الهجرة، فيركلاف، فان ديك.