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A Semantico- Critical Discourse Analysis of Swaying Public Opinion in Selected Political Speeches

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ABSTRACT: The present study adopts Winifred Crombie's (1985) framework of semantic relational structuring to examine how politicians try to sway public opinion by reversing moral roles—depicting the occupying power as a victim acting in self-defense and portraying the group defending its land as the occupier. For this purpose, the researcher purposively selects three political speeches by Rishi Sunak (the former prime minister of United Kingdom) concerning Israel's conflict with Hamas and Iran, chosen from the years 2023–2025. The study aims to investigate how politicians use semantic structuring relations to promote particular political ideologies and attitudes in order to mislead the public. Crombie's theoretical framework is applied primarily to identify the political ideologies operating within the selected speeches. These speeches are analyzed through the categories of Crombie's SRS by examining sentence constructions that contain semantic structuring relationships, thereby demonstrating the speaker's ability to construct and alter facts about Iran and Hamas. The study shows that the selected political speeches are filled with ideological allusions and clues intended by the speaker to sway the public opinion.

1. INTRODUCTION

In discourse, the focus is on how interlocutors select modes of speech to mislead others according to the situations in which they find themselves and in relation to the social relationships, identities, ideologies, and attitudes they wish to disclose. Accordingly, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is one of the main subfields of discourse analysis; its central aim is to identify the ideational cues embedded in the linguistic choices made by language users in spoken or written texts (Fowler, 1991).

Discourse analysts cannot overlook semantic findings when examining a spoken or written text, since discursial research involves the meanings of linguistic expressions. Moreover, lexis is the most fundamental means of investigating ideology, which is largely—though not exclusively—revealed through word choice (Van Dijk, 1998). Conversely, ideology, defined as a set of views shared by members of a social group, is typically created, reproduced, and disseminated through spoken or written discourse (Simpson, 1993). Therefore, this study employs a semantic framework to examine the ideological foundations of speeches intended to deceive the public. Hence, the present study adopts a semantic theoretical framework to uncover the mechanisms through which political ideologies in the selected political speeches are constructed via the linguistic categories proposed by Winifred Crombie (1985).

The analysis seeks to uncover how politicians promote political ideologies, beliefs, and perspectives concerning Israel's conflict with Hamas and Iran, as reflected in the use of semantic structuring relationships in the selected political speeches. To this end, the study adopts a qualitative approach to read the selected speeches in search of the semantic relational

structurings responsible for their ideological content. Finally, critical and ideological perspectives are used to discuss and interpret the data.

2. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary field of study that examines language and other semiotic systems in use. It began in the 1990s as an informally connected group of scholars who took part in a small symposium in Amsterdam. Since then, it has developed into a wide-ranging international program containing diverse approaches that investigate the relationships between discourse (language use), the people who produce and use it, and the social and political contexts, structures, and practices in which it occurs. According to Catalano and Waugh (2020, p. 1), its purpose is to critically investigate the relationship between language, ideology, power, and social structure—for example, how social inequality is constructed, reproduced, legitimized, and resisted in language and other modes of communication. Flowerdew and Richardson (2018) add that CDA aims to deepen our understanding of how discourse functions in social processes, social figures, and social change (p. 1).

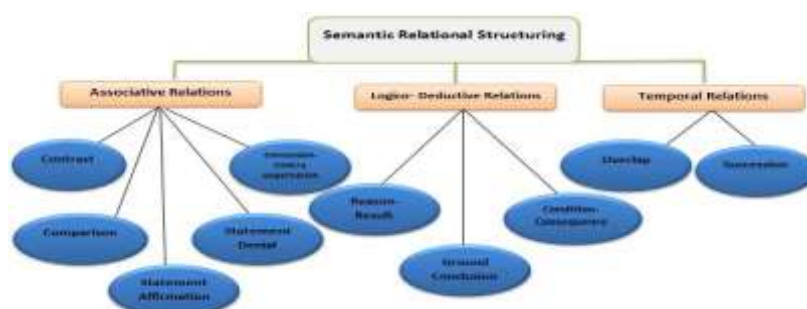
Machin and Mayr (2025) state that CDA offers a set of tools for analyzing texts and spoken language, and that these tools have proven highly useful to scholars working in various academic fields (p. 8). This has been especially true in media and communications studies, as well as in business, marketing, political, health, and legal studies, among others. By using CDA's tools, features of written or spoken language that would be less apparent to an ordinary observer can be revealed. In other words, they allow us to move beyond the surface level of the text and identify evidence showing what is actually being communicated.

Van Dijk (2015) argues that CDA's main focus is to examine how social-power abuse and inequality are legitimized, enacted, reproduced, and resisted through talk and text in political and social contexts. In such dissident research, critical discourse analysts adopt an explicit stance, seeking to understand, reveal, and ultimately confront social inequality. For this reason, CDA can also be described as a social movement of politically active discourse analysts. As an analytical practice, CDA is not merely one research method among many in discourse studies. Rather, it is a critical perspective found in all areas of discourse studies, such as conversation analysis, discourse grammar, discourse pragmatics, stylistics, rhetoric, narrative analysis, sociolinguistics, multimodal discourse analysis, and social semiotics. In other words, "CDA is discourse study with an attitude" (p. 466).

3. SEMANTIC RELATIONAL STRUCTURING (SRS)

Although other scholars adopt different methods of classification, Winifred Crombie (1985) divides semantic relations into three main types. This division is particularly useful for describing possible connections among discourse components and for assessing the extent to which such connections may be regarded as artistically significant. These three categories are associative relations (relations grounded in comparison and contrast), logico-deductive relations (cause-effect relations), and temporal relations. The last category comprises two sub-relations: temporal overlap (i.e., events occurring at the same time) and temporal succession (i.e., events occurring one after another) (Longacre, 1996, p. 53). Figure (3.1) presents these specific semantic relations as identified by Crombie (1985)

(3.1): Crombie's Semantic Relational Structuring Framework:



3.1 Associative Relations:

Associative relations are generally indicated by some conjunctions such as “then,” “while,” “and,” “but,” and “or,” which explicitly mark the relation (Mason, 2025). However, They are classified into the following subtypes:

3.1.1 Contrast

Contrast is used to strike a comparison between two ideas or things to point out what is different about these ideas or things. However, it is usually indicated by several discourse markers, such as “however,” “although,” and “but.” This relation is realized in two forms: explicit, where the contrast is signalled by clear discourse markers such as “but,” “however,” or “although,” and implicit, where the contrast is inferred from context without any explicit marker (Prep, 2023).

3.1.2 Comparative Similarity

Comparative similarity is a semantic relation that can be shown by some discourse markers. One of the most utilized markers is “like,” which is sometimes deleted. Its absence/presence brings about the strengthening/weakening of the impact of a given comparison. However, writers use it to point out what is similar about two or more things or ideas. The relation operates through a binary distinction: open, in which the similarity marker (e.g., “like”) is present and the comparison is explicit, and closed, in which the marker is deleted or omitted, rendering the comparison implicit and often more forceful (Prep, 2023).

3.1.3 Statement Affirmation

Basically, the affirmative statement comprises a positive meaning that expresses and shows the validity or truth of a basic assertion, which may be applied to statements, clauses, verb phrases, and some other utterances. Three subcategories are distinguished: simple, denoting a straightforward positive statement without emphasis; intensive, denoting an emphatic positive statement marked by items such as “indeed,” “certainly,” or “definitely”; and self, denoting affirmation that refers to the speaker’s own stance, identity, or commitment (Anmol, 2024).

3.1.4 Statement Denial

Denial is indicated by negation, and it can be either direct or indirect. A statement can be denied directly using markers such as “no” or “not” and indirectly by giving a reverse answer. However, people’s use of denial requires that they have knowledge about the affirmative state of affairs or what is alleged to be true. Denial manifests in three modes: simple, involving direct negation through “no,” “not,” or “never”; comparative, involving negation that contrasts with an expected affirmative; and intensive, involving emphatic or reinforced negation, often through multiple negative markers or strong adverbs (Anmol, 2024).

3.1.5 Concession-Contra-expectation

According to Taboada and González (2012), concession-contra-expectation is the relationship that joins two clauses or units in a potential or apparent contradiction and helps writers and speakers express opinions. In a similar vein, Quirk et al. (2008, p. 1098) explained that “the situation in the matrix clause is contrary to expectation in the light of what is said in the concessive clause.” This relation is differentiated into positive, where the main clause expresses a result that occurs despite a concessive clause, and negative, where the main clause expresses a result that does not occur despite a concessive clause (Taboada & González, 2012).

3.2 Logico-Deductive Relations

In English, logico-deductive relations depend on semantic markers that make logical deductions and cogent results (Crombie, 1985). However, it falls into the following subtypes:

3.2.1 Reason-Result

Karhausen (2025) points out that reason-result, as a semantic relation, includes an idea of necessary connection that can be inferred from observed regularities. However, reason and result are associated with each other; that is to say, whenever the reason occurs, the result follows and vice versa. The relation subdivides into direct, denoting a clear and immediate causal link

between reason and result; indirect, denoting a causal link that requires inference or additional context; and probabilistic, denoting a causal link that is probable rather than certain (Hub, 2025).

3.2.2 Condition-Consequence

In English, conditional clauses are extremely crucial. They help learners express possibilities and hypothetical situations that can occur in the past, present, or future. They are among the more challenging aspects of learning English. Nevertheless, a conditional clause expresses a condition, as the name implies. It consists of a main clause and a conditional clause. “If,” “when,” or “unless” introduce the conditional phrase, and the main sentence gives the result. A situation is set up by the condition, and the outcome informs us of the consequence if it materializes. This relation is actualized as either factuality, where the condition is presented as possible or real, or counter-factuality, where the condition is presented as contrary to fact or impossible (Hui, 2025).

3.2.3 Ground Conclusion

Ground Conclusion is realized through 'entailment', a term was originally used in formal logic which influences semantics. It can be defined as “a relation between a pair of SENTENCES in which, the truth of the second sentence necessarily follows from the truth of the first one.” Entailment comprises mutual, where two sentences entail each other; lexical, where entailment is based on word meaning; and logical, where entailment is based on logical form (Crystal, 1985, p.109).

3.3.3 Temporal Relations

Sakr et al. (2025) argue that temporal relations specify precisely how two or more temporal values relate to each other. However, in this type of relationship, the following subclasses are tackled as follows:

3.3.1 Overlap

Temporal overlap, as explained by Sakr et al. (2025, p. 45), is when “two temporal values overlap if their interiors intersect and their intersection is not equal to either of them.” It occurs when two or more actions happen at the same time. Overlap takes two forms: parallel, where two actions occur at the same time, and precedence, where one action begins before another and continues alongside it (Sakr et al., 2025).

3.3.2 Succession

Temporal succession occurs when two activities appear one after the other in a phrase. It signifies that the states or activities they describe took place in that famous order: X, and following after X, Y. However, in English, this is demonstrated by certain markers, such as “and,” “then,” “when,” and so on. Succession is either immediate, where one event follows another without delay, or extended, where one event follows another after an interval (Isaksson, 2024).

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study adopts Winifred Crombie’s (1985) model to examine and highlight the principal forms of Semantic Relational Structuring in Sunak's three selected political speeches. The model is highly compatible with the data analyzed, and its components effectively reveal the speaker’s efforts to influence the public regarding Israel’s conflict with Iran and Hamas. Politicians draw on categories such as contrast, comparative similarity, reason–result, and condition–consequence to express their views on Iranian forces and Hamas. Three data items were selected because they are sufficient to cover the topic and to apply every component of the chosen theoretical framework. The period 2023–2025 was selected because Israel’s conflict with Iran and Hamas took place during this time. Nonetheless, this framework includes temporal, logico-deductive, and associative semantic relations, which are applied to the data under study.

5. SRS ANALYSIS OF SUNAK'S SELECTED POLITICAL SPEECHES

5.1 Associative Relations

5.1.1 Contrast

Sunak uses the contrast by acknowledging the killing of Palestinians and then blaming Hamas (which is Palestinian) to exonerate Israel:

1. I recognise that the Palestinian people are suffering terribly. Over 4,000 Palestinians have been killed in this conflict. They are also the victims of Hamas, who embed themselves in the civilian population.

The statement attributed to Sunak is notable for its reliance on an implicit contrast as a central linguistic device. It dismantles the unity of the Palestinian people and their resistance by presenting Hamas as a separate entity, even one that "kills" them. While acknowledging the killing of 4,000 Palestinians, the direct Israeli killing—through a blatant contradiction—is transformed into a byproduct of Hamas's existence, thus absolving the occupier of responsibility. This dichotomy (Hamas killing its own people / Israel defending itself) aims to delegitimize resistance, transforming it from an inherent right in the face of occupation into an existential threat that must be eliminated. It is a reproduction of colonial discourse that blames the victim for defending themselves and presents aggression as a moral imperative. This use of contradiction not only reflects political bias but also reveals a rhetorical mechanism that justifies genocide by stripping the resistance of its national and humanitarian dimensions.

5.1.2 Comparative Similarity

In one example of implicit comparative similarity employed by Sunak, he links Hamas and Iran to confuse objectives and sway public opinion.

2. Hamas, who are backed by Iran, started this war. They wanted not just to kill and murder, but to destabilise the whole region.

In this example of closed comparative similarity relation, Sunak uses the phrase "Iranian-backed Hamas" at the beginning of the sentence to create a rhetorical fusion between the two, suggesting a convergence of goals: Hamas wants "killing and slaughter," and Iran wants "destabilization," as if they were two sides of the same coin. This direct link misleads public opinion by shifting the descriptions of the resistance's military actions into a broader regional context, thus assigning both sides double responsibility. The result is that any defense of the Palestinians' right to resist is automatically reduced to the label of "Iranian proxy," and Israel is portrayed as the victim of an expansionist project. Through this mechanism, the debate becomes confined to an "Iranian axis" rather than an ongoing occupation, and the resistance is delegitimized by being accused of being a tool of destabilization rather than a liberation movement.

5.1.3 Statement Affirmation

In one example of Statement Affirmation, Sunak declares the necessity of ending the war, and he holds Hamas solely responsible for starting it and refusing to stop it:

3. Thirdly, the conflict in Gaza must end. Hamas, who are backed by Iran, started this war. They wanted not just to kill and murder, but to destabilise the whole region. This weekend, they rejected the latest hostage deal, which offered a road to a ceasefire. It is Israel's right, and indeed its duty, to defeat the threat from Hamas terrorists and defend its security.

In this segment, Sunak applies the technique of intensive statement affirmation to present a one-dimensional narrative that simplifies the conflict in Gaza to serve the pro-Israel British political stance. He begins by asserting that "ending the conflict is essential," but quickly shifts to blaming Hamas solely for initiating and perpetuating the war, ignoring the context of the pre-existing occupation and blockade. He also uses Hamas's rejection of the hostage deal as evidence that it "doesn't want to stop the war," neglecting the possibility that the deal might be contingent on crippling Israeli conditions, or that the ongoing Israeli aggression is the primary obstacle to any ceasefire. The assertion that it is "Israel's right and duty" to defeat Hamas grants unlimited legitimacy to military retaliation and disregards the obligation to protect civilians under international law. In this way, Sunak diverts public attention from Israel's responsibility for the continuation of the war and presents Hamas as the sole obstacle to peace, in a clear misrepresentation of the full context of the conflict.

5.1.4 Statement Denial

In one example of statement denial relation, Sunak denies Hamas's right to seize Palestinian territory in Gaza, as an attempt to separate it from Palestine and strip the resistance of any political legitimacy.

4. So let me be clear: there is no scenario where Hamas can be allowed to control Gaza or any part of the Palestinian territories. Hamas is a threat not only to Israel, but to many others across the region. All the leaders I met agree that this is a watershed moment.

In this excerpt, Sunak employs an intensive Statement Denial to preempt any possibility of Hamas remaining a political or military actor in Gaza or any part of the Palestinian territories. This denial not only denies Hamas's legitimacy but also aims to strip the Palestinian resistance of any political cover, presenting it as merely a "threat" that extends beyond the conflict with Israel to encompass the countries of the region. By asserting that "all the leaders I met agree," Sunak attempts to lend international legitimacy to this position, as if the consensus against Hamas has become an indisputable fact. This approach sways public opinion by reducing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to a purely security equation, ignoring the historical context of the occupation, the Palestinian people's right to resist, and the political representation that movements like Hamas provide to a segment of the Palestinian population. Denial here is not simply a political stance but a tool to justify the continuation of the war by denying any future role for Hamas without offering a genuine political alternative, thus prolonging the conflict and leaving the military option as the only viable one.

5.1.5 Concession-Contra-Expectation

Sunak uses the concession-contra expectation argument to justify Britain's intervention, claiming that the far-flung Middle East has an impact on its internal security:

5. Our aim is to support stability and security because that is right for the region, and because although the middle east is thousands of miles away, it has a direct effect on our security and prosperity at home.

In this excerpt, Sunak employs a positive concession-contra expectation relation to legitimize British intervention in the Middle East. He begins by seemingly conceding that the region is "thousands of miles away," implying that Britain's connection to it is not self-evident. He then reverses this expectation by asserting that its impact is "direct on our security and prosperity at home," transforming a complex political and humanitarian issue into a matter of pure British national security.

This framing aims to present military and political support for Israel as a defensive necessity rather than an ideological choice, and it misleads public opinion by reducing British intervention to the protection of self-interest under the guise of "stability." It also ignores the fact that the British military presence itself is often a source of instability, not a solution. Through this rhetorical mechanism, Sunak deflects responsibility for his policies in the region onto a supposed domestic necessity, justifying his continued support for Israel even at the expense of Palestinian rights and the region's actual stability.

5.2 Logico-deductive Relations

5.2.1 Reason-Result

In one of his uses of Reason-Result relations, Sunak explains that Hamas's attack is shocking because it challenges the idea of coexistence.

6. One reason this attack is so shocking is that it is a fundamental challenge to any idea of co-existence, which is an essential precursor to peace and stability in the region.

In this example, Sunak relies on a **direct Reason-Result** relation to present the Hamas attack as shocking because it "challenges the idea of coexistence," using this connection as the sole reason for describing the attack as destructive to peace. This approach misleads public opinion by reducing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to a simplistic moral equation: one side wants coexistence (Israel), and the other rejects it (Hamas). In contrast, Sunak completely ignores decades of Israeli policies that have undermined actual coexistence: settlement construction, the blockade, the displacement of Palestinians, and the rejection of a two-state solution. By presenting "coexistence" as an abstract value, he obscures the fact that the real obstacle to peace is not Hamas's rejection alone, but the continued occupation and Israeli policies that render coexistence impossible. In this way, one side is held responsible for the collapse of peace, while the responsibility of the other, more powerful side in perpetuating the conflict is ignored.

5.2.2 Entailment

In one of his uses of Entailment, Sunak portrays Hamas as a terrorist group committing a massacre, without mentioning the crimes of the occupation or the complex historical context:

7. The attacks in Israel last weekend shocked the world. Over 1,400 people murdered one by one; over 3,500 wounded; almost 200 taken hostage; the elderly, men, women, children and babes in arms murdered, mutilated, burned alive. We should call it by its name: it was a pogrom.

Sunak's example relies on the mechanism of lexical entailment relation, moving from enumerating the crimes (numbers, methods of killing, age groups) to the implicit conclusion that the act constitutes a "massacre," laden with a preconceived moral judgment. This detailed enumeration serves not merely as a description, but as an argument that necessitates the conclusion that Hamas is a terrorist entity par excellence. The fallacy lies in confining the violence to one side, omitting the historical context, and failing to mention Israeli crimes or the reality of the occupation. By this omission, the discourse transforms from an analysis of the conflict into a tool of misinformation that portrays Hamas as the sole perpetrator of violence, exonerates the occupying power, and presents a one-sided narrative serving a political agenda under the guise of humanitarian condemnation.

5.2.3 Condition-Consequence

In one use of Condition-Consequence, Sunak makes a truce and a ceasefire the sole condition for aid to reach the children of Gaza, thus ignoring the identity of the real perpetrator of the daily killing:

8. The children of Gaza whom they were risking their lives to feed need a humanitarian pause immediately, leading to a long-term sustainable ceasefire. That is the fastest way to get hostages out and aid in, and to stop the fighting.

In this excerpt, Sunak's discourse is based on a factual condition-consequence argument that posits a humanitarian truce and a ceasefire as the sole prerequisite for delivering aid to the children of Gaza. This approach reduces the problem to the absence of a "cessation of hostilities" without naming those responsible for the daily killing of these children. It thus shifts responsibility from the perpetrator (Israel) to the absence of an abstract humanitarian mechanism, ignoring the fact that bombing and starvation are ongoing Israeli tactics. The result is a deception of public opinion: Sunak appears to have the children's best interests at heart, while his discourse reproduces the same logic that legitimizes aggression by absolving it of its perpetrator, and offers procedural solutions that ignore the root causes of the violence and the crimes of the occupation.

5.3 Temporal Relations

5.3.1 Temporal Overlap

Sunak uses a temporal overlap relation to link Hamas's rejection of the hostage deal to the start of the war, misleading the public about who is responsible for its continuation:

9. This weekend, they rejected the latest hostage deal, which offered a road to a ceasefire ... Hamas, who are backed by Iran, started this war."

In this example, Sunak uses a parallel temporal overlap to create a false link between two events: Hamas's rejection of the hostage deal and the Iranian attack, by placing them within the context of "this week." This temporal connection suggests coordination or a unified plan between Hamas and Iran to obstruct peace, while offering no evidence to support it. The aim is to mislead public opinion into concluding that the war has continued due to Hamas's intransigence and Iranian support, ignoring the fact that Israeli policies—such as the ongoing bombing, the blockade, and the refusal to agree to a ceasefire—are what prolong the conflict. In this way, Sunak shifts responsibility for the continuation of the war onto his opponents and absolves Israel of any role in obstructing political solutions.

5.3.2 Temporal Succession

The following excerpt shows a temporal succession used by Sunak to link the rise in anti-Semitism to the attack, to justify funding and sway the public.

10. "I am sickened that antisemitic incidents have increased since the attack. We are doing everything we can to protect you. We are providing an additional £3 million for the Community Security Trust to protect schools ..."

In this example, an **extended Temporal Succession** relation is utilized by Sunak mentioning a carefully crafted chronological sequence of events to mislead: he places the October 7 attack at the forefront as the initial event, then immediately follows it with a rise in antisemitic incidents, as if this rise were a natural and inevitable consequence of the attack, rather than a response to Israeli escalation or differing political stances. This selective chronology doesn't describe reality so much as it creates a false causal link between support for Palestinians and antisemitism. It implicitly suggests that any sympathy for Gaza or criticism of Israel is an extension of anti-Jewish hatred, thus silencing dissenting voices by labeling them as extremists and inciters. Through this mechanism, Sunak misleads public opinion and transforms the political debate about Palestinian rights and the occupation into a moral security issue that transcends rational discussion. The result is that Israel is granted impunity, a one-sided narrative is perpetuated that blames only its adversaries for the violence, and any call for justice or an immediate end to the war is criminalized.

6. CONCLUSION

Sunak strategically employed Crombie's semantic relational structuring to sway public opinion toward Israel. Through associative relations—contrast, comparative similarity, affirmation, denial, and concession—he framed Hamas and Iran as existential threats while portraying Israel as a victim defending itself. Logico-deductive relations, including reason-result, entailment, and condition-consequence, constructed a one-sided causal narrative that blamed Hamas for the war's continuation and absolved Israel of responsibility. Temporal relations, such as overlap and succession, falsely linked events to suggest coordination and shift blame. Together, these semantic choices manipulated public perception, legitimized Israeli aggression, and delegitimized Palestinian resistance, reinforcing a pro-Israel ideological stance.

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