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Examining Rhetorical Strategies in Malay Political Discourse: A Study of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's Speeches

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ABSTRACT

Despite the central role of rhetoric in shaping political communication, scholarly attention to the systematic analysis of rhetorical strategies in Malay political discourse remains limited. This study examines the rhetorical strategies employed in the political speeches of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, one of Malaysia's most influential Malay politicians. Adopting a modified version of Grimes' (1975) discourse analysis model, the research conducts a systematic textual analysis of three selected speeches, comprising a total of 1,032 sentences. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are applied to identify and categorize rhetorical strategies. The analysis reveals the use of 13 primary rhetorical strategies and 37 sub-techniques, although not all can be directly associated with specific phrasal structures. The findings further indicate that the occurrence of certain rhetorical strategies correlates with speech topics. This study underscores the unique characteristics of rhetorical expression in Malay political discourse and offers significant pedagogical implications for Malay language instruction, particularly in the areas of rhetorical competence and curriculum development.

Keywords: rhetorical strategies, political speeches, discourse analysis, Malay political discourse, Mahathir Mohamad

INTRODUCTION

The role of rhetoric in political discourse cannot be overstated, particularly in contexts where language, power, and identity intersect to shape the socio-political landscape. In Malaysia, the long political career of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad provides a compelling case study of rhetorical strategies that have profoundly influenced national politics, governance, and the construction of collective identity. While political rhetoric has been extensively studied in Western contexts, research on rhetorical strategies within Southeast Asian political discourse—particularly in Malaysia, based on speeches delivered in the Malay language—remains relatively limited. Therefore, the objectives of this study are to:

- 1. Examine the rhetorical strategies employed in Mahathir's political speeches.
- 2. Analyze the frequency of these rhetorical strategies in his speeches.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Importance of Examining Rhetoric in Political Discourse

Rhetoric is a fundamental tool in political discourse, enabling leaders to persuade, influence, and shape public opinion. The relationship between language and power is central to understanding how political leaders use rhetoric to create social realities, construct identities, and justify political actions. Scholars such as Van Dijk (2008) and Fairclough (2001) emphasize that political discourse is not merely a channel of communication but a mechanism through which power relations are enacted and reinforced. This is particularly evident in post-



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colonial societies, where political rhetoric is often employed to assert sovereignty, negotiate power dynamics, and construct national narratives.

In the Malaysian context, the political speeches of Mahathir Mohamad represent a rich tapestry of rhetorical strategies that have not only influenced political outcomes but also shaped the very fabric of Malaysian identity. As a leader who served as Prime Minister for over two decades, Mahathir's speeches were instrumental in mobilizing public sentiment, justifying policy decisions, and framing political and social issues. Therefore, studying the rhetorical strategies employed in his speeches is essential to understanding how political discourse shapes national identity, governance, and societal values in Malaysia.

Past Studies on Rhetorical Strategies in Political Discourse

Saeed et al. (2020) provide a comprehensive analysis of Imran Khan's rhetorical strategies, offering valuable insights into how language can be employed to persuade and shape public opinion. However, the study's reliance on a single speech and its relatively narrow theoretical framework leave considerable scope for further investigation.

In the Malaysian context, research on rhetorical strategies has revealed diverse approaches across different settings and media platforms. Fear-based rhetoric emerged as a prominent strategy during the 11th Malaysian General Election, when the National Front (Barisan Nasional) party effectively employed *ad baculum* tactics. These strategies, particularly targeting Malaysian Chinese voters through Islamic state imagery in political advertisements, proved effective due to BN's control of mainstream media and the Chinese community's preference for maintaining political stability (Lim, 2009; Hui & Har, 2008).

More recent studies indicate that Malaysian politicians have adopted Aristotelian rhetorical appeals in social media communication, with individual politicians demonstrating distinct preferences. For instance, an analysis of social media posts during the Taman Sri Muda flood crisis found that Syed Saddiq predominantly employed *pathos* (emotional appeals), while Hannah Yeoh relied more heavily on *ethos* (credibility-based appeals). Nonetheless, both politicians drew upon all three classical appeals—*ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*—to establish credibility, evoke empathy, and present evidence in support of their arguments (Manan & Shukri, 2023).

Past Studies on Rhetorical Strategies in Mahathir's Discourse

Tun Dr. Mahathir's rhetoric is known for its strategic use of language to address political challenges, frame national issues, and rally support for his policies. Researchers have examined various aspects of his rhetorical style, such as his use of metaphor, framing, and appeals to nationalistic sentiment. Kamarudin (2015) highlights Mahathir's frequent use of metaphors, particularly in relation to Malaysia's development and modernization. The metaphor of "building the nation" was central to his narrative, positioning Malaysia's progress as a collective effort requiring unity and national pride.

Mahathir's speeches also employed the rhetorical strategy of framing, which is crucial for shaping public perceptions of political events. According to Lakoff (2004), framing refers to the way issues are presented to influence opinion. Mahathir often framed Malaysia's political and economic challenges as external threats, frequently directed at the West or global powers. This approach galvanized nationalistic sentiments among the populace. As Hasan (2007) observes, such framing reinforced Malaysia's sovereignty and positioned Mahathir as a defender of national interests.

Another key element of Mahathir's rhetoric was his appeal to the Malay majority in Malaysia. Lee and Tan (2008) argue that his rhetoric was instrumental in consolidating the political power of the Malay community, particularly through policies such as the *Bumiputera* initiative. By emphasizing the centrality of Malay identity, Mahathir crafted a political narrative that placed the Malay community at the heart of Malaysia's political and economic future. This framing of Malay identity demonstrates how political discourse can construct and reinforce both ethnic and national identities.



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As Taufiq (2013) suggests, studying Mahathir's rhetoric provides a unique opportunity to explore how discourse strategies function in a post-colonial, multi-ethnic society. In Malaysia, where ethnic relations are both sensitive and central to the nation's political framework, Mahathir's rhetoric plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions and political realities. Understanding his rhetorical strategies is therefore vital not only for comprehending Malaysia's political history but also for offering insights into how rhetoric can be employed to navigate complex ethnic and national issues in post-colonial contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an eclectic discourse analysis approach grounded in Grimes' (1975) discourse analysis model. The method integrates both the "Alternative Description Method" and the "Quantitative Method" to deconstruct and analyse three excerpts of Mahathir's political speeches. Grimes' model (1975) was selected because it enables the interpretation of diverse types of information through a three-step procedure:

- 1. conducting clause-by-clause analysis of sentences within a given discourse;
- 2. categorizing clauses into designated columns of information; and charting the occurrence of specific clause elements across a uniform alignment. This approach extends beyond mere grammatical description by considering situational details within the broader continuity of discourse.

Through the "Alternative Description Method," the three selected excerpts of Mahathir's speeches were segmented into 1,032 clauses, each numbered and examined for rhetorical strategies and their corresponding sub-techniques. Simultaneously, the "Quantitative Method" was applied to calculate the frequency of specific rhetorical strategies, thereby providing a systematic overview of their patterns of use

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on an eclectic approach grounded in Grimes' discourse analysis model, this study finds that a total of 13 main rhetorical strategies and 37 sub-techniques have been utilized by Mahathir in his political speeches. The results of this analysis arranged in order of frequency of usage are presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Rhetorical Strategy and Sub-Techniques in Mahathir's Political Speeches

No.	Rhetorical Strategy and Sub-Techniques in Mahathir's Political Speeches	Frequency of Usage (Percentage)
1	Information Statement Strategy	304
	Information statement technique through examples	(29.5%)
	 b. Information statement technique through generalizations 	
	c. Information statement technique through hypotheses	
	d. Information statement technique through old information	
	e. Information statement technique through additional information	
2	Explanatory Strategy	180
	Explanatory technique through analogy	(17.4%)
	 b. Explanatory technique through code-mixing or code-switching 	
	c. Explanatory technique through clarification	
	d. Explanatory technique through general statements	
	e. Explanatory technique through cause-and-effect	
3	Support Baiting Strategy	162
	Baiting technique through revealing weaknesses	(15.7%)
	Baiting technique through persuasion	
	c. Baiting technique through direct accusations	
	d. Baiting technique through indirect accusations	
	e. Baiting technique through appealing for sympathy	
	f. Baiting technique through self-promotion	



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Fear-Inducing Strategy	104	
	(10.0%)	
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c. Fear-inducing technique through predictions		
0 1 01		
Didactic Strategy	77	
Didactic technique through warnings	(7.5%)	
b. Didactic technique through encouragement		
c. Didactic technique through prohibitions		
d. Didactic technique through advice		
e. Didactic technique through calls to action		
Reinforcement Strategy	72	
Reinforcement technique through examples	(6.9%)	
B. Reinforcement technique through information		
c. Reinforcement technique through actions		
Certainty Strategy	40	
	(3.9%)	
Expression Statement Strategy	33	
a. Expression statement of happiness	(3.2%)	
b. Expression statement of hope		
c. Expression statement of disappointment		
d. Expression statement of displeasure		
Rhetorical Question Strategy	27	
Alternative-type question technique	(2.6%)	
D. Question technique opening new problems		
c. Provocative-type question technique		
Incitement Strategy		
a. Direct incitement technique	(1.4%)	
b. Indirect incitement technique		
Sarcasm Strategy	11	
	(1.1%)	
Flashback Strategy	4	
	(0.4%)	
Politeness Strategy	4	
	(0.4%)	
Total	1032 (100%)	
	Fear-Inducing Strategy a. Fear-inducing technique through examples b. Fear-inducing technique through factual statements c. Fear-inducing technique through predictions d. Fear-inducing technique through conclusions Didactic Strategy a. Didactic technique through warnings b. Didactic technique through encouragement c. Didactic technique through prohibitions d. Didactic technique through advice e. Didactic technique through calls to action Reinforcement Strategy a. Reinforcement technique through examples b. Reinforcement technique through information c. Reinforcement technique through advions Certainty Strategy Expression Statement Strategy a. Expression statement of happiness b. Expression statement of hope c. Expression statement of disappointment d. Expression statement of displeasure Rhetorical Question Strategy a. Altemative-type question technique b. Question technique opening new problems c. Provocative-type question technique Incitement Strategy a. Direct incitement technique b. Indirect incitement technique Sarcasm Strategy Politeness Strategy	Fear-Inducing Strategy a. Fear-inducing technique through examples b. Fear-inducing technique through factual statements c. Fear-inducing technique through predictions d. Fear-inducing technique through predictions d. Fear-inducing technique through conclusions Didactic Strategy a. Didactic technique through warnings b. Didactic technique through encouragement c. Didactic technique through prohibitions d. Didactic technique through advice e. Didactic technique through calls to action Reinforcement Strategy a. Reinforcement technique through examples b. Reinforcement technique through advions Certainty Strategy 40 (3.9%) Expression Statement Strategy a. Expression statement of happiness b. Expression statement of happiness b. Expression statement of disappointment d. Expression statement of displeasure Rhetorical Question Strategy a. Alternative-type question technique b. Question technique opening new problems c. Provocative-type question technique Incitement Strategy a. Direct incitement technique Sarcasm Strategy Politeness Strategy Politeness Strategy Politeness Strategy Total 1032

The findings presented above revealed that the *Information Statement Strategy* (29.5%) was the most frequently employed rhetorical strategy in Mahathir Mohamad's speeches at the UMNO General Assembly, underscoring his central role as UMNO president in disseminating political narratives and affirming ideological positions. The dominance of this strategy reflects a discourse style that privileges instruction and authority, consistent with Mahathir's technocratic and paternalistic leadership persona (Wain, 2009). The second most frequently used strategy, the *Explanatory Strategy* (17.4%), further reinforces this pedagogical tone by clarifying and legitimizing policy positions or ideological stances through analogies, generalizations, and cause–effect reasoning. Together, these strategies construct a didactic discourse that seeks not only to inform but also to discipline and align party members with the party's dominant ideological trajectory.

More revealing, however, is the significant use of the *Support-Baiting Strategy* (15.7%), which serves a dual function: consolidating internal support while discrediting dissenting voices, often through rhetorical attacks that draw on moral or nationalistic imperatives. This strategic positioning resonates with Fairclough's (2003) assertion that political discourse operates through both representation and recontextualization, allowing speakers to frame political opponents as threats to national stability or party unity. In Mahathir's rhetoric, such



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antagonistic positioning aligns with broader efforts to secure ideological hegemony within the party and among the Malay electorate.

Besides, the *Fear-Inducing Strategy* (10.0%) and the *Didactic Strategy* (7.5%) appear to operate in a mutually reinforcing manner. Fear-inducing rhetoric—often grounded in predictions of chaos, decline, or foreign threat—functions to create a sense of crisis or vulnerability, which the didactic strategy then addresses through moral instruction, prohibitions, or calls to unity. This rhetorical interplay reflects a form of "authoritarian populism" (Hall, 1985), in which fear is mobilized to justify top-down guidance and reinforce loyalty to leadership. Such rhetoric not only legitimizes centralized authority but also silences alternative viewpoints by presenting dissent as dangerous or unpatriotic.

From a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective, these strategies do more than merely persuade; they enact and reproduce power relations, ethnic hierarchies, and identity politics. Mahathir's speeches are situated within a broader discursive formation that prioritizes Malay dominance and national development narratives, often at the expense of pluralistic or dissenting voices (Shamsul, 1996). His rhetorical framework reflects what van Dijk (1998) terms the "ideological square," in which the in-group (in this case, UMNO and the Malay community) is portrayed positively, while out-groups or internal critics are represented negatively. This is particularly evident in the use of support-baiting and fear-inducing strategies, which frame the political "other"—be it the opposition, ethnic minorities, or Western influences—as morally or existentially threatening.

Comparatively, this pattern mirrors findings from studies of other populist or strongman leaders. For instance, in her analysis of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rhetoric, Korkut (2014) identifies a similar reliance on moral didacticism and fear to consolidate support and suppress political dissent. Likewise, Chilton and Schäffner (2002) note that authoritarian discourse often merges instruction with affective appeals—especially fear—to shape ideological commitments. These comparative insights suggest that Mahathir's rhetorical style is not idiosyncratic but participates in a global pattern of populist-nationalist discourse that seeks to discipline the public and monopolize national identity narratives.

Finally, the relatively low frequency of the Expression Statement Strategy (3.2%), Sarcasm Strategy (1.1%), Politeness Strategy (0.4%), and Flashback Strategy (0.4%) further supports the characterization of Mahathir's rhetoric as highly directive and ideologically assertive. His preference for directness and minimal emotional appeals suggests a calculated effort to project control, rationality, and moral certainty. Rather than building rapport through personal anecdotes or emotional resonance, Mahathir's discourse often assumes a top-down model of communication, treating the party and public as audiences to be instructed, corrected, or mobilized toward national goals. This rhetorical stance reinforces his identity as a political patriarch, consistent with the "father of development" image cultivated during his tenure (Milner, 1995).

CONCLUSION

This study of Mahathir Mohamad's political rhetoric holds significant implications for advancing the field of discourse analysis. While political discourse analysis has been extensively developed within Western scholarship, its application to non-Western political contexts remains comparatively underexplored. By analysing Mahathir's speeches through the lens of discourse analysis, this study contributes to broadening both the theoretical and methodological boundaries of the discipline. Grimes' (1975) discourse analysis model provides a useful framework for uncovering the communicative strategies employed to construct political ideologies, frame national narratives, and shape public perception.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this study also highlights important pedagogical implications, particularly for Malay for Academic Purposes classrooms. Analysing rhetorical strategies within political discourse offers students valuable insights into the ways language can be employed persuasively to influence opinion and achieve specific communicative objectives. The findings suggest that incorporating examples from political rhetoric into teaching practice can enhance students' abilities in persuasive writing and public speaking, thereby equipping them with practical skills that extend beyond the classroom.



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While this study provides a foundational account of the rhetorical strategies employed in Mahathir Mohamad's speeches, future research should move beyond descriptive frequency analysis toward a more critical engagement with the ideological functions of rhetoric. Categorising rhetorical strategies in isolation risks oversimplifying the complexity of political discourse unless these strategies are situated within broader sociopolitical and ideological contexts. Future studies should therefore investigate the interplay between rhetorical strategies—such as how fear-inducing and didactic strategies may operate synergistically to construct moral authority, discipline audiences, and legitimize political dominance.

Adopting a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach would substantially deepen the analytical scope by examining how rhetorical strategies reproduce power relations, articulate ethnic identity politics, and sustain nationalist and developmentalist ideologies. For instance, Mahathir's discourse frequently mobilizes ethnic boundaries to foreground Malay supremacy and national unity, framing the Malay-Muslim majority as both the protectors and rightful stewards of the nation. A CDA perspective can elucidate how such rhetorical manoeuvres operate ideologically to normalize exclusion, delegitimize dissent, and marginalize minority voices within Malaysian political discourse (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 1998).

Moreover, comparative research across political figures or historical periods could further illuminate how rhetorical strategies evolve in response to shifting political contexts, particularly regarding issues such as multiracialism and economic modernization. Such comparisons would reveal continuities and ruptures in the ideological framing of national identity, governance, and legitimacy.

From a pedagogical standpoint, future studies might also explore how insights from political discourse analysis—especially those informed by CDA—can be systematically integrated into Malay language and communication curricula. Teaching students to recognize rhetorical strategies and their ideological implications fosters critical thinking, rhetorical awareness, and discursive agency. Such pedagogical integration would not only enhance students' ability to produce and analyse persuasive discourse but also contribute to cultivating critically engaged citizens capable of navigating Malaysia's complex sociopolitical landscape.

In summary, shifting from mere classification and frequency analysis to a more ideologically focused and critically reflective approach will enable future research to gain a deeper understanding of how political rhetoric functions as a mechanism of power, identity formation, and social regulation within Malaysian political discourse.

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