

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 postcolonial 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.

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:

- (i) conducting clause-by-clause analysis of sentences within a given discourse;
- (ii) categorizing clauses into designated columns of information; and
- (iii) 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 (29.5%)
	a. Information statement technique through examples	
	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	<p>Explanatory Strategy</p> <p>a. Explanatory technique through analogy</p> <p>b. Explanatory technique through code-mixing or code-switching</p> <p>c. Explanatory technique through clarification</p> <p>d. Explanatory technique through general statements</p> <p>e. Explanatory technique through cause-and-effect</p>	180 (17.4%)
3	<p>Support Baiting Strategy</p> <p>a. Baiting technique through revealing weaknesses</p> <p>b. Baiting technique through persuasion</p> <p>c. Baiting technique through direct accusations</p> <p>d. Baiting technique through indirect accusations</p> <p>e. Baiting technique through appealing for sympathy</p> <p>f. Baiting technique through self-promotion</p>	162 (15.7%)
4	<p>Fear-Inducing Strategy</p> <p>a. Fear-inducing technique through examples</p> <p>b. Fear-inducing technique through factual statements</p> <p>c. Fear-inducing technique through predictions</p> <p>d. Fear-inducing technique through conclusions</p>	104 (10.0%)
5	<p>Didactic Strategy</p> <p>a. Didactic technique through warnings</p> <p>b. Didactic technique through encouragement</p> <p>c. Didactic technique through prohibitions</p> <p>d. Didactic technique through advice</p> <p>e. Didactic technique through calls to action</p>	77 (7.5%)
6	<p>Reinforcement Strategy</p>	72 (6.9%)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Reinforcement technique through examples b. Reinforcement technique through information c. Reinforcement technique through actions 	
7	Certainty Strategy	40 (3.9%)
8	Expression Statement Strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Expression statement of happiness b. Expression statement of hope c. Expression statement of disappointment d. Expression statement of displeasure 	33 (3.2%)
9	Rhetorical Question Strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Alternative-type question technique b. Question technique opening new problems c. Provocative-type question technique 	27 (2.6%)
10	Incitement Strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Direct incitement technique b. Indirect incitement technique 	14 (1.4%)
11	Sarcasm Strategy	11 (1.1%)
12	Flashback Strategy	4 (0.4%)
13	Politeness Strategy	4 (0.4%)
		Total 1032 (100%)

Based on the findings presented above, it was observed that the *Information Statement Strategy* (29.5%) was among the most frequently employed rhetorical strategies by Mahathir in his political speeches at the UMNO General Assembly. This trend can be attributed to his role as UMNO president at the time, where his primary responsibility was to convey both new and existing information to party members. In other words, Mahathir's speeches at the UMNO General Assembly were largely "instructive" and "informative" in nature. This is further supported by the high frequency of the *Explanatory Strategy* (17.4%), which was the second most frequently used strategy.

In addition, the *Support-Baiting Strategy* also featured prominently, accounting for 15.7% of usage. At the same time, Mahathir leveraged his influence as party president to both guide and discipline party members, often through instilling caution or fear to discourage misconduct or undesirable behavior. This is evidenced by his use of the *Fear-Inducing Strategy* (10%) and the *Didactic Strategy* (7.5%).

Nevertheless, the findings suggest that Mahathir was not a politician inclined toward subtlety or indirectness. This is reflected in the relatively low frequency of certain rhetorical strategies, namely the *Expression Statement Strategy* (3.2%), *Sarcasm Strategy* (1.0%), *Politeness Strategy* (0.4%), and *Flashback Strategy* (0.4%). Such patterns may be explained by Mahathir's well-known forthrightness, or by his perception of UMNO members as an extended family to whom he could speak directly and candidly.

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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