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Ideological Inclinations: An Analysis of Heads of Institutions' Speeches in Imenti North Sub-County, Kenya

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Abstract
This study employed a qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) design, integrated Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory to interpret the ideological underpinnings of principals' speeches. Twenty speeches from twelve secondary schools in Imenti North Su-county were purposively selected and transcribed verbatim. The analysis followed Fairclough's three-dimensional framework involving textual, discursive and social practices, supported by thematic categorisation of ideological expression. Findings show that principals' discourse simultaneously enforces school rules and aligns institutional practices with broader social, political, and cultural frameworks. The speeches legitimise authority by embedding dominant values in everyday communication, naturalising them through repetition, moral appeals, and cultural references. By invoking religious traditions, principals embed rules in sacred frameworks; by emphasising performance, they align education with neoliberal logics; by framing discipline as destiny, they normalise surveillance and obedience. The study argues that principals' speeches are not neutral acts of leadership communication but sites of ideological reproduction where authority is enacted and legitimised. The findings contribute to Critical Discourse Studies by extending CDA into African educational contexts and showing that the micro-level practices of school leadership sustain macro-level social hierarchies.

Key terms: Critical Discourse Analysis, ideology, institutional communication, power, principals' discourse.

INTRODUCTION

In many Kenyan schools, principals' speeches function as powerful communicative acts that shape institutional culture, student behaviour, and public perception of education. However, while these speeches appear managerial or motivational, they often embed dominant ideological assumptions that legitimise authority and perpetuate specific social values. The problem addressed in this study is that such ideological orientations remain largely unexamined in Kenyan educational discourse, leaving a gap in understanding how everyday institutional communication functions as a mechanism of power and social reproduction. Ideology refers to the system of ideas, values and beliefs that serve to justify existing social relations of power (Eagleton, 2007). Discourse denotes language use as a social practice through which meaning, identity and power are constructed (Fairclough, 1995). Institutional communication, in this context, encompasses all formal and semi-formal speech acts by school principals that perform organisational, moral and pedagogical functions.

Studies such as Sharndama (2015) on Obama's speeches, Holmes and Stubbe (2003) on workplace power, and Wodak (2001) on institutional communication have revealed that leadership discourse reproduces social hierarchies. In African contexts, Mwinlaaru (2018) examined Ghanaian head teachers' speeches and found that discourse naturalises authority through politeness and moral framing. In Kenya, studies by Murimi (2020) and Ndung'u (2019) highlight how principals' language shapes student discipline and moral order, but do not interrogate underlying ideologies. This study fills that gap by analysing ideology as embedded in linguistic practice.

Despite extensive literature on educational leadership and communication, few studies in Kenya have used CDA to analyse ideology in principals' speeches. Most research emphasises management effectiveness or moral education rather than the ideological reproduction of authority. This study bridges that gap by showing how linguistic choices encode belief systems that sustain institutional and societal hierarchies. The findings contribute to African discourse studies and reveal how local educational practices are connected to global ideological trends such as neoliberalism and meritocracy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Discourse, Ideology, and Power

The study of ideology in discourse is grounded in the recognition that language is not merely a vehicle for communication but a medium through which social relations and power are enacted, reproduced, and challenged. Fairclough (1995) conceptualises discourse as a social practice shaped by and shaping ideology and power. Through his three-dimensional model—text, discursive practice, and social practice—he illustrates how linguistic choices reflect broader social structures. Similarly, Van Dijk (1993) argues that discourse is both the site and product of ideological reproduction, where dominant groups maintain hegemony through subtle linguistic strategies that normalise their worldview. These theories make discourse analysis particularly useful for examining institutional speech such as that of school principals, whose language embodies the authority and values of the education system.

In the African context, discourse has been increasingly recognised as a crucial medium of postcolonial negotiation and identity construction. Scholars such as Mazrui (1995) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) emphasise that language is inherently political in postcolonial societies, shaping not only how reality is represented but also whose perspectives are legitimised. The schooling system, inherited from colonial structures, continues to reflect these ideological tensions through administrative language, curriculum discourse, and leadership rhetoric. Principals' speeches, therefore, become key sites for understanding how educational ideologies are localised and communicated in Kenya's school context.

Ideology and Educational Discourse

Ideology in education refers to the underlying set of beliefs, values, and assumptions that inform educational policies, practices, and discourses (Apple, 2004). Educational institutions act as ideological apparatuses that reproduce social hierarchies under the guise of neutrality (Althusser, 1971). Fairclough (2010) argues that institutional discourses such as policy documents or school leadership speeches serve

as mechanisms for legitimating power and sustaining particular social orders. For instance, discourse emphasising performance, discipline, and accountability aligns with neoliberal ideologies that frame education as a market-oriented enterprise (Ball, 2012).

Globally, research shows that school leaders' discourse reflects these ideological orientations. Mulderrig (2011) found that in UK educational policy, the language of modernisation and reform concealed neoliberal imperatives. Similarly, Rogers et al. (2005) demonstrated that principals' communication often mirrors dominant political discourses, thereby reinforcing systemic inequalities. These findings are relevant for the Kenyan context, where principals operate at the intersection of national policy directives, local cultural expectations, and resource limitations.

African Perspectives on Educational Discourse

In African education systems, the ideological dimension of discourse has distinct historical and socio-political roots. Postcolonial scholars argue that education in Africa was initially structured as an extension of colonial administration and continues to perpetuate hierarchical and Eurocentric epistemologies (Bunyi, 1999; Prah, 2009). Language, in particular, is a central site of ideological struggle. Bamgbose (2000) observes that the privileging of English in education symbolises modernity and progress, while simultaneously marginalising indigenous languages and knowledge systems. These linguistic hierarchies reflect broader ideological alignments that privilege Western epistemologies and bureaucratic authority.

Kenyan education discourse reflects this postcolonial continuity. Aswa (2017) contends that the bureaucratic discourse of school leadership in Kenya maintains colonial-era power asymmetries between administrators and teachers, while presenting authority as a moral and professional obligation. Similarly, Nthiga (2020) demonstrates that principals' communication during staff meetings and assemblies often invokes notions of discipline, obedience, and meritocracy. These studies suggest that principals' language not only manages school operations but also transmits deep-seated ideological orientations about order, authority, and productivity.

Discourse, Ideology and Curriculum Reform in Kenya

Kenya's education system provides a particularly rich context for studying ideology in discourse because of ongoing curricular and policy reforms. The introduction of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) has generated significant shifts in educational discourse. Nganga (2023) critically analyses the Basic Education Curriculum Framework, revealing how the CBC discourse embeds neoliberal and technocratic ideologies under the rhetoric of learner-centeredness and innovation. Terms such as "competence," "efficiency," and "global competitiveness" are linguistic vehicles through which neoliberal ideologies are naturalised in policy talk.

Similarly, Wambugu and Changeiywo (2018) argue that the implementation discourse of CBC positions teachers and principals as agents of national transformation while simultaneously constraining them within bureaucratic accountability systems. This dual role produces ideological tensions in the way school leaders articulate their duties. Consequently, principals' speeches in Kenya often blend moral appeals, patriotic rhetoric, and managerial discourse—an amalgam that reflects the complex ideological terrain of contemporary educational reform.

Power Relations in School Leadership Discourse

School principals occupy a pivotal position in the educational power hierarchy. Their discourse functions both as institutional communication and as a performative act of authority. According to Maleya (2018), speech acts such as directives, warnings, and commendations during school assemblies serve to construct asymmetrical power relations between administrators, teachers, and students. Through linguistic features like modality, evaluative adjectives, and pronoun choice, principals assert control while invoking legitimacy from moral, religious, or policy-based sources.

Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and CDA together provide complementary tools for analysing how principals manage authority and face needs in their communication. In Kenyan schools, where respect for authority is culturally entrenched,

principals often use mitigated commands or moral appeals to maintain social harmony while reinforcing institutional hierarchies (Karanja, 2019). Thus, the ideological dimension of their speech lies not only in explicit policy references but also in the subtle ways they position themselves and others through language.

Language Ideology and Educational Leadership in Kenya

Language ideology studies in Kenya reveal the deep intersections between language use, identity, and power. Kiramba (2018) shows that the preference for English in classrooms and administrative communication reflects the epistemic exclusion of indigenous knowledge systems. Similarly, Githinji (2019) argues that language choices in Kenyan educational leadership discourses index modernity, authority, and intellectual legitimacy. For school principals in Meru and other regions, this means that the very choice of linguistic code, English versus Kiswahili or local languages, signals ideological alignment with national and global norms of professionalism.

Further, Kenyan studies on leadership discourse highlight the moralising tone that pervades principals' speeches. Lopez and Rugano (2018), in a qualitative study of Kenyan principals' narratives, found that leaders frequently frame their authority in moral and religious terms, positioning themselves as custodians of societal values. This moral discourse intersects with bureaucratic and developmental ideologies, creating a hybrid form of authority that blends cultural legitimacy with institutional power.

Contextualising Imenti North Sub-County

The Meru region, and specifically Imenti North Sub-County, reflects broader national trends while possessing unique socio-cultural dynamics. Local studies like Kilaku (2019) and Mwirigi (2021) describe educational leadership in Meru as shaped by community expectations of moral uprightness, church influence, and competition for school performance. Principals often adopt a paternalistic discourse emphasising discipline, collective responsibility, and moral rectitude, an ideological orientation that resonates with traditional authority structures. However, such discourse also aligns with state expectations of efficiency and accountability, suggesting that principals in Imenti North operate within intersecting ideological frameworks.

Despite this context, there is limited scholarship applying critical discourse analysis to principals' speech in the region. Most local studies focus on administrative efficiency, resource management, or teacher motivation, like Thuranira (2018), leaving unexplored how principals' actual language use constructs and communicates ideological positions. The present study, therefore, fills a critical gap by foregrounding the ideological dimensions of principals' discourse as both a reflection and reinforcement of social power in Imenti North.

The reviewed literature highlights three key insights. First, discourse analysis provides a powerful framework for understanding how institutional language encodes ideology and legitimises power. Second, Kenyan and African scholarship underscores the historical continuity of colonial and neoliberal ideologies within educational discourse. Third, empirical studies on school leadership reveal how principals' language mediates between policy, culture, and community expectations.

However, notable gaps remain. Few studies in Kenya have examined the ideological underpinnings of principals' discourse using a critical linguistic approach. Research that exists often analyses policy texts or classroom interaction rather than formal speeches or public addresses. Moreover, region-specific analyses, particularly in Imenti North, are scarce, leaving a gap in understanding how local socio-cultural values intersect with national ideological currents in school leadership communication. By examining these discourses within the socio-cultural context of Imenti North, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how language mediates power, ideology, and educational leadership in postcolonial Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative discourse analytic approach. Data were collected from twenty speeches delivered by principals in twelve schools across Imenti North Sub-County, during school assembly days between January 2025 and July 2025. The schools were selected based on institutional diversity – boys', girls

and mixed schools to ensure representativeness across gender and category. Inclusion required that schools be registered under the Ministry of Education and have principals with at least three years of leadership experience. Purposive sampling was complemented by stratified random selection within this frame to enhance reproducibility and avoid bias.

The analysis followed Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model to situate principals' discourse within broader social ideologies. Speech Act Theory was used to analyse how utterances functioned as performative acts of authority, while Politeness Theory examined how principals managed face threats in authoritative discourse. The speeches were recorded after seeking the principals' consent, and anonymity was preserved through pseudonyms. The study's scope was limited to one sub-county, but its findings resonate with broader patterns in Kenyan and African education.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of principals' speeches revealed eight major ideological orientations.

Ideology of Meritocracy in Principals' Discourse

The findings reveal that the ideology of meritocracy forms a dominant strand in principals' speeches, positioning success as the outcome of individual effort, discipline, and determination rather than structural advantage. This aligns with Fairclough's (1995) assertion that institutional discourse often presents social arrangements as natural and self-evident. In the principals' speeches, utterances such as *"results are very, very personal"* and *"you have the same opportunity, the same time"* transform educational achievement into a moral and individualised responsibility.

Theoretically, this reflects Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) concept of *misrecognition*, where social inequalities are obscured through the language of personal merit. By insisting that success depends solely on effort, principals' discourse legitimises educational hierarchies while erasing structural inequities. From a speech act perspective, rhetorical questions such as *"when shall we clap for you?"* function as indirect directives that both motivate and discipline learners.

Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) helps explain how principals communicate meritocratic authority through mitigated directives. Public recognition and applause serve as positive politeness strategies that reward compliance and marginalise underperformers. Thus, meritocracy operates as a moral ideology that normalises competition and individual accountability. These findings echo Littler's (2018) argument that meritocratic discourse conceals privilege while celebrating effort. Within Kenya's education system, this ideology resonates with the Competency-Based Curriculum's (CBC) emphasis on self-improvement and personal achievement (Nganga, 2023).

Neoliberal Logic of Competition and Self-Responsibilization

The neoliberal ideology embedded in principals' discourse constructs students as self-managing subjects responsible for maximising their productivity. Phrases such as *"make good use of your morning"* and *"the ball is in your court"* reveal the economisation of learning—a hallmark of neoliberal performativity (Ball, 2012). In Fairclough's (2010) terms, this represents a discursive shift from collective educational purposes to marketised rationalities centred on efficiency, performance, and accountability.

Speech act analysis shows that these utterances carry both directive and commissive forces. Imperatives like *"you must work hard"* obligate learners, while motivational assurances such as *"we are the best in this region"* commit institutions to continued excellence. Inclusive pronouns such as *"we"* soften coercion through collective identification, yet, as Fairclough (1995) notes, such linguistic inclusivity often masks asymmetrical power relations.

The neoliberal learner thus emerges as a disciplined, entrepreneurial subject—constantly benchmarking performance against institutional goals. These findings mirror Harvey's (2005) view that neoliberal rationality measures human worth through productivity. In Kenya's CBC era, this discourse translates into an implicit moral duty to perform, aligning personal success with institutional and national competitiveness.

Authoritarianism and Surveillance

A parallel ideology evident in principals' discourse is authoritarianism expressed through surveillance and moral control. Directives such as *"instructions must be followed unconditionally"* and references to CCTV cameras reflect Foucault's (1977) *panopticism*, where power operates through visibility and internalised discipline.

Speech Act Theory clarifies how these directives merge command and moral appeal, compelling compliance while invoking institutional care. The statement *"it is for your own good"* is both a directive and a commissive—ordering obedience while promising protection. Such linguistic constructions reproduce what Apple (2004) terms *authoritarian schooling*, where control is legitimised as moral instruction.

Politeness Theory exposes the strategic softening of authoritarian discourse through collective moral appeals, aligning with Holmes's (2000) concept of *strategic politeness.* The principal's voice becomes both paternal and disciplinary, framing obedience as virtue. This fusion of care and control exemplifies how power in schools operates through linguistic normalisation rather than overt coercion.

Gender Ideology and Patriarchal Reproduction

Gendered discourse in principals' speeches perpetuates patriarchal ideologies that privilege male authority and moralise female identity. Statements such as *"girls cannot be ahead of us"* and *"you girls are our mothers of tomorrow"* illustrate what Connell (2002) describes as *hegemonic masculinity*—the linguistic naturalisation of male leadership and female subordination. From a CDA perspective, these utterances constitute a *hidden curriculum* (Apple, 2004) that socialises students into gendered roles. Speech act analysis reveals that declaratives such as *"you are mothers of tomorrow"* simultaneously assign and normalise social roles, embodying Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity.

Politeness markers like praise and moral appeals serve as indirect strategies for maintaining patriarchal order. Female virtue is positioned as moral capital, while male performance is tied to leadership and prestige. These patterns mirror Sifuna's (2010) findings on gendered moralisation in Kenyan schools, indicating that principals' discourse reproduces patriarchal hierarchies under the guise of moral mentorship.

Nationalisation and Institutional Prestige

Principals' emphasis on national identity and school prestige reflects the ideology of nationalisation intertwined with institutional branding. Phrases such as *"this is a national school, not a village school"* highlight the symbolic capital of national recognition.

Fairclough's (1992) notion of *interdiscursivity* helps explain how this discourse merges nationalism and neoliberalism, aligning moral identity with competitive excellence. The directive *"we must protect the name of our school"* performs both directive and commissive acts, binding the community to institutional reputation.

Ball's (2003) theory of *performativity* provides further insight: under neoliberal conditions, schools transform into competitive brands. National pride becomes a discursive strategy for legitimising performance-driven management. The moral lexicon of nationhood masks institutional rivalry, demonstrating how ideology operates through emotionally charged but politically expedient narratives.

Religious Ideology and Moral Governance

Religious references pervade principals' discourse, transforming institutional authority into moral governance. Biblical allusions such as *"you are the salt of the earth"* and *"respect teachers, you honour God"* illustrate how spirituality legitimises obedience. As Fairclough (1995) notes, interdiscursivity enables institutions to borrow from religious registers to reinforce hegemony.

From a Speech Act perspective, statements like *"God rewards those who work hard"* perform assertive and commissive functions, asserting moral truth and promising divine reciprocity (Austin, 1962). These utterances also serve as expressive acts that align moral virtue with academic discipline.

Politeness Theory clarifies that the use of inclusive forms such as *"let us thank God"* reduces social distance while affirming authority. The fusion of faith and discipline, as Bernstein (2000) argues, constitutes a powerful form of symbolic control. Religion thereby

functions as a moralising ideology that sanctifies compliance and legitimises authority within the school hierarchy.

Inclusion Ideology and Communal Solidarity

Despite hierarchical tendencies, inclusion discourse surfaces in appeals to unity, fairness, and cooperation. Expressions like *"we are calling upon girls of good will"* and *"classes that are doing well have unity"* frame togetherness as both moral and functional virtue.

CDA reveals that inclusion is instrumentally linked to performance—cooperation serves institutional goals. Fairclough (2010) argues that such discursive blending of morality and productivity sustains ideological stability by framing institutional control as collective virtue.

Speech acts in this domain are primarily directive and assertive, promoting belonging while subtly reinforcing conformity. Politeness strategies, particularly inclusive pronouns and moral appeals, reduce power distance and construct the principal as a caring leader. However, this discourse also disciplines through shared morality, illustrating the dual nature of inclusion as both empowerment and control. In the Kenyan educational context, inclusion discourse aligns with government rhetoric on equity but remains constrained by performative assessment systems that sustain competition and ranking.

The interplay of meritocratic, neoliberal, authoritarian, gendered, nationalistic, religious, and inclusionary ideologies demonstrates that principals' discourse operates as a multifaceted ideological apparatus. Using Fairclough's (1995, 2010) CDA, it becomes evident that everyday speech acts reproduce macro-level power structures under the guise of morality, unity, and progress.

Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory jointly expose how principals balance coercion and care, asserting control through polite directives and moral persuasion. The findings show that principals' language constitutes ideological performance, shaping compliant, competitive, and morally disciplined subjects.

These discourses mirror Kenya's postcolonial educational landscape, where neoliberal reforms, moral conservatism, and residual colonial hierarchies intersect. Principals thus function as ideological mediators, translating national policy into moral and linguistic practices that sustain institutional order.

This discussion demonstrates that principals' discourse in Imenti North Sub-county embodies intertwined ideologies that reflect broader socio-political realities in Kenyan education. Meritocracy and neoliberalism promote individual accountability; authoritarianism enforces obedience through surveillance; gender discourse reproduces patriarchy; religious and nationalist rhetoric legitimise institutional authority, while inclusion offers moral cohesion.

Through Fairclough's CDA, these ideologies are shown to operate not as overt impositions but as normalised linguistic patterns that naturalise social order. The integration of Speech Act and Politeness Theories highlights how power is exercised subtly through language that inspires, disciplines, and moralises. Overall, principals' discourse functions as a microcosm of Kenya's ideological landscape where educational leadership is both a communicative and political act, shaping the moral, civic, and productive citizen.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study has shown that principals' speeches in Kenyan high schools are deeply ideological. Through linguistic strategies such as modality, pronoun choice, repetition, speech acts, politeness, rhetorical questions, and cultural allusions, principals reproduce ideologies of meritocracy, neoliberalism, authoritarianism, nationalism, religion, gender, discipline, and inclusion. These ideologies legitimise authority, normalise obedience, and align education with broader social structures. By applying CDA, Speech Act Theory, and Politeness Theory, the study has demonstrated how everyday institutional communication sustains power relations. Principals' discourse exemplifies Althusser's ideological state apparatus, Foucault's disciplinary power, and Gramsci's hegemony. The findings underscore that school leadership is not ideologically neutral but a site of ideological reproduction.

Implications extend beyond Kenya. Educational leaders globally should recognise the ideological power of discourse and reflect critically on how their language shapes students' identities, values, and citizenship. For policy, this calls for fostering critical pedagogy that questions dominant ideologies rather than reproducing them. For research, future studies could compare discourse across regions, analyse gendered patterns more deeply, or conduct longitudinal studies to trace ideological shifts. Ultimately, principals' speeches are more than words: they are instruments of power, shaping how students perceive themselves and their world. By critically analysing them, we uncover the ideological forces at work in education and gain insight into how language sustains authority, discipline, and social order.

Recommendations: Educational policymakers should integrate discourse awareness into leadership training to help principals recognise how their language choices reflect and reproduce ideology. Teacher training programs should include CDA-informed modules to foster critical reflection on communication and power. Future research should explore students' interpretations of principals' discourse to examine how ideology is received and internalised across gender and social groups.

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