

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Charlie Chaplin's Final Speech in the Great Dictator

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ABSTRACT: Political and ideological discourses can sometimes be challenged through different channels, not just in legislative chambers or on battlefields, but also within the realm of popular culture. The final speech of Charles Chaplin in *The Great Dictator* (1940) can be considered a revolutionary moment in political rhetoric and cinema. It serves as a powerful humanist plea that presents a direct, out-of-character monologue delivered during the rise of fascism beyond its satirical context. This paper provides a critical discourse analysis of the speech, using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework as the primary method, supplemented by the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel Foucault. It tries to analyse the speech's linguistic structure (Text), its function as a communicative event (Discursive Practice), and how it functions as a form of social action (Sociocultural Practice). The study claims that the speech shows a powerful critique with a humanist voice that steadily challenges the dominant fascist ideology by reversing its messages, redefining the ideas of power, humanity, and progress. The analysis shows how Chaplin tries to discursively shift the source of power from authoritarian leaders to the people through his linguistic choices, genre subversion, and use of his global persona, making the speech a vital piece of political and cinematic history.

KEYWORDS: Critical Discourse Analysis, Charlie Chaplin, *The Great Dictator*, Political Discourse, Humanism, Fascism, Fairclough, Bakhtin, Foucault

1 INTRODUCTION

The film "The Great Dictator" is one of the revolutionary works that is considered a political satire. Chaplin used features like synchronised dialogue to criticise Adolf Hitler and Nazism (Chaplin, 1964; Eyman, 2023; Maland, 2019). The final speech, which is an iconic and controversial part of the movie, delivers an impassioned plea for peace, democracy, and humanity (Chaplin, 2003). *The Great Dictator* is considered an innovative work of political satire and a bold act of artistic rebelliousness. The film was the first for Chaplin to use synchronized dialogue, in which he did not use this new feature for light entertainment but to launch a sarcastic critique of Adolf Hitler and Nazism (Chaplin, 1964; Eyman, 2023; Maland, 2019). The film concludes with an iconic and controversial part: the final speech. In this scene, a humble Jewish barber, mistaken for the fascist dictator Adenoid Hynkel, delivers an impassioned plea for peace, democracy, and humanity (Chaplin, 2003). It is a moment where Chaplin, the artist, appears to break the fourth wall, dropping his comedic mask to address the world directly at a time of profound crisis (Weissman, 2020; Robinson, 1985).

The paper claims that the final speech that Charlie Chaplin delivered in *The Great Dictator* shows a deliberate act of discursive criticism against fascism. This speech utilizes unique linguistic, generic, and ideological strategies to face the principles of authoritarianism and to present a compelling vision of universal humanism, ultimately aiming to reshape societal power dynamics. To analyze the different layers of meaning and authority within this speech, this study employs Norman Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This framework provides a systematic method for connecting linguistic features of the text (the micro-level) with discursive practices involved in its creation and reception (the meso-level), as well as sociocultural and ideological structures that support it (the macro-level) (Fairclough, 2015; Janks, 1997).

This analysis seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does the final speech in *The Great Dictator* feature as a specific linguistic and rhetorical tool (text) work to construct a moral and ideological opposition to fascism?
2. How do the ways of production and reception (discursive practice), which include the film's genre, the historical context, and Chaplin's public persona, shape the persuasive power and meaning of the speech?
3. How does the speech function as a method of social practice to criticize the hegemonic ideology of fascism and propose an alternative sociocultural vision based on humanism and democracy?

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To achieve the aims of the papers, the following objectives have been set:

1. To analyse the grammatical, lexical, and rhetorical features of the text to identify how its linguistic structures build a humanist argument.
2. To interpret the speech as a communicative event by studying its subversion of genre, the context of its production, and the way of reception.
3. To examine the speech's role as a social practice by studying its ideological effects and its challenge to the hegemonic power structures of its time.
4. To demonstrate how the speech systematically dismantles the core principles of fascist ideology while simultaneously building a coherent, alternative vision of universal humanism.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Discourse and Critical Discourse Analysis

The term 'discourse' can have different interpretations within the broad field of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1993). It can be viewed differently according to structural and functional paradigms, as they offer explicit definitions to this term. From a functional perspective, it emphasizes a particular aspect, such as language usage, but within the structural framework, it pertains to a distinct linguistic unit (beyond the sentence level) (Schiffrin, 1994). Structuralists perceive language as an intrinsic and distinctive characteristic, focusing primarily on its structure, especially grammar. Conversely, functionalists focus on the substance and application of language. Discourse is characterized variably according to the foundational paradigms. Schiffrin (1994) posits that a functionalist perspective perceives discourse as the application of language, but a structuralist perspective regards it as language that transcends the sentence level (e.g., a structural type).

On the other hand, the term "critical discourse analysis" refers to a collection of methodologies employed to investigate language and textual processes as cultural and social practices (Fairclough, 1992). It is founded on three principal theoretical elements. This perspective draws from poststructuralism, asserting that texts play a pivotal role in shaping human identities and actions, and that discourse operates laterally outside specific institutional contexts. Secondly, it utilises Bourdieu's sociology as its foundation, asserting that "embodied" forms of "cultural capital" possessing trade value in specific social domains arise from tangible textual practices and engagements with texts. Thirdly, it adopts an assumption from neomarxist cultural theory: that these discourses emerge from political economies and function to articulate and influence broader social structures, ideologies, and movements within those contexts (Hall, 1996). Van Dijk (1993: 131) defined Critical Discourse Analysis as:

"Not a homogenous model, nor a school or a paradigm, but at most a shared perspective on doing linguistics, semiotic or discourse analysis."

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model (Fairclough, 2010, 2015) to connect the micro-level textual analysis with the macro-level social structure analysis. This paradigm tries to provide a comprehensive framework for linking textual components to the broader social processes that are influenced by them, as well as the time and location in which they were created (Janks, 1997). This paper's methodology consists of three interrelated dimensions of analysis:

1. **Description (The Text):** This part involves an analysis of the vocabulary, grammar, and overall structure of the speech (Fairclough, 2015).
2. **Interpretation (Discursive Practice):** The analysis of the text within its context to explore the speech's processes of production and reception (Fairclough, 2015). This study examines factors such as genre and meaning interpretations by the participants (Janks, 1997).
3. **Explanation (Sociocultural Practice):** The final stage of analysis is to link discourse to the broader social context by examining how social structures influence it and, in turn, its effects on social change or preservation (Fairclough, 2015). It focuses on how power can influence ideology that is implemented within discourse (Fairclough, 1989).

This paper also integrates concepts from two additional influential theorists to strengthen the framework. This analysis employs Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and polyphony to examine the various voices and ideologies present in the speech. This is crucial for understanding the precise moment when the Barber's voice transitions to Chaplin's, creating a polyphonic expression that contests the singular narrative of fascist discourse. The speech is further analyzed as a social practice through the lens of Michel Foucault's exploration of the power-discourse relationship. Characterizing the speech as a "counter-discourse" serves to reject and delegitimize the dominant fascist narrative by establishing an alternative framework of truth. This approach aligns with Foucault's notion of discourse as a system that generates knowledge and regulates behavior.

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3. ANALYSIS

3.1 Textual analysis

This level of analysis focuses on the first level in Fairclough's model (micro-analysis), which investigates the grammar, vocabulary, and rhetorical structure of the speech. The aspect of language plays a significant role in delivering its ideological position and persuasive power.

3.1.1 Grammatical and Lexical Analysis

The word selection and the grammatical structures of the speech are not merely linguistic features. Still, its message and its emotional content are deeply encoded within them by using simple vocabulary words and structures that are intentionally used to create a strong ideological and moral binary. The speech also blends the rhetorical strategies with the linguistic features to inspire humanism, unity, and rejection of authoritarianism.

3.1.1.1 The lexical aspect of the speech

The word selection is used to establish oppositions (dichotomies) to shed light on the conflict between tyranny and humanism globally. There are words like "liberty", "help", "brotherhood", and "happiness" which are put against "conquer", "misery", "greed", and "rule". These distinct word selections are used to dehumanize the oppressors and Fascism by linking them to words that show them as "brutes", machine men with machine minds and hearts, and unnatural men to strip them of any legitimacy, and to shape them as a global threat to all humanity. The speech also gives an alternative reality based upon humanism in which its core is the wellspring of democracy, kindness, and gentleness. By putting these different words against each other, Chaplin presents the audience with a clear choice between a reality that is dominated by mechanized brutality or a world of humanistic flourishing. This distinction can also be found by using specific pronouns to put the oppressors as an outside group. The pronoun "you" resembles "the soldiers/people" and "us/we", which represent "humanity". In contrast, Chaplin uses the exclusive "they" to speak about the dictators and brutes.

3.1.1.2 The grammatical and syntactic structure

The grammatical structure of the text shows a domination of a declarative mood, which can be used to make statements, facts, and information. Chaplin proclaims that "Human beings are like that", "you are not machines! you are men", and "Greed has poisoned men's souls" to stress the world's ills and state facts with a revelation tone. The text also contains an imperative mood that shows the shift in the authority of and the role of the speaker. He moves from being someone who states facts to someone who leads (from diagnosis to leadership). The speaker calls for urgent actions: "to those who hear me, I say do not despair", "soldiers! do not give yourselves to brutes-", and the climactic expression "Let us all unite". These direct instructions try to warn the audience of the consequences. The speech also includes an inclusive imperative by using "Let us" which indicates a significant implication as it positions the speaker among the people, not above them, which refers to the collective struggle they all face.

In terms of the speech's modality, it is full of linguistic expression that expresses the likelihood or the obligation of the fact that the future is not unachievable but needs the deeds of those who want it. The analysis also shows a heavy reliance on using modal auxiliaries that show probability. Chaplin used modal verbs like "will" and "can" to frame the probable future as in "the hate of men will pass, and dictators die, and the power they took from the people will return to the people". He also states that "the good earth is rich and can provide for everyone". This tone of confidence transforms the hopeful vision that the speaker wants to convey. The language of certainty and dispelling despair is what Chaplin tries to command listeners to follow. In contrast, the use of obligation is rarely used as it appears at the beginning of the speech "I should like to help everyone". The use of the modal auxiliary "should" frames Chaplin's desire to be a leader as a moral duty, not a personal whim.

3.1.1.3 The rhetorical aspect of the speech

The speech utilizes sophisticated rhetorical strategies to persuade the audience. Chaplin employs a powerful structuring device to give his speech a memorable rhythm. Some of the rhetorical strategies are:

1- **Repetition:** The technique is used to enhance the memorability of the speech while underscoring the message of resistance and compassion against tyranny. Specific words like "machine", "men", and "power" are repeated throughout the speech, aiming at unifying the shared case of the diverse group. The word "men" is one of the repeated words to highlight the importance of collectivity rather than individuality.

2- **Anaphora:** The use of the collective pronouns "we" and "us" to build a collective identity and a powerful rhythm.

3- **Antithesis:** As mentioned earlier, the speech is full of contrasting ideas to create poetic balance and simplify the ideological choices.

4- **Metaphors:** This strategy is used to implement an explicit imagery that contrasts the goodness of humanity with the destructive force of materialism and greed, as in "machine mind and machine heart".

The speech is filled with various rhetorical strategies that work together to deliver a powerful message using carefully chosen techniques.

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3.2 Discourse practice

This aspect of interpretation considers the relationship between text and interaction. It considers how the speech is produced, distributed, and received. The cinematic context, in which the speech occurs, plays a significant role in its spread and interaction. It was the first film for Chaplin to use full conversations between characters, as a dramatic shift from his previous ones. The final speech represents a radical rupture from the rest of the film's generic and narrative form. Most of the movie shows satirical comedy and parody to ridicule Fascism. The final scene shatters this mode from tyrants' farcical rants into "a normal man (barber), eloquent and serious confrontation that addresses real-world problems at this point. Charlie Chaplin's most famous persona, "Little Tramp," had to be sacrificed as it shifted to Chaplin's political convictions and ideologies, signaling the birth of Chaplin as a political activist. The film was produced in 1939-1940, when the US was officially neutral. The production faced significant difficulties during its production due to its heavy criticism of another political regime. The Speech works as a counter-discourse to two different but related levels. First, it is a direct criticism of the discourse of Fascism. It confronts all of Nazi ideology (racial purity, militarism, authoritarian control) with a counter-narrative (kindness, democracy, and universal brotherhood). Secondly, the speech was a challenge to the dominant political discourse of the movie industry in Hollywood and the political establishment at that time. The dominant code established is to discourage negative portrayals of foreign nations. The films that criticized Hitler's Nazi regime were rare and controversial. Chaplin's concluding Speech was an act of courage against the unspeakable rules of silence. It was a rebellion not only against a foreign dictator but also against the political timidity of his own industry and country.

Michel Foucault's theories on power give a robust framework of how language plays a significant role in reflecting the power dynamics within society. The speech shows how Chaplin puts himself in a position of authority to challenge tyranny. According to Foucault, discourse is not only used to describe but also a source of constituting power relations that work as a catalyst to promote ideologies. Foucault also argues that power acts in a diffuse way rather than being centralized in a specific institution. Chaplin utilized language to subvert fascist ideologies and promote humanitarian values. Discursive practices play a significant role in shaping societal structures and norms. The use of rhetorical devices in the speech evokes a profound emotional response, conveying complex ideas.

The speech was received in a time of crisis, serving as a powerful rallying for American and British audiences and other parts of the world in general. It faced a ban in Germany and all occupied territories at that time. The film was heavily criticized and considered controversial. In the contemporary era, it is regarded as revolutionary, representing a timeless universal humanitarian message.

3.3 Sociocultural practice

The early 1940s marked a clash of totalitarian ideologies (Fascism/Nazism) with liberal democracy. At that time, the US was in the midst of a debate over whether its policy should be isolationist or interventionist. The speech clearly shows a clear lean toward intervening, aligning with liberal-humanist values across all borders.

Chaplin's speech is a clear example of "discourse as a social action", which is an attempt not only to describe the world but to intervene and change it. It challenges nationalism as in "go away with national barriers". Additionally, it attacks militarism by imploring the soldiers to fight for liberty, not "slavery." It also confronts authoritarianism by promising that "dictators will die, and the power that was taken from the people will return to the people". The message was targeted to all people regardless of all differences "Jew, Gentile, black man, black".

The film, in general, operates within "Carnavalesque logic". This logic was presented by Mikhail Bakhtin, in which it assumes that medieval carnivals were not only festivals, but also a powerful social and cultural practice. They temporarily suspend standard norms and prohibitions. It creates a space for different kinds of "free and familiar" interaction between people. The film uses this logic to subvert the fixed, monologic, and terror order of totalitarianism. The entire film is a classic carnivalesque as its central plot is the mistaken identity between one of the lowest figures in the social hierarchy, a Jewish barber, with the "highest in the social class, a powerful dictator.

In sum, the speech is full of empathy, collective responsibility, and equality, and it attempts to reduce those in power. The mixture of different mechanics within the speech gave it a revolutionary tone to move people forward, in the face of threats from inhuman ideologies. Despite all of the obstacles Chaplin had, he managed to present a masterpiece that influenced many after him.

3.4 Voices within the speech,

To analyse the complexity of the speech, it is essential to apply Bakhtin's concept of "Polyphony". Polyphony is multiple, different voices and consciousness merged into a single authorial voice (Ness, 2022). The analysis of the speech shows that it is not a monologue but a speech that combines multiple voices, creating a speech full of depth and resonance. Below are the different voices found in the text:

1) The voice of a humble barber. The speech starts with the voice of a barber: a low-class citizen in the social hierarchy. The voice features a tone of humility, apology, and a rejection of power. This voice serves as an establishment for an empathetic attachment with the audience.

2) The voice of an orator: The speech shifts to the other voice that masters rhetorical strategies. It features a sophisticated use of rhetorical devices, passionate and controlled delivery, and self-awareness of global problems and the audience he tries to address.

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"Even now my voice is reaching millions throughout the world". This voice represents Chaplin as a filmmaker breaking the fourth wall to deliver his message.

3) The voice of a political leader: The speech also contains a political representation, most notably some references to the US president at that time, Franklin D. Roosevelt. It borrows some themes from FDR's speeches, like the danger of the machine age to humanity, the use of terms like "god" and "devil", and the defense of democracy. These references can give the speech credibility as it is attached to a world leader.

4) The voice of a spiritual Authority: The fourth voice is one that directly quotes scriptures, "in the 17th chapter of St. Luke, it is written: the kingdom of God is within man. This voice presents a spiritual and sacred image in a political discourse. It links the call to take action beyond the realm of politics to a divine and timeless moral law. Chaplin suggests that the power of the people is not just a political right but also a sacred and inherent quality.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of Charlie Chaplin's speech using Norman Fairclough's 3-dimensional model shows a powerful and complex act of political discourse. The integration of Bakhtin and Foucault frameworks reveals that it is considered a communicative event that tends to address the world's emerging threats through sophisticated strategies that were able to deliver its intended message.

The textual analysis shows a careful linguistic construction leading to a persuasive appeal. The text merges declarative and imperative structures to construct a universal, prophetic, and persuasive message.

The discursive practice analysis reveals that Chaplin used his global persona to deliver his message at a moment of extreme historical peril. It constituted a controversial intervention in the media and political discourse that broke the conventions through a mixture of satire and serious acts. Chaplin challenged totalitarianism through counter-discourse ideologies appropriating fascist propaganda and dominant ideologies in Europe and America.

The sociocultural practice of the speech offers an ideological response to the rise of Fascism. It works as a Carnavalesque by using laughter to attach to the audience. It also tries to construct an alternative vision for a better reality through universal humanism.

Despite the long time since the speech was aired, it is still relevant after more than 80 years. It addresses some core concepts like democracy, humanity, greed, and unity. The film, with its final speech, can be regarded as a masterpiece in critical discourse due to the simple yet powerful message that travelled through time and space to be considered universal and become a formidable force for social and political change.

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