

Framing migration and legitimizing power: A critical discourse analysis of Suella Braverman's Illegal Migration Bill

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ABSTRACT

Language plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions, reinforcing ideological dominance, and legitimizing government policies. The purpose of this paper is to analyze how linguistic and rhetorical strategies are used as a means to legitimize government authority and construct migrant identities. This is achieved through an examination of the rhetorical strategies employed by the former UK Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, in her speech on the Illegal Migration Bill. Using Critical Discourse Analysis and the Sociolinguistic concepts of ideological positioning and social actor representation, this study investigates word choice, lexical framing, and ideological positioning to reinforce dominant migration narratives. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, using AntConc to generate quantitative lexical and collocational patterns and Leximancer to map conceptual relationships across the dataset. The results of these analyses then inform the subsequent qualitative discourse analysis, which interprets the ideological and sociolinguistic significance of the identified patterns. The findings reveal that Braverman's speech employs binary opposition, securitization rhetoric, and in-group/out-group framing to justify restrictive migration policies. Furthermore, the study highlights the interaction between political rhetoric and media narratives, demonstrating how media coverage can reinforce or contest political messaging. This study concludes that language plays a role in shaping public opinion and policy, contributing to broader discussions on migration governance, language ideology, and discursive power. It offers insights into the discursive strategies through which political actors manipulate language to shape migration narratives and legitimize divisive, exclusionary measures.

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INTRODUCTION

Language is a powerful political instrument that has the ability to shape public perception, reinforce ideological dominance, and legitimize state policies (Fairclough, 2003; Tariq et al., 2020). Immigration debates illustrate this clearly, with political discourse framing policies around legality, security, and national identity (Gennaro & Ash, 2022). In the UK, recent shifts in migration rhetoric—such as replacing “illegal immigrants” with “irregular

arrivals”—reflect deliberate efforts to control public narratives (Home Office, 2022).

Despite extensive existing studies on migration discourse in the U.S. and Europe (Goodman, 2011; Mayne-Davis et al., 2020) which have employed either quantitative or qualitative analytical approaches, limited scholarship to date has used analytical mixed methods to examine how UK policymakers construct ideological legitimacy through language. Our study will address this methodological gap in analyzing the rhetorical

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strategies UK politicians use to shape public opinion and justify exclusionary measures by using multi-layered methodological approaches (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Mayne-Davis et al., 2020; Goodman & Narang, 2019). Using CDA and Sociolinguistic concepts (see 2.4 below for a detailed presentation of the conceptual framework), this study investigates word choice, lexical framing, and ideological positioning to reinforce dominant migration narratives.

The question guiding this study is: How does the UK Home Secretary's speech on the Illegal Migration Bill employ linguistic and rhetorical strategies to legitimize state authority and construct migrant identities? By integrating computational and critical discourse analysis, this study contributes to broader discussions on migration governance, language ideology, and discursive power. Additionally, it explores how media discourse shapes political rhetoric by either reinforcing dominant narratives or providing counter-discourses that challenge political messaging and public perception.

Although this study is confined to the analysis of a single speech, the depth of analysis provided below aligns with CDA's emphasis on a multi-layered examination of discourse. Our analysis incorporates lexical patterns, collocations, social actor representations, evaluative language, and ideological framing, which support a deep, context-rich interpretation of the ways in which speech constructs power and identity. (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Braverman's address, a ministerial speech introducing legislation, serves as a critical exemplar of how UK political rhetoric constructs securitization, legality, and national identity in migration discourse, widely documented in existing analyses of UK migration debates (e.g., Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Goodman & Narang, 2019; Wodak, 2015). This makes it a valuable case for understanding broader ideological trends.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reveals how language conveys power and control, often through subtle, structural relationships (Wodak, 1996, 2011). Fairclough (1989, 1992, 2003) emphasizes that language shapes social realities and reinforces ideologies and power structures. Political rhetoric, particularly on migration, influences public perception by framing migrants through legal and security discourses (Sap et al., 2019). In migration debates, for example, terms like *illegal* or *legal* influence public perception, framing migrants in ways that reflect broader political agendas (Sap et al. 2019).

Political rhetoric often reinforces stereotypes. This can be seen in the Trump discourse on immigration, which contributed to the marginalization of refugees (Funk & Shaw, 2021). The refugees interviewed in Funk and Shaw's study reported feeling marginalized and depicted as

threatening outsiders as a result of the Trump era rhetoric. Similar trends appear in migration discourse in Australia, in which asylum seekers are labeled as "illegal" to justify exclusionary policies (Mayne-Davis et al., 2020).

Political language normalizes specific narratives while limiting alternative views (Johnson, 2011). Studies show that migration discourse often constructs migrants as threats, allowing politicians to justify restrictive policies via securitization rhetoric (Mayne-Davis et al., 2020). For instance, migrants are often described as illegal and are depicted as threats to national security or economic stability. Such language features move the discussion of migration from a humanitarian to a national preservation focus, facilitating the implementation of restrictive immigration measures by politicians on national security grounds. Examining parliamentary speeches, such as Braverman's, can offer insight into how political figures can shape public debates through the use of criminalizing labels and language that depict migrants as dangerous and different from the host population.

Analysing speeches, like Suella Braverman's speech on the Illegal Migration Bill (Hansard, 2023), demonstrates how language directs immigration debates and shapes public opinion. Sociolinguistics further reveals how language reflects social identities and power relations (Coupland, 1998). Ultimately, language has the power to both assert and resist dominance. This makes it a vital tool for constructing or challenging social realities (Fairclough, 2013).

Political and media discourse often interact in a mutually reinforcing relationship (Cooper et al., 2021; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008). The relationship between media discourse and political legitimacy in Western and European contexts has garnered considerable scholarly attention, especially amid the shifting landscape of political communication and public perception. Liebert (2007) provides a foundational framework for understanding political conflict surrounding European integration, particularly in the context of the failed Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. His study underscores the role of national media in shaping transnational discourse and influencing public perceptions of legitimacy, demonstrating how media can both support and challenge political processes in complex, multi-level governance systems like the European Union.

Although focused on a different political context, Schroedel et al. (2011) examine the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign to reveal how charismatic rhetoric shapes public perception and bolsters a candidate's perceived legitimacy. Along similar lines, Kangas (2014) investigates linguistic strategies used by political candidates during the same election, showing that rhetorical choices not

only reflect political positions but also serve as deliberate tools for constructing legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate.

Expanding the scope to Western Europe, Helbling (2012) explores how debates around integration and immigration are influenced by both national and transnational actors. Drawing on quantitative media data, the study reveals that political legitimacy is co-constructed through the interplay of local contexts and international discourses, complicating the idea that legitimacy stems solely from national narratives.

Turning to the digital sphere, Alonso-Muñoz et al. (2020) examine Eurosceptic discourse on Twitter during the 2019 European Parliament elections. Their studies highlight how populist actors strategically use social media to frame messages and mobilize support, demonstrating the platform's growing influence in shaping public discourse and contesting institutional legitimacy. These studies affirm that media discourse—across both traditional and digital platforms—plays a vital role in shaping how political legitimacy is constructed and perceived.

While prior studies have employed either qualitative or quantitative methods to examine speeches, there remains a notable gap in studies that integrate both approaches in analyzing political speeches. Our study addresses this gap by using a mixed-methods design to analyze political rhetoric in the UK, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how legitimacy is negotiated through public speech. This mixed methods approach supports an examination of how migration discourse constructs power, legitimacy, and identity by combining corpus-assisted techniques for identifying language patterns with CDA for interpreting their significance.

In political discourse, language is a powerful tool for conveying meaning and persuasion, often used to assert and maintain power (Jones & Peccei, 2004). Analyzing political speech helps reveal underlying ideologies and power dynamics through social actor representation and ideological positioning (Surjowati, 2020). According to Johnson (2011), political language normalizes specific ways of thinking while limiting alternative views, creating a dominant narrative. In this paper, the term ideology denotes socially shared meanings that are reproduced through discourse to maintain power relations (Fairclough, 2003). Meanwhile, ideological positioning refers to ways in which linguistic choices align speakers with certain values and perspectives, influencing how social actors and policies are interpreted.

This was evident in the 2024 U.S. presidential debates, where both Biden and Trump employed strategic language on immigration. Trump spoke of an “influx of illegal immigrants” to frame Biden’s policies negatively, while Biden defended his

stance by invoking border patrol support and criticizing Trump’s actions (CNN, 2024). These examples demonstrate how politicians use language to frame issues, influence public perception, and garner support.

Scholars argue that political language perpetuates power structures within society (Labov, 1972; Fairclough, 2003). In migration discourse, terms such as legal and illegal, in conjunction with the strategic choice of inclusive and exclusive pronouns, are used to help shape public opinion and legitimize restrictive policy responses. Thus, the choice of language in political discourse also plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and policy, making it a significant tool for both reinforcing and challenging societal norms.

Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Sociolinguistics as a conceptual framework is essential for this study. Both approaches offer complementary insights into the power dynamics embedded in political language. CDA exposes how discourse constructs and legitimizes ideological positions and reveals hidden power structures in political rhetoric (Fairclough, 2003). Sociolinguistics, meanwhile, demonstrates how language reflects and reinforces social hierarchies, shaping public perception through lexical choices and framing strategies (Labov, 1966; Coupland, 1998). Together, these frameworks provide a robust analytical lens for examining how Suella Braverman’s speech on the Illegal Migration Bill constructs migrant identities and legitimizes state authority. By combining a CDA with a focus on ideological framing, policy legitimization, and power, and a sociolinguistic analysis of social positioning and identity construction, this approach enables a rich examination of the linguistic choices that underlie political discourse.

METHOD

This study analyzes Suella Braverman’s parliamentary speech and related parliamentary discussion on the Illegal Migration Bill, delivered on March 7, 2023, sourced from the UK Hansard (Hansard, 2023). Ethics exemption was granted by the University of Tasmania (project ID H0029922), as the speech is publicly available.

Data Collection and the Context

The dataset consists of a single parliamentary speech and related parliamentary discussion analyzed in relation to its linguistic and physical context. Understanding context is essential in discourse analysis. Context takes two primary forms: linguistic context (co-text)—the surrounding words influencing meaning (Yule, 2022; Ramos et al., 2019)—and physical context, referring to where and how language is used (Yule, 2022).

When analyzing Braverman's speech, both the content and situational context were considered. The speech was delivered at a time of great political and social debate in the UK around the situation of migrants arriving by boat. As meaning is derived not only from individual words but also from their interaction within discourse, this consideration of situational context informed both the analysis and interpretation of data. In particular, media coverage of the Bill was analyzed to assist with interpretation.

Data Analysis and Procedure

A content analysis and thematic analysis approach (Vaismoradi et al., 2016) was applied to examine recurring linguistic patterns, thematic structures, and discursive strategies in Suella Braverman's speech on the Illegal Migration Bill (March 7, 2023). The analysis drew on both Critical Discourse Analysis and sociolinguistics. In particular, Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional model of discourse informed the examination of textual features, discursive practices, and social context. In addition, van Dijk's (2008) ideological framework guided the analysis of in-group/out-group positioning and legitimation strategies. Furthermore, sociolinguistic concepts such as social actor representation (van Leeuwen, 2008) supported the interpretation of how linguistic choices construct migrant identities and social relations. Content and thematic analysis thereby served as procedural tools within this linguistically grounded framework.

This study included a three-stage analytical process to examine linguistic structures, thematic trends, and ideological framing within the speech, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods for a comprehensive interpretation of discourse strategies. This is achieved through the triangulation of corpus-assisted lexical analysis, thematic mapping, and CDA-informed qualitative interpretation. This approach facilitates an examination of discourse strategies in terms of linguistic form, thematic patterning, and ideological function.

The first stage, lexical and collocation analysis, used AntConc to identify frequently used words, key collocations, and discourse framing. This quantitative analysis revealed dominant lexical choices, exposing framing strategies and rhetorical emphasis in migration discourse (Baker, 2023; Anthony, 2022). By mapping word frequencies and co-occurrences, the analysis highlighted patterns of emphasis, inclusion, and exclusion that shape ideological positioning (Stubbs, 1996).

The second stage, thematic mapping and concept clustering, was conducted using Leximancer to identify conceptual relationships and ideological framing. Unlike manual coding, Leximancer automates theme discovery, reducing subjectivity and bias while ensuring systematic classification of recurring discourse patterns (Smith,

2021; Angus et al., 2013). This stage uncovered implicit ideological structures and provided a visual representation of thematic trends (Watkins, 2017). Following the Leximancer analysis, manual checking was conducted to ensure reliability and interpretive validity. Key themes and concepts emerging from the automated analysis were compared with concordance lines and extended stretches of discourse in the original speech and related discussions. This process was intended to confirm thematic relevance and support the interpretation of results in relation to ideological framing and social context.

The third stage, interpretative critical discourse analysis, contextualizes findings within media discourse and political ideology (Wodak, 2015; van Leeuwen, 2007). Building on computational findings from AntConc and Leximancer, this phase analyzed how linguistic choices construct power, identity, and legitimacy (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The integration of thematic analysis enabled a critical examination of discursive strategies, including "us" vs. "them" dynamics, security-based framing, and legitimacy appeals within the broader sociopolitical context (Fairclough, 2003; Reisigl & Wodak, 2017).

This three-stage approach combined quantitative insights into linguistic patterns with the qualitative depth of thematic interpretation. Analytical depth is achieved through multi-level analysis of linguistic form, thematic patterning, and ideological function. By triangulating corpus-based analysis, thematic mapping, and critical discourse interpretation, the study offers a comprehensive and methodologically rigorous examination of political rhetoric in migration discourse (Krippendorff, 2018; Baker et al., 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). This integrative strategy enhances both the validity and reliability of the analysis, enabling a systematic yet critically informed understanding of how language constructs power, identity, and ideology (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Denzin, 2012).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from the analysis of Suella Braverman's speech on the Illegal Migration Bill. The analysis begins with AntConc to identify lexical patterns, keyword frequencies, and discourse framing, followed by Leximancer to examine thematic structures and relationships among key concepts. The findings are then interpreted through critical discourse analysis to explore how linguistic and rhetorical features are employed in the speech.

Themes Identified by Using AntConc

To begin the analysis, this section applies AntConc to explore the lexical patterns and collocations in Suella Braverman's speech. Identifying frequently

occurring keywords and their contexts reveals how language choices contribute to dominant ideological framing in migration discourse.

Key Words Identification

Linguistic keywords were identified based on frequency analysis. A word frequency count of Suella Braverman's speech on the *Illegal Migration*

Bill revealed that grammatical words such as “the” and “of” were the most common, which is expected in any text of similar length. However, grammatical words alone do not reveal the speech's distinctive linguistic features. To address this, a concordance analysis was conducted to examine specific keywords, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Key Word Collates

Key word	Frequency in original text	8-word range	4-word range
Immigrant	2	4	1
Migrant	24	0	0
Arrival	6	1	5
Illegal	57	2	3
Legal	109	3	5
We	342	4	4

From Table 1, it can be seen that the speech strategically emphasizes “legal” (109 instances) and “illegal” (57 instances) to reinforce a binary opposition that legitimizes state action while delegitimizing migrants. Examples of this are shown in Tables 2 and 3. Similarly, the pronoun “we” (342 instances) constructs a national in-group, aligning

government policy with British identity while portraying migrants as outsiders (Coupland & Jaworski, 2009). Examples are presented in Table 4, where “we” refers to the British in-group, while expressions such as *these individuals* and *them* refer to migrants.

Table 2

Concordance Lines of “Legal”

... for sustainable safe and <i>legal</i> routes for genuine asylum...
...what she really means is unlimited safe and legal routes—open borders by the back door. The...
... here via safe and legal routes. We will, thanks...

Table 3

Concordance Lines of “Illegal”

...system and to take a firm line on illegal migration. I broadly welcome the announcement today and...
...Government not to respond to the waves of illegal migrants breaching our borders would be to betray...
...enables the detention of illegal arrivals, without bail or...

Table 4

Concordance Lines of “We”

... always support the world's most vulnerable. Since 2015 <i>we</i> have given sanctuary to nearly half a million...
... the United Kingdom. Unless <i>we</i> act today, the problem...
... remains that these individuals just disappear. And when <i>we</i> try to remove them, they turn our generous...

Beyond framing legality, the speech strategically employs “we” to construct a national identity that is both inclusive and divisive. Instead of referring solely to the government, we invoke the British people, positioning them against irregular migrants, who are depicted as “the problem” (Table 4). This rhetorical strategy guides public perception, reinforcing the notion that unauthorized entry is not just unlawful but harmful to national stability. Effectively, the speech constructs a binary opposition: supporting the Bill equates to protecting

the nation, while opposing it aligns with lawlessness and national insecurity (Wodak, 2015).

Figures 2 and 3 show that an AntConc-generated word cloud visualizes the frequency and co-occurrence of key terms, reinforcing the speech's dominant framing. If grammatical function words, such as “the” and “that” are ignored, it can be seen that terms related to national security, legality, and protection are clustered together, emphasizing that immigration control is positioned as a defense against external threats.

Figure 2

The Concordance of the Use of the Pronoun “We” in Suella Braverman’s Illegal Migration Bill Speech (Hansard, 2023)

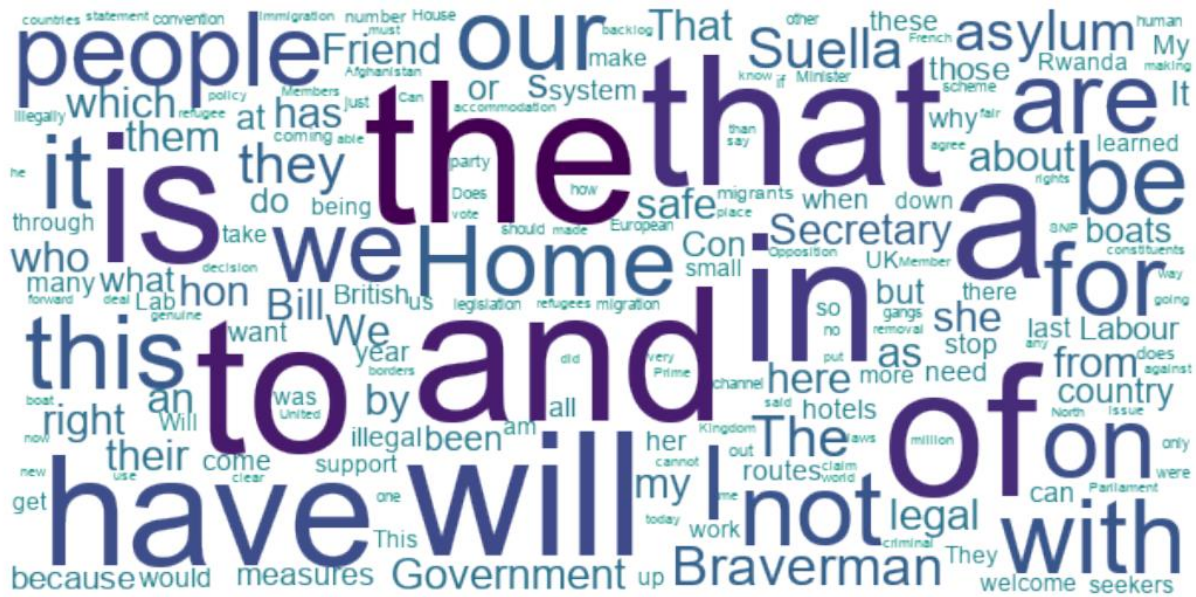


Figure 3

Illegal Migration Bill AntConc Frequency of Word Usage (Anthony, 2022; Hansard, 2023).

Left Context	Hit	Right Context
introduced by the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister, which	we	have been crying out for. The Opposition often speak
to accommodate them and provide them with appropriate support. Therefore,	we	have been forced to use hotel accommodation in many
to know before we vote on this Bill? Suella Braverman	We	have been in negotiations with several countries, which is
have mentioned quite a few times, but it bears repetition,	we	have been proud to welcome 20,000 people from Afghanistan who
is right to highlight concerns about the process to which	we	have been subject from Strasbourg. That is why there
and his family now live in fear in the region.	We	have been told that because he is a British
bearing down on the legacy backlog in our asylum system.	We	have increased the number of decision makers and streamlined
making good progress on bearing down on the asylum backlog.	We	have increased the number of decision makers, we have
root of this problem is absolutely essential. That is why	we	have increased our funding to the NCA to ensure
operating across transnational boundaries on the continent. That is why	we	have increased resources for the National Crime Agency and
too. Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con)	We	have heard a great deal from Opposition Members setting

If interpreted through sociolinguistic and CDA lenses, these clusters show how lexical choices index shared national values (Labov, 1996; Coupland & Jaworski, 2009), reinforcing ideological polarization through the depiction of immigration as a threat to national security (van Dijk, 2008). This use of language to construct a threat from external others serves to legitimize protective government action.

Sociolinguistic Perspective: Power and Ideology in Keyword Use

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the recurrence and context of “legal,” “illegal,” and “we” reveal deliberate linguistic choices that shape migration discourse (Labov, 1966; Coupland & Jaworski, 2009). These terms reinforce power structures and ideological framing, privileging dominant narratives while marginalizing alternative perspectives, including humanitarian concerns, migrant voices,

and critiques of government policy (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 1993).

Braverman's repeated use of "legal" and "illegal" constructs a binary opposition, linking legality to state control and illegality to criminality and exclusion (van Dijk, 1993). This linguistic framing dehumanizes migrants and justifies punitive measures, as can be seen in the concordance lines in Table 3 above. These examples illustrate how "illegal" frequently co-occurs with terms relating to enforcement and control, while policy actions are presented as rational and necessary responses. Similarly, "we" appears inclusive but functions as a rhetorical tool to strengthen in-group unity while excluding migrants as outsiders (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The pronoun reinforces a collective national identity, aligning the government with British citizens while depicting migrants as a disruptive force. For example, from Table 4, "when *we* try to remove

them”, migrants are depicted as outsiders who do not share this collective identity,

This strategic use of inclusive vs. exclusionary pronouns aligns with sociolinguistic theories of language as a social index, where lexical choices reinforce belonging and exclusion. By framing the government and public as a unified entity, the speech legitimizes restrictive immigration policies as necessary for protecting national identity and security. Consistent with the sociolinguistic perspective outlined above, the pronoun “we” operates as a social index, indicating a shared national identity (British) and group alignment (Labov, 1996; Coupland & Jaworski, 2009).

Van Dijk's Ideological Square: Framing Migration through Ideology

Beyond sociolinguistic framing, these findings align with van Dijk's (2008) ideological square, where self-representation (we protect the nation) contrasts with other-representation (they threaten public order). This discourse reinforces the government's position as rational and moral, while portraying migrants as a legal and social threat. By invoking national security, economic burden, and legal integrity, the speech reproduces historical narratives of exclusion that have long justified restrictive migration policies (Wodak, 2015).

Through intertextual framing and presupposition, these discursive strategies

normalize migrant exclusion, presenting legal measures as self-evident necessities rather than political choices (Fairclough, 2003). Ultimately, the speech frames migration as a moral and legal crisis rather than a complex socio-political issue, reinforcing government legitimacy and public compliance. Additional themes were identified through analysis that extended beyond the lexical level to encompass broader textual and discursive structures.

Themes Identified by Using Leximancer

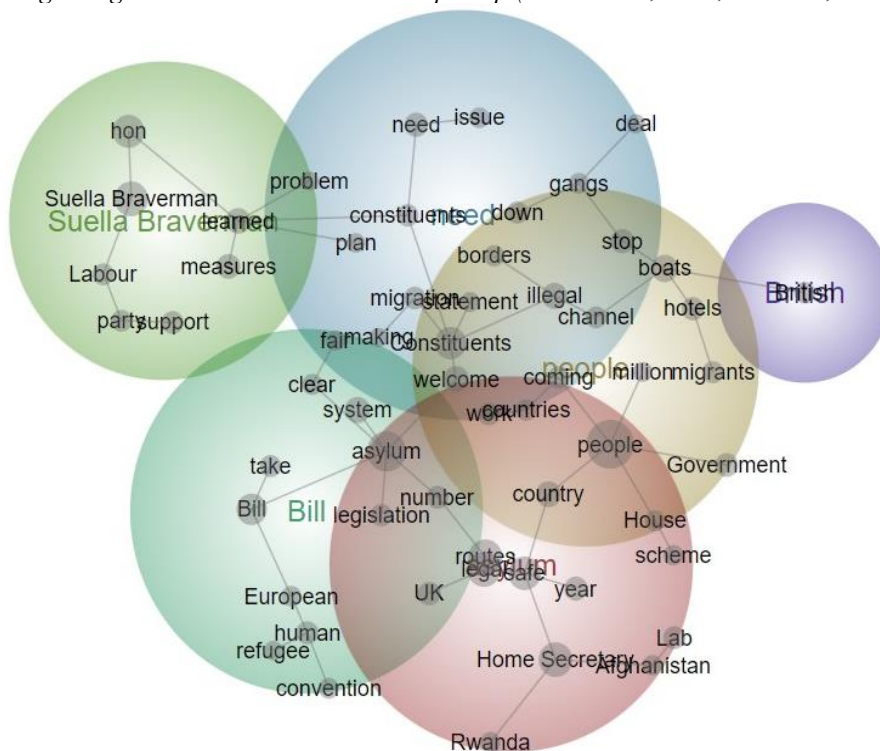
Language not only conveys meaning but also reflects the ideological positioning of the speaker (White, 2017). In political discourse—particularly on migration—strategic lexical choices serve to reinforce specific ideological narratives (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 2008; Wodak, 2015). Leximancer enables the visualization of these socio-cultural and ideological dimensions, offering data-driven insights into the rhetorical framing within Suella Braverman’s speech on the Illegal Migration Bill (Hansard, 2023), while also incorporating patterns reflected in media coverage.

Concept mapping

Figures 4, 5, and 6 present Leximancer-generated visual concept maps that illustrate key thematic clusters and their interrelationships within the dataset.

Figure 4

Illegal Migration Bill Leximancer concept map (Leximancer, 2021; Hansard, 2023).



to “safe and legal routes” help portray government intervention as a necessary and lawful response.

These elements illustrate how language legitimizes restrictive migration policies by framing migration not as a humanitarian issue but as a security threat. The overlap between “Suella Braverman” and “British People” suggests that political discourse aligns government narratives with national identity, reinforcing public support for stricter immigration control.

In addition, Braverman’s speech also frequently employs security-based rhetoric, framing migration as a threat to national stability. Keywords such as “legal” (48 instances) and “illegal” (37 instances) create a binary opposition that justifies restrictive policies. The pronoun “we” (217 instances) constructs a national in-group, aligning government policy with British identity while portraying migrants as outsiders (Coupland & Jaworski, 2009).

Legitimation Strategies and Parliamentary Discourse

Figures 4 and 5 provide a macro-level view of textual patterns, but a closer analysis of parliamentary exchanges reveals how discourse is strategically shaped. Leximancer’s topic analysis (Figure 6) identifies the main issues surrounding the *Illegal Migration Bill*, particularly how individuals arrive in the UK and the legality of their entry.

For instance, in the introduction of the Bill, Braverman emphasizes legal entry routes, stating:

We will always seek to uphold international law, and I am confident that this Bill is compatible with international law. When we have stopped the boats, the Bill will introduce an annual cap, to be determined by Parliament, on the number of refugees the UK will resettle via safe and legal routes.

In response, James Daly (Bury North, Conservative Party) reinforces this stance:

I warmly welcome the legislation. Will the Home Secretary confirm that the only route to asylum in the UK is a safe and legal route, with an annual cap on the number of refugees?

Braverman affirms this view:

My hon. Friend speaks a lot of sense. The British people did not vote for 40,000 people to arrive here on small boats. They did not vote for our immigration laws to be broken.

This exchange demonstrates how political rhetoric constructs migration as an issue of legal compliance, positioning government enforcement as both necessary and justified.

Braverman closes the speech with an appeal to unity:

The reality is that we need to all work together now to find a pragmatic, compassionate, and fair solution to this problem. That is why I have introduced these

measures today and why I encourage all Members to support them.

While presenting the Bill as fair and balanced, this rhetoric legitimizes restrictive policies by aligning them with moral imperatives and public interest (van Dijk, 2008). The parliamentary discourse suggests that opposition to the *Illegal Migration Bill* is irrational, unfair, or even unpatriotic.

Opposition and Political Nuance

The parliamentary debate surrounding the Bill further reveals how language is used to frame opposition. Ben Bradley (Conservative Party) echoes the government’s justification, arguing that the Bill is fair to constituents and taxpayers by enforcing immigration laws.

However, Labour MP Yvette Cooper presents a nuanced critique of the Bill:

A record 45,000 people crossed the channel on dangerous small boats last year, up from just 280 four years ago. In that short time, the Government have allowed criminal gangs to take hold along the Channel and our border. Convictions of people smugglers have halved; Home Office asylum decisions have collapsed, down 40%; the backlog and costly hotel use have soared; removals of unsuccessful asylum seekers are down 80% from the last Labour Government.

In the example above, opposition to the Bill is framed through quantification, in the form of statistics, evaluative language, such as “dangerous” and “collapsed”, and causal attribution, with a narrative of crisis attributed to governmental failure. This framing is used to delegitimize the Bill by portraying it as insufficient in the face of a growing problem. Cooper’s response shifts the narrative from legality to government failure, highlighting poor enforcement rather than migration itself as the problem. She argues that government inaction has enabled illegal crossings, suggesting that the system is “broken” due to mismanagement rather than a failure of existing laws.

Binary Opposition and Ideological Framing

Ultimately, the analysis reveals that “illegal” and “legal” dominate the speech, constructing a binary opposition that frames migration as a moral and legal crisis rather than a complex socio-political issue. This linguistic framing aligns with van Dijk’s (2008) ideological square, emphasizing ingroup-outgroup distinctions that reinforce national legitimacy while delegitimizing migrants.

By employing discursive strategies, Braverman reframes restrictive policies as necessary and widely supported, while opposition is depicted as misguided or contrary to public interest. The speech aligns with historical patterns in migration discourse, where language is used to justify exclusionary policies under the guise of

national security, legality, and moral responsibility (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

Media Reinforcement of Political Rhetoric

UK media coverage of the *Illegal Migration Bill* plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse by either reinforcing or contesting Braverman's rhetorical framing. While right-leaning outlets align with the government's securitization narrative, left-leaning publications challenge it, exposing a polarized media landscape where migration discourse is contested rather than universally accepted.

UK media coverage of the *Illegal Migration Bill* plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse. Right-leaning newspapers, such as *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun*, align with government rhetoric, portraying migration as a security crisis and emphasizing border control (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Rheindorf & Wodak, 2020). Headlines following Braverman's speech emphasized "illegal arrivals" and the urgency of stopping small boat crossings. For instance, *The Daily Mail* published the headline "*Stop the Boats: Braverman's Tough New Law Targets Illegal Arrivals*" on March 8 2023, while *The Sun* featured "*Illegal Migrants Will Be Deported – No Exceptions*" on the same day. These headlines closely mirror the government's securitized framing, portraying migration as an immediate crisis that requires strong legislative intervention.

In contrast, left-leaning media, such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, critique restrictive migration policies, often centering humanitarian concerns and challenging the securitization of migration (Philo et al., 2013). Following Braverman's speech, these outlets framed the Bill as legally and ethically controversial, highlighting potential human rights violations.

Broadcast media, particularly *BBC News* and *Sky News*, attempt neutrality but still rely on dominant government sources, reinforcing official frames while providing limited space for migrant perspectives (Berry et al., 2016). Social media platforms facilitate both reinforcement and resistance to political discourse, with right-wing commentators amplifying exclusionary narratives and progressive activists challenging government rhetoric (Rheindorf & Wodak, 2020).

The interaction between political and media discourse demonstrates how migration narratives are shaped, contested, and legitimized. While conservative media reinforce state power, progressive outlets offer counter-narratives, and digital platforms diversify debate. This fragmented media response underscores the struggle over public perception, where control over migration discourse ultimately influences policy legitimacy and public sentiment.

Media coverage of the *Illegal Migration Bill* reflects Braverman's framing, amplifying the "crisis" narrative while marginalizing migrant perspectives. Right-leaning newspapers frequently adopt government-aligned rhetoric, emphasizing security concerns and the need for stricter border controls. Meanwhile, left-leaning outlets often challenge these narratives, framing the policy as a humanitarian crisis. This contrast highlights how political discourse and media narratives interact, reinforcing or contesting dominant ideologies (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Rheindorf & Wodak, 2020).

Suella Braverman's Illegal Migration Bill

Findings show that Braverman's speech employs binary oppositions ("legal" vs. "illegal"), securitization rhetoric, and in-group/out-group framing to justify restrictive policies. The media's role in amplifying, reframing, or contesting this rhetoric further shapes public perceptions of migration governance.

The framing of migrants as security threats aligns with van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimization strategies, where policy rhetoric rationalizes exclusionary measures as necessary for national stability. While prior UK-based studies focus on migration discourse in economic contexts (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008), this study highlights moral legitimacy and legality as central to UK parliamentary rhetoric. The study also aligns with Fairclough's (2003) argument that discourse operates as a site of ideological struggle.

While U.S. migration rhetoric often relies on invasion metaphors and economic threats (Santa Ana, 2002), UK discourse places greater emphasis on legality and moral legitimacy, shaping public perceptions of state authority and migration control. The interaction between political speeches and media coverage reveals a reinforcement effect, where dominant government narratives often set the agenda for news reporting (Philo et al., 2013). However, previous research has shown that media discourse also produces counter-narratives, particularly in left-leaning publications, resulting in a contested discursive space rather than a monolithic public perception (e.g., Rheindorf & Wodak, 2020).

By integrating quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis, this study provides a multi-dimensional perspective on how political actors manipulate language to shape migration narratives. While previous studies have focused on qualitative rhetorical analysis, the combination of AntConc's lexical analysis and Leximancer's thematic mapping offers a layered and data-driven method for identifying ideological framing. This is significant in advancing critical discourse methodologies, demonstrating how computational

tools can enhance qualitative interpretations (Baker et al., 2008).

Importantly, this study not only examines how political language constructs migration narratives but also demonstrates the value of a multi-layered analytical approach that bridges computational analysis and critical interpretation. This integration moves beyond isolated textual analysis typical of many UK discourse studies on migration, offering a more holistic lens for future studies on political speech. By synthesizing corpus tools like AntConc with interpretive CDA and Leximancer mapping, this study challenges the limits of single-method analyses and contributes a flexible, scalable framework for examining how discourse legitimizes political authority across diverse policy contexts.

The findings suggest that rhetorical strategies may contribute to the ways migration is represented in political discourse and, potentially, to broader debates surrounding migration policy. In the speech examined, migrants are frequently framed as legal and security risks, illustrating how discourse can be used to support and legitimize restrictive policy positions (van Dijk, 2008; Wodak, 2015). These findings provide further insight into the role of discursive power in constructing political narratives and may help explain how particular representations of migration gain legitimacy within public debate (van Leeuwen, 2007; Philo et al., 2013).

This study also illustrates how rhetorical strategies can be employed to construct and reinforce particular understandings of migration. Methodologically, the findings suggest that combining corpus-based tools with critical discourse analysis offers a useful framework for examining ideological language in political communication. While this approach proved valuable in the present case, its applicability across other political contexts warrants further investigation.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. As a case study focusing on Suella Braverman's parliamentary speech and the accompanying debate, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of UK political discourse more broadly. Moreover, the analysis examines political and media discourse rather than the perspectives of migrants themselves. Future research could extend this work by analyzing a wider range of political texts, exploring public responses across different media platforms, or incorporating the experiences of individuals directly affected by migration policy.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how linguistic and rhetorical features are employed in Suella Braverman's

parliamentary speech on the Illegal Migration Bill. Drawing on corpus-assisted analysis using AntConc and thematic mapping with Leximancer, the study identified recurring lexical patterns and interpreted these through Critical Discourse Analysis and sociolinguistic concepts. Across the analyses, particular attention was given to the repeated use of terms such as *legal*, *illegal*, and *we*, as well as the broader thematic organization of the speech.

The findings suggest that the speech consistently presents migration through the language of legality, national identity, and security. The frequent contrast between *legal* and *illegal*, together with the recurrent use of inclusive pronouns, positions government action within a collective national perspective while distinguishing migrants from that collective identity. These linguistic choices are consistent with observations made in previous studies of political discourse on migration, in which questions of legality and national belonging are foregrounded (e.g., Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Wodak, 2015). Rather than treating these features as isolated rhetorical devices, the analysis indicates how they work together within the broader argumentative structure of the speech.

The combination of corpus-assisted techniques and qualitative discourse analysis also proved useful for examining different aspects of the data. AntConc facilitated the identification of recurring lexical patterns and collocations, while Leximancer provided an overview of thematic relationships that informed subsequent close reading. Although neither tool is sufficient on its own to explain ideological meaning, their combined use provided complementary perspectives that supported the qualitative interpretation. The value of this approach lies less in methodological novelty than in demonstrating how computational and interpretive methods can be used together when analysing political discourse.

The study should also be interpreted in light of its limitations. The analysis is based primarily on a single parliamentary speech and related parliamentary exchanges. Consequently, the findings should not be regarded as representative of UK political discourse more generally or of migration discourse across different institutional and media contexts. Likewise, although the discussion considers media coverage to contextualise the speech, the study does not directly examine how audiences interpret these messages or whether the rhetorical strategies identified influence public attitudes or policy outcomes. Such questions require different forms of empirical investigation.

Future studies could build on this study by examining a larger corpus of parliamentary speeches across different governments, political parties, or policy debates. Comparative analyses

across countries or historical periods may also help determine whether the linguistic patterns identified here are specific to this case or characteristic of migration discourse more broadly. In addition, studies incorporating audience reception, media discourse, or the perspectives of migrants themselves would provide a fuller account of how migration narratives are produced, circulated, and interpreted across different social settings.

Taken together, the findings provide a detailed account of the linguistic resources employed in one influential parliamentary speech on migration. While the study does not seek to establish broader causal relationships between political discourse and social or political outcomes, it illustrates how corpus-assisted methods and critical discourse analysis can be combined to examine the linguistic construction of political arguments and representations of migration within a specific institutional context.

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