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Critical Discourse Analysis of Bato's Senatorial Speech in the 2025 Philippine Debate

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Abstract

This study examines the discourse strategies employed by a senatorial candidate, referred to as Bato, during the 2025 Philippine political debate, titled "Tanong ng Bayan" GMA Senatorial Face-Off 2025 by analyzing modality, pronoun shifts, lexical choices, and thematic framing evident in the candidate's responses. Using Norman Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Framework for Critical Discourse Analysis, as cited by Hassan *et al.* (2019), the research explores how authority, legitimacy, and ideological alignment were constructed and contested through language. Findings indicate a deliberate framing of narratives centered on national sovereignty, legal defense, and political persecution that reflects broader sociopolitical tensions and evolving public sentiments in the Philippine context. The analysis identifies key linguistic features including the strategic use of inclusive and exclusive pronouns, assertive modal verbs, and metaphoric language, all of which positioned the candidate as a protector of national interest and constitutional rule. Results suggest that political discourse operates not merely as a vehicle for information delivery but as an instrument for identity construction, power negotiation, and public influence. Although this study contributes to the growing body of research on political discourse in the Philippines, it is recommended that future research expand the scope by employing alternative discourse analysis frameworks, conducting comparative studies across different political contexts, examining the effects of political language on public opinion, exploring gendered dimensions of political communication, and analyzing multimodal elements such as non-verbal cues.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Political Rhetoric, Philippine Political Discourse, Philippine Senatorial Debate, Political Debate, Norman Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Framework

Introduction

Political discourse serves as a powerful instrument in shaping public perception, asserting authority, and negotiating ideological positions. In democratic settings such as the Philippines, political debates function not only as platforms for candidates to present their policy agendas but also as strategic arenas where language becomes a tool for constructing political identities and influencing voter sentiment. Partington and Taylor (2017) ^[1] stated that in a functioning democracy, language plays a central role in political life and serves primarily as a tool for persuasion for both within political institutions and in broader public discourse, including traditional and social media.

As cited by Partington and Taylor (2017) ^[1], Schäffner (1997) language is essential in translating political will into social action, noting that virtually every political activity is prepared, carried out, monitored, and shaped through language. Fairclough (1989), also cited by Partington and

Taylor, further argues that politics is not only conducted through language but is, in many respects, constituted by it through emphasizing political conflicts often unfold within and about language. Consequently, almost all forms of political engagement such as speeches, media commentaries, legislative sessions, and official communications are deeply embedded in and reliant upon discourse. On the other hand, the term 'political debates' refers to verbal exchanges conducted by specific participants in designated forums.

These debates focus on issues of public concern. Given the variety of actors involved and the settings in which they occur, political debates can take many forms. Also, the term is commonly associated with presidential debates held during election periods, often broadcast to the public by media outlets. On the other hand, political debates can also take place in environments accessible to civil society actors, such as private homes, streets, bars, conference rooms,

online forums, and social media platforms (Berganza *et al.*, 2016) [2]. According to Santa Clara University (2024) [16], the functioning of democracy is deeply rooted in the idea that informed citizens can make sound decisions, particularly during elections.

In a healthy democracy, the act of debating is not only a means of communication but also a critical part of the democratic process. It allows for transparency where candidates must defend their positions in front of the public. This helps voters assess their qualifications and policy ideas and ensure that decisions are made based on knowledge rather than just party affiliation or emotional appeal. As the Philippines approaches the 2025 Senatorial Elections, political debates take on a more significant role in informing voters, promoting transparency, and encouraging democratic participation.

The individuals elected to the Senate will directly influence the legislative direction of the country. Senatorial debates provide a space for candidates to discuss national concerns such as the economy, education, healthcare, security, and governance. These forums allow them to explain their platforms, clarify policy positions, and address public questions. Such debates are especially relevant given the growing public demand for transparency and accountability from political leaders. The upcoming elections occur during a time when the country continues to face pressing social and economic issues, making legislative leadership even more important.

This study examines how language is used to construct authority, legitimacy, and ideological positioning in Bato's senatorial speech using Norman Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Framework for Critical Discourse Analysis, as cited by Hassan *et al.* (2019) [8] during the 2025 Philippine political debate and it contributes to the growing body of research on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in the context of Philippine political debates by offering a detailed examination Bato's discourse during the 2025 senatorial debate. The study explores how language is used not only to communicate political messages but also to construct power, legitimacy, and ideological positioning in a highly contested political environment. This study also builds upon existing CDA frameworks and applies them to the specific context of Philippine political debates that could help to expand the understanding of political discourse in the country and its role in shaping democratic governance, public opinion, and political participation.

Literature Review

Political discourse plays a crucial role in shaping ideologies and reinforcing power relations especially in the democratic country like the Philippines. Several studies have demonstrated how language operates as a tool of political control, persuasion, and ideological reinforcement using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework. For instance, Caballero (2015) [3] conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis of Senator Miriam Defensor Santiago's privilege speech and revealed that rhetorical strategies such as repetition, hyperbole, and evidential references served to construct an anti-corruption stance while Santiago reinforces her political identity.

On the other hand, Carreon and Peña (2018) [4] analyzed the campaign discourse of Filipino women politicians and

identified distinctive linguistic markers such as super polite forms and material process verbs that conveyed both competence and empathy. Their study contributes to understanding how gendered language functions within political rhetoric and while these studies center on traditional political rhetoric, there is limited scholarly attention to Philippine political debate formats like the 2025 Philippine Senatorial Debate.

In a comparative lens, Mohammadi and Javadi (2017) [10] studied Donald Trump's 2016 campaign speech and critically analyzed its discourse using Fairclough's three-dimensional framework. Their study revealed how simplistic sentence structures and repetition amplified populist themes and to strategically frame his opponent. Similarly, El-Hawary, Youssef, and Hamdy (2020) [6] studies the debate Trump and Clinton and found that aggressive and impolite rhetorical strategies were the center of Trump's success. These findings shows that the performative nature of debate language in establishing political authority shows its relevance to the present study.

Perna *et al.* (2018) [12] also investigated how legislators frame expertise in congressional hearings and discovered strategic discursive practices that align testimonies with political agendas. This also shows how language serves in the institutional interests even in formal deliberative settings. Other studies have also expanded CDA to examine broader socio-political ideologies. Amanda and Handayani (2024) [1] found that Joe Biden's use of repetition, modality, and inclusive pronouns projected leadership and unity. Their findings suggested that rhetorical style strongly contributes to perceived legitimacy.

Sajjad (2015) [15] analyzed Barack Obama's Middle East speeches and revealed how democracy and U.S global leadership were subtly constructed through strategic discursive moves. Despite these extensive applications of CDA, there remains a research gap concerning Philippine Senatorial candidates live debate discourse. This study aims to fill that gap by critically analyzing the speech of a 2025 senatorial candidate using Fairclough's CDA framework to uncover the discursive strategies and embedded ideologies in a nationally broadcasted debate.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its methodological approach. The analysis was anchored on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, as cited by Hassan *et al.* (2019) [8] which examines discourse at the levels of textual analysis, discursive practice, and socio-cultural practice. The primary data were obtained from *Tanong ng Bayan: The GMA Senatorial Face-Off 2025*, a live-streamed episode published on the GMA Public Affairs YouTube channel.

The researcher transcribed the portions of the debate where Senator Ronald "Bato" dela Rosa delivered his responses. These transcripts served as the data corpus for the analysis. Purposive sampling was used to select the subject. Among the twelve (12) senatorial aspirants who participated in the debate, Senator Bato was chosen due to his consistent ranking within the "Magic 12" of three major senatorial preference surveys conducted in February 2025, namely, the Social Weather Stations (SWS) Survey, Pulse Asia Survey,

and OCTA Survey. His strong presence in public opinion made him a relevant figure for ideological discourse analysis.

The transcribed data were systematically cleaned to ensure accuracy and consistency for analysis. The transcripts were validated against the original recordings with corrections made for any misheard or omitted segments. Non-essential verbal fillers and irrelevant non-verbal cues were removed while repetitions and code-switching were retained for their analytical relevance. Spelling, grammar, and punctuation were standardized to enhance clarity and instances of Filipino-English code-switching were clearly marked. The transcripts were then segmented into clearly labeled speaker turns and numbered statements to facilitate systematic analysis using Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework.

The researcher first examined the textual features of Bato’s statements, such as lexical choices, grammatical structure and rhetorical features. This was followed by an exploration of the discursive practices involved in the debate setting, such as its production, dissemination, and interpretation. Lastly, the researcher interpreted how the candidate’s discourse reflected and reinforced broader social and political ideologies in the context of the 2025 Philippine senatorial elections.

Findings

Using qualitative content analysis in examining Bato’s speech in the 2025 Philippine Senatorial Debate, titled “Tanong ng Bayan” GMA Senatorial Face-Off 2025, the study identified several themes categorized as follows:

Table 1: Dimension Themes Description

Dimension	Themes	Description
Textual Analysis	Nationalistic Language	Use of patriotic phrases and emotionally charged expressions to project sincerity, love for country, and public service.
	Code-switching	Frequent switching between Filipino and English to appeal to both local and formal audiences and to enhance relatability and credibility.
	Rhetorical Questions and Repetition	Use of rhetorical structures to emphasize contrast or reinforce moral arguments.
	Personalization	Frequent use of personal pronouns and direct address to create a more immediate and relatable tone.
Discourse Practice	Framing Self as Public Servant	Construction of a public image as morally upright, law-abiding, and aligned with the ideals of nation-building.
	Delegitimization of Opponents and Institutions	Discrediting political rivals and international bodies and framing them as unjust or politically motivated.
	Defense of personal and collective reputations.	Strong rhetorical defense of figures like President Duterte and using logic of individual accountability versus collective blame.
Socio-cultural Practice	Populist Themes and Anti-Elite Narratives	Framing discourse to resonate with ordinary citizens and emphasizing social inequality and elite privilege.
	Sovereignty and Nationalism	Emphasis on national self-determination, specifically in resistance to international criticism or oversight.
	Cultural Familiarity and Informality	Use of colloquial discourse to resonate with the audience and highlight cultural or national identity

The analysis of the selected statements reveals several features of the senatorial candidate’s political discourse during the 2025 Philippine Debate. The candidate constructs political legitimacy by employing nationalistic language, emotive appeals, and institutional vocabulary such as “serbisyo,” which collectively portray him as a sincere and duty-driven public servant. This rhetorical approach fosters emotional resonance and reinforces a persona of selfless governance.

Moreover, the repeated rejection of international jurisdiction like the International Criminal Court (ICC), is framed as a defense of national sovereignty. The speaker strengthens a populist narrative that centers on legal independence and resistance to foreign intervention. The discourse also reveals a deliberate effort to delegitimize political opponents by utilizing rhetorical strategies that include personal attacks, confrontational language, and the framing of legal investigations as politically motivated “demolition jobs.” These moves not only serve to deflect criticism but also reinforce the speaker’s allies’ position as a victim of persecution.

This aligns with populist positioning evident in the discourse that emphasizes systemic inequality by contrasting the experiences of “ordinary people” with those of political elites. The speaker leverages this contrast to

align himself with the masses and critique perceived injustices within the legal system. Additionally, the candidate's language demonstrates a blend of formal legal terminology and colloquial Filipino-English code-switching, allows him to maintain both credibility and accessibility across diverse audience groups. On economic matters, the speaker presents government programs such as AKAP as effective but temporary solutions while also advocating for structural reforms in agriculture and market regulation.

This reflects a pragmatic leadership stance that acknowledges immediate public needs alongside long-term development goals. Finally, the speaker uses alignment and solidarity language to build political coalitions and to show shared perspectives with other candidates to reinforce a collective stance against adversarial narratives. These findings illustrate a carefully calibrated discourse strategy aimed at asserting political authority, maintaining public trust, and navigating both domestic and international criticisms.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the speaker's discourse is strategically designed to resonate with a domestic audience that is sensitive to issues of national sovereignty and political legitimacy. The speaker seeks to undermine the

credibility of the opposition and position themselves as a victim of political persecution by framing political and legal challenges as politically motivated “demolition jobs”. The use of the term “demolition job” is significant because it suggests a coordinated effort to destroy the reputation and influence of the Duterte family and their allies that portrays these actions as politically motivated rather than based on legal merit.

Moreover, the emphasis on national sovereignty in the rejection of the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC) speaks to a broader populist strategy that leverages anti-foreign sentiment to galvanize support. In the context of the Philippines, where historical distrust of external powers runs deep, this strategy effectively frames the speaker as a defender of the nation’s independence and legal autonomy. The speaker’s stance is not just about rejecting foreign influence but also about asserting control over the national narrative that positions themselves as a protector of the nation's dignity and legal processes.

In discussing immediate solutions like the AKAP program, the speaker further reinforces their populist appeal. The speaker navigates the tension between addressing immediate public concerns and the reality of more complex and systemic economic issues through acknowledging the program's limitations in providing only short-term relief while simultaneously advocating for long-term economic reforms. This careful balancing act allows the speaker to maintain credibility by recognizing the need for long-term solutions while also presenting themselves as actively addressing pressing issues in the short term.

Conclusion

The analysis of Bato's discourse in the 2025 Philippine Senatorial Debate reveals significant insights into how language can reflect and challenge existing power structures and dominant political ideologies in the Philippines. Through the use of strategic language, Bato constructs a narrative that challenges perceived political adversaries that reaffirms his stance on national sovereignty and positions himself within the broader discourse of nationalism and populism. His discourse exemplifies the ongoing struggle between political factions.

His use of phrases such as “demolition job” and “investigation in aid of persecution” strategically frames his opponents as tools of political destruction rather than agents of justice. This rhetorical framing effectively critiques the power dynamics at play and positions Bato as a defender of national sovereignty against foreign intervention and as a staunch advocate for local legal authority. Bato’s language challenges the status quo by advocating for political autonomy and deflecting external scrutiny that makes a pointed case for resisting foreign influence in domestic affairs.

Bato employs several linguistic strategies to assert his position, convey his ideologies, and exercise his political power. His usage of legal terminology such as referencing “jurisdiction” and the “Rome Statute” combined with colloquial expressions and metaphors, allows him to engage with a wide audience while maintaining a position of authority. Bato strategically aligns himself with the populist sentiment that resists foreign influence. Furthermore, his discourse reflects an attempt to solidify his political identity

as a strong and independent leader who prioritizes national interest that makes him appealing to voters who value sovereignty and local governance. The critical analysis of language used in political debates is crucial for understanding its impact on voter perception, civic engagement, and democratic participation.

Language, as demonstrated by Bato's discourse, plays a vital role in shaping public opinion as it frames issues, defines political identities, and influences how voters interpret candidates’ positions. We can better understand the mechanisms through which political power is exercised and contested by carefully examining how language is used to position oneself against opponents and appeal to the electorate.

In terms of democratic participation, the strategic use of language helps voters navigate the complex political landscape, discern candidates' true positions, and make informed choices that align with their values and interests. Therefore, critically analyzing political discourse not only enhances our understanding of political dynamics but also empowers citizens to actively engage in the democratic process.

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