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The role of speech in the formation of national identity and nation-building: A critical discourse and textual analysis of Jacob Zuma's speeches

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Abstract

The question of national identity has always been linked to the nation-building project, which depends on national unity for national development. This study examines the Inaugural and State of the Nation address by Jacob Zuma to determine how much South African Presidents value and promote formation of national identity and nation-building. The contents of the two speeches were analysed using the thematic content analysis method. To make comparisons of the use of 'we,' 'our,' 'I,' and ‘us’ by President Jacob Zuma, some quantitative data were provided. Grounded theory was used to establish and analyse the themes contained in the two speeches. The speeches reflected nation-building and national identity formation, as revealed by critical discourse analysis. The speeches assist Presidents in nation-building, unity, and social cohesion. This study establishes that the President's speeches conveyed a variety of messages that aligned with the nation-building initiatives of the government. This study contributes to the field of communication science by providing new information about the role of speech in the formation of national identity and nation-building from the perspective of South Africa.

1. Introduction

During South Africa’s first fifteen years of democracy (2009), political narratives about the rainbow nation were generally optimistic. The ‘discourse of hope’ was evident in the presidential speeches of Jacob Zuma. President Jacob Zuma uses different tools to communicate with citizens, address concerns and allay fears of people about service delivery matters. Among such communication tools is presidential speech. Such developments can be categorised with the concept of post-modern communication; whereby, several channels are used by political communicators to reach their target audiences (Masip et al., 2019; Perloff, 2021; Chaka & Adanlawo, 2024).

The dedicated commitment with which South African presidents assumed the importance of post-modern communication with his citizens highlights the significance of national unity in the building of a nation. South Africa’s African National Congress-led government through its nation-building programmes has pursued unity and nation-building goals (Baloyi & Lubinga, 2017; Mona & Kaschula, 2018). The question of national identity has always been linked to the nation-building project (Isaacs & Polese, 2015; Zajda & Majhanovich, 2021), which depends on national unity for national development. Building a nation and promoting national unity and identity is the prominent element of the historic objective of post-apartheid South Africa. By bringing national identity to life as an aspect of the ideal, it becomes clear, and comprehensible for every individual of the population of South Africa.

To know the extent to which South African presidents value and promote the formation of national identity and building of South Africa nation, this study examines Jacob Zuma speeches (State of the Nation address and Inauguration speech). A presidential speech was viewed in this study as a linguistic activity that establishes the relationship between the President, the society and its members (Rahro et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2026). The structure of a presidential speech is generally narrational and linear (Munawar, 2018), they include salutations, congratulatory remarks, the historical past, the presentation

of past achievements, the present state and future direction of society. Presidential speech also includes information the government's goals, campaigns and nation-building initiatives. On the linguistic level, it does not have any language features that makes it unique, but it might have some generic features like accepted address formats (Periti & Montanelli, 2024; Geeraerts et al, 2024).

To reveal the Presidential persuasive strategies, Jacob Zuma's Inaugural and State of the Nation address were selected for the purpose of counting the frequency and connotations of the speeches' text. Grounded theory was utilised to identify and analyse the themes in the two speeches. To know the extent to which the speeches reflect national identity formation and nation-building, a research question was posed.

RQ: To what extent does Jacob Zuma speeches reflect South Africa's national identity formation and nation-building objectives?

2. Theoretical background

2.1 *Grounded theory*

Grounded theory is described by Glaser and Strauss (2017) as "the best approach for an initial, systematic discovery of theory from the data of social research." With grounded theory, researcher is able to identify themes using a methodical analysis of the data (Dougherty, 2017; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). This study employed a grounded theory approach to determine the most effective way to understand the context of presidential speeches.

The qualitative approach of grounded theory allowed the researcher to apply conceptual meaning to the categories by connecting the elements within and between categories (Liu & Tseng, 2021; Fouquet & Létourneau, 2026). When these meanings were found in multiple categories, they were labelled as themes. Thus, the depth of the examination of the speech content gave the study its importance rather than the number of texts.

The theory is used in a variety of disciplines, including communications, where it has been recognised as a unique way to unearth discourse (Albert et al., 2019; Clarke, 2021). In the context of this study, it was important to read through the speeches multiple times until certain words commanded attention more than others. This is referred to as attention-commanding words as verbal concepts (Reddy & Adanlawo, 2018; Sokolova, 2021). When patterns appeared among the concepts, they were labelled as categories. Grounded theory emphasises the identification of patterns or consistency in the use of concepts across data

2.2 Discourse theory

Critical discourse analysis provides insight into social identities and relationships. According to discourse theory, every word spoken draws its meaning from the social practices of which it is a part (Heracleous, 2017). It is believed that discourse practices, which are the means by which texts are

produced and consumed (received and interpreted), are a significant type of social practice that helps to shape social identities (Zotzmann & O'Regan, 2016).

Critical discourse analysis further analyses a discourse from its ideological, social and historical connotations that the listener or reader might not be aware of (Heracleous, 2017; Adamu & Sadat, 2025). Thus, every text has some "hidden" meaning. As a result, analysts advocate reading texts critically to uncover hidden information.

3. Conceptual background

3.1 General concepts of political discourse

Van Dijk (1997) avers that each speech delivered by a politician is a realisation of his intention. Therefore, politicians use language to accomplish their goals. As a result, language appears to be an important tool employed by politicians to cultivate a feeling of belonging. Political speakers thus make effort to involve every citizen in the decision-making process. On the other side, the receivers use their political and intertextual expertise to analyse the texts delivered by politicians (Ekström et al., 2018; Chilton, 2025).

The usefulness of linguistic techniques in constructing political speech have been reported by Titscher et al. (2000), and for the purpose of this study, we used some of their terminologies with minor modifications. Adanlawo and Chaka (2025) refer to language as a symbolic system of authority, possessing the intrinsic capacity to shape individuals' conceptions of reality that either validate or alter their perceptions and beliefs, therefore impacting both their own conduct and the broader world.

According to Perloff (2021), politicians cleverly use their expertise to increase people's desire to take part in political activities. Chilton (2025, p. 5) adds that "political discourse is fully dependent on people, as it is produced by them." As a result, the manner in which something is stated is just as important as the content. More so, the speaker should consider the cultural identity, which is defined by a shared set of values when writing a text. As a result, the speaker adopts the listener's viewpoint, and the speeches are tailored to the recipient's intellectual level. According to Masip et al. (2019), the speaker can create a more compelling text by using this strategy. To understand discourse, the concept of context must be taken into account. Druckman and Jacobs (2015) maintain that Presidents can impact a large number of recipients by directing their speeches (texts) in the right direction. Therefore, linguistic, grammatical and semantic elements of Presidential speeches make language use so inspiring.

4. Methodology

Thus study employed a mixed methods research design to explore and describe the role that speeches play in reflecting nation-building and national identity formation. It reads thus: to what extent and in what ways, does Presidential speeches reflect nation-building and national identity formation objectives? The primary purpose of using a mixed methods research design is to facilitate understanding of a complex

phenomenon (Maphela & Adanlawo, 2026). We collected both the State of the Nation address and Inaugural speech of President Jacob Zuma from Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) website (GCIS, 2009). The reason for the inclusion of two speeches was to look into possible changes in President Zuma's political language as a whole and ways of linking these changes to transformation in society.

This critical discourse analysis begins with a textual analysis of the speeches. The textual analysis was done according to the guidelines set forth by Foss (2004) and Fairclough (2001). In order to complete a comprehensive analysis, several methods were synthesised and applied, namely; thematic discourse analysis, ideological criticism on a few selected text in the speeches and linguistic text analysis. All were used as part of the critical discourse analysis. While analysing the text to find the ideology, Foss (2004) suggests paying attention to words and text such as "we", "all", "us" vs. "them" in the linguistic analysis of the sampled speeches.

We analysed the speeches to understand the extent to which they reflect the formation of national identity and nation-building objectives. The analysis was primarily qualitative with some statistical support. In order to make comparisons of the use of 'we', 'our', 'I' and 'us' by President Jacob Zuma, some quantitative data were provided. We form inferences about the texts' messages after quantifying and evaluating words and concepts meanings. Each text was transcribed and checked for significant linguistic characteristics. This approach facilitated a precise statistical evaluation of concurrent linguistic characteristics as they occurred in the texts.

We also analysed the contents of the two speeches making use of thematic content analysis method. Kleinheksel et al. (2020) explain content analysis as a research techmique which examines words or phrases in various texts. Due to its wide array of applications, we focused on the text in the speeches.

4.1 The techniques used to identify themes

First, we read and coded text to identify themes. We, then, wrote down the emerging themes. Grounded theorists call this "open coding" (McCall & Edwards, 2021). In discovering themes in texts, we did the following: 1. We analyse words (word repetitions, key terms, and key-words-in contexts); (2) we compare and contrast the texts; (3) we examine the linguistic elements such as metaphors, transitions, connectors; (4) we re-read the speeches to ensure that no other themes were overlooked.

We finally arrived at 10 main themes: (1) Social cohesion and nation-building, (2) Poverty alleviation, (3) Economic support and transformation, (4) Human dignity, (5) social welfare protection, (6) Non-racialism, (7) Justice and crime, (8) Affordable health care, (9) Economic growth and reform, and (10). Job creation.

5. Results

This section outlines the interpretation of the speeches. In carrying out the findings of this study, we follow these procedures: firstly, we reviewed approaches to critical discourse analysis to identify the best theoretical framework that matches the study's aim. Secondly, presidential speeches were analysed in two phases:

1. A comprehensive textual narrative of the speeches is provided using syntax and lexis;
2. Critical discourse analysis is established as a 'three dimensional' framework consisting of three distinct analyses, explicitly language text (spoken or written), discourse practice, (processes of text production, distribution and consumption), and analysis of discursive events.

5.1 Critical discourse analysis of speeches

5.1.1 Inauguration of Jacob Zuma

An Address by Mr. Jacob Zuma on the occasion of his Inauguration as the third democratically elected President of South Africa. The President mentioned that his administration will adhere to the path that former President Nelson Mandela established for nation-building and reconciliation.

President Zuma said:

"Mandela had healed the country's wounds and firmly established South Africa as a rainbow nation."

"Mandela had made reconciliation the central theme of his term of office,"

"We will not deviate from that nation-building task. Thank you, Madiba, for showing us the way."

a) The theme for the inauguration:

Zuma said, "As President of the Republic, I will do my best to lead the country towards the realisation of Madiba's vision of a truly non-sexist, non-racial South Africa, united in its diversity."

b) **Outline of the inaugural speech**:

The Inaugural address is internally divided into the following sections:

1. Gratitude to his predecessor
2. Acknowledging the challenges of democracy
3. Pointing ideologies

- "With the support of my organisation, the ANC, as well as all South Africans, I hope to lead the country on a path of friendship, cooperation, harmony, unity and faster change."
- Zuma also embraced Thabo Mbeki and his wife, Zanele. He honoured the former President who dismissed him as Deputy President in 2005. He claimed that Mbeki has progressed South Africa as

a true statesman while considerably enhancing democracy and economic growth.

Zuma mentioned that Mbeki "made our country an integral part of the continent and worked tirelessly for an African rebirth, and through his leadership, South Africa's stature grew on the continent and globally." Zuma expressed gratitude towards FW de Klerk, who worked alongside Mandela to abolish apartheid and contributed to the establishment of a new South Africa.

c) Ideological criticism

The acknowledgement comes as a surprise, as he speaks favourably about a man who dismissed him as his deputy. Zuma embraces the contribution that the previous administration has made. Thus an ideological shift from the tension that has been there since the break between Mbeki and the ANC, a shift from a conventional and conservative viewpoint of Mbeki to a more liberal acceptance of what happened.

Finally, he acknowledged the outgoing President Kgalema Motlanthe, he described him as a friend, comrade, and brother. Zuma said, “Motlanthe had brought calm, stability and certainty to the government and the country during a period of great anxiety.”

5.1.2 State of The Nation Address

Critical discourse analysis shows that the speeches concentrate on change and transformation, but his policies concentrate on continuity. His approach, style and organisation of government leadership is modelled on the Mandela example. The analysis also reveals that, Zuma is strong on style and form, but less on content and substance. Zuma’s final remarks on citizenship, as defined by mutual obligation of duty, emphasise the importance of South Africa’s democracy and remind engaged citizens of their responsibilities.

5.2 Textual analysis results

The two speeches consist of 10110 words with 965 sentence lines. The pronoun “We” dominates the frequency count, tally with a total occurrence of 41%. This is attributed to a sense of inclusiveness by the President to the people of South Africa. Table 1 shows the pronouns as reflected in both speeches.

Table 1
Pronouns used in Jacob Zuma's speeches

Pronouns	Frequency	%
I	4	1
We	138	41
Us	12	4
Our	136	40
All	47	14
Total	337	100
Source: Own construct		

The most frequently appearing pronoun in the speeches was 'Our'. This was used to give a sense of common ownership and this approach was used to make people feel responsible for the change in his dispensation. The most frequently appearing pronoun in the speeches was 'Our' with 40%. The President used first-person plurals most often.

In the speeches, the first-person plural pronoun '*We'* is regarded as a very powerful approach to connects the nation and President. By using 'We', President tries to expand his political symbol and unity among South Africans. The word is effective in fostering fellowship among South African.

'We' is inclusive, suggesting 'we South Africans. This pronoun ('We'), also gains the meaning for government, and emerges more often in his portrayal of shared identity. In his speeches. The President points out the following:

1. *...working 'together* **we** *can do more to fight poverty and build a better life for* **all***'.* **paragraph 1**
2. *'* **We** *are humbled by this decisive electoral mandate given by the people of* **our** *country, who have chosen their government in a most convincing manner***'. paragraph 2**
3. *...'* **we** *have a strong and fully functional constitutional democratic system, with solid institutions, that* **we** *overcame these difficulties smoothly and with dignity'.* **Paragraph 3**
4. *... "* **we** *have sought to create a united cohesive society out of our fragmented past.* **We** *are called upon to continue this mission of promoting unity in diversity..."* **paragraph 53**

Phrases used in Jacob Zuma's speeches

Table 2 portrays the important phrases used by President Zuma in his speeches.

Table 2
Phrases used in Jacob Zuma's speeches

Phrases	Frequency	%
We will	84	83
We must	12	12
A new	2	2
The people	3	3
Total	101	100

Source: Own construct

The table shows the use of 'we will' with 84%, 'we must' with 12% and 'the people' with 3%.

1. '*We have sought to create a united cohesive society out of fragmented past.* In this case the above is interpreted as; all South Africans, all institutions and individuals are on a mission to act together for nation-building to be successful.

In addition to the statement above, another excerpt shows the same sentiment in the text:

2. 'We must develop a common attachment to our country, our Constitution and the national symbols. In this spirit, we will promote the National Anthem and our country's flag and all other national symbols **'. paragraph 53–54.**

3. 'Sport is a powerful nation-building tool. Working together we must support all our national teams' from Bafana Bafana to the Proteas and the Springboks, from Banyana Banyana to Paralympians'. **paragraph 55.**

4. 'We will ensure a common national approach. This must provide an opportunity to involve all South Africans in forging an inclusive national identity, to deepen our understanding of our history and heritage'. **paragraph 55**

In the extract, the phrases used to express certain that all South Africans must perform, because of the President's strong commitment and ability to change things. This is demonstrated by the use of explicit speaker presence 'we must' paired with the formation of a high level of solidarity with the audience, signalled by 'together', 'All' and 'Our', when addressing the matter of national unity, social cohesion and nation-building. Table 3 below highlights words used by Jacob Zuma in his two speeches.

Table 3
Words used by Jacob Zuma

Words	Frequency	%
Together	16	22
Nation-building	1	1
South African	30	42
Democracy	5	7
United	8	11
Peace	10	14
Reconciliation	2	3
Total	72	100
Source: Own construct		

The text also reflects the beginning of a new chapter characterised by a strategy of inclusiveness. The word 'South Africa' appears 30 (42%) times in Zuma's speeches, followed by 'together' with (22%) and 'Peace' (14%).

This speaks about:

1. '*South Africa that belongs to all, a nation united in its diversity, a people working together for the greater good of all'*. **paragraph 2.**
2. *'Working together with all South Africans, we will intensify the fight against crime and corruption. We will build cohesive, caring and sustainable communities'*. **paragraph 17**.
3. *'Fellow South Africans, working together we can do more to realise our common vision of a better and more prosperous nation!'* **paragraph 75**.

Figure 1 below shows the use of the words "government, job, economic, poverty, better life, campaign, freedom, and change" as the policy focus of Zuma's administration.

Source: Own construct

The figure shows that Zuma used the word 'Government' in 41 (28%) ways, Jobs (27%), and economy, with 28%. This explains Zuma's philosophical position on national wealth distribution, and eliminating the free market ideology. The text analysis also outlines his economic theory and ideology. Zuma articulates an ideological viewpoint on the function of government in light of the global financial crisis.

1. *'We take as our starting point the framework for South Africa's response to the international economic crises'*. **Paragraph 9**
2. *'We have begun to act to reduce job losses'*. **Paragraph 10.**

The President promised in his speech that workers who would ordinarily be laid off due to economic downturns would be retained and re-skilled.

Discussion

According to an analysis of the data based on the frequency and connotation of the speeches, Zuma employed words differently in his presidential speeches. The texts depict three distinct discourses, each with unique linguistic characteristics in an attempt to create a national identity and social relationships between the President and his fellow citizens. The textual analysis was done according to van Dijk (2004), Burrows (2004), Fairclough and Fairclough (2015) and Chung and Pennebaker (2018) guidelines.

In order to complete a comprehensive analysis, several methods, thematic discourse analysis, ideological criticism on a few selected text in the speech and linguistic text analysis were synthesised and applied. All were used as part of the critical discourse analysis. While analysing the text to find the ideology, Fairclough and Fairclough (2015) suggest paying attention to words and texts such as “we”, “all”, “us” vs. “them” and in the linguistic analysis of the sampled speeches. The use of words and their frequency were analysed and presented. Words/phrases like ‘The people’, ‘South Africans’, ‘We’ and ‘Our’ are prominently used in the speeches. These patterns demonstrate the tone in which Presidents are likely to create a cohesive and a national identity is linked to South Africans’ participation in presidential discourse.

More so, issues relating to corruption, unemployment, crime, and poverty were reflected in the speeches. Zuma pledged to intensify the fight against crime and corruption, and to build cohesive, caring and sustainable communities. He stressed the accountability for South Africans to support nation-building. The speeches emphasised how crucial is economy development and jobs creation is to government. The speeches focused on health, societal well-being, and the preservation of a healthy environment for future generations. The speeches focused on health, societal well-being, and the preservation of a healthy environment for future generations. The speeches also stressed a policy-based agenda for creating a robust and thriving economy that benefits everyone.

Zuma mentioned in his speeches a commitment by government and the people to work together in speeding up economic growth with the aim to create sustainable livelihoods. The President promised that his administration would be a participatory communication strategy in which the government hears the opinions of the people. Therefore, it can be argued that the speeches revealed that there is a strong sense of shared national consciousness among the people of South Africa.

Conclusion

The study's findings support the premise that speeches play an important role in the formation of ideologically biased political discourse, and that the meaning they convey is open to pragmatic interpretation. Based on the analysis, the pronouns, words, phrases, modal verbs (*must, should* and *have to)* that appeared in the discourse of Zuma exclusively promote national identity formation and nation-

building. The speeches represent a dialogue between the South African government and its citizens. Also, as the dialogue between the nation and the globe. As a result, President Zuma assumed the position of steward, using public speeches, such as the State of the Nation address and Inaugural speech to convey South African message to the world. The analysis's findings are consistent with the discursive event and structure, and its interconnectedness of ideas as suggested by Fairclough and Fairclough (2015) and Chung and Pennebaker (2018). The speeches influenced the text's discursive framework, and the audience's understanding of the critical discourse influenced the South African Presidents' discourse practices.

The research has shown that the use of words in constructing a consistent thematic ideological viewpoint indicates a continuous high level of commitment on the part of the leadership. This study establishes that the President's speeches conveyed a variety of messages that aligned with the government's nation-building efforts. It is evident that the speeches reflect the efforts taken by the South African government to achieve an inclusive and all-encompassing approach towards achieving nation-building and national identity formation. The speeches have been prepared from the viewpoint of the South African people, and the events and procedures they describe are only seen from the perspective of the South African government. This study contributes to the field of communication science by providing new information about the role of speech in nation-building and national identity formation from the perspective of South Africa. It also reflects on the place of development communication in this process as well.

Declarations

Ethical approval:

Not applicable to this research.

Conflict of interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Author Contribution

Conceptualization, MC and EFA; methodology, EFA; validation, MC and EFA; formal analysis, MC and EFA; investigation, MC; resources, EFA and MC; data curation, MC; writing—original draft preparation, EFA;

writing—review and editing, MC and EFA; supervision, MC; project administration, MC. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability

All data supporting the findings of this study are available within the paper and its Supplementary Information.https://www.gcis.gov.za/sites/default/files/docs/resourcecentre/reports/2010/gcis_annual-rpt_10.pdfhttps://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/dev-indicators_09.pdfhttps://www.gov.za/news/speeches/president-jacob-zuma-inauguration-fourth-democratically-elected-president-southhttps://www.gov.za/news/speeches/state-nation-address-his-excellency-jacob-g-zuma-president-republic-south-africa-0

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