

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## **Power, Race, and Linguistic Dominance in *To Kill a Mockingbird***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Historically, language has been used not only to assert dominance, manipulate opinions, and incite violence but also to marginalize people of color or minor ethnicities. This study explores the weaponization of language in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It delves deep into how language was used as a tool of power to marginalize and assert dominance over Black Americans in the 1930s Maycomb, Alabama. Key examples from the novel show how characters use language to demonstrate power, influence public opinion, and perpetuate discrimination against people of color in the town of Maycomb. Therefore, through specific focus on Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis Model, this paper examines how Lee uses language to criticize discrimination and impose racial hierarchies. Complemented by Michel Foucault's concept of discourse and the relationship between power and knowledge, this paper also investigates how language constructs social realities, reinforces racial hierarchies, and regulates societal norms. In Maycomb, language is more than communication; it is a mechanism through which power circulates, disciplines, and marginalizes. Consequently, this paper intends to reveal the impact of language weaponization on the characters and the community and shed light on how social hierarchies and power dynamics are constructed through linguistic choices.

### **ARTICLE HISTORY**

Received: June, 2025

1st Revision: July, 2025

2nd Revision: September, 2025

3rd Revision: October, 2025

Accepted: December, 2025

Online Publication: January, 2026

### **KEYWORDS**

Racial Discrimination, Language Weaponization, Power Dynamics, CDA.

## **1. Introduction**

It is believed that Harper Lee was inspired to write her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* based on a similar case that happened during her childhood

involving the murder of a white man at the hands of two African American men, showcasing the racial injustice and the biases of white people towards colored people, in particular, black people. This novel is set in the 1930s in the small fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama. It is set in a racially charged environment marked by pervasive racism and distinct social and racial inequalities. This novel deals with themes like racial and social injustice, portraying a society where black people are automatically guilty of crimes, are treated as slaves, and are thought to belong to a lower social class.

While *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been widely studied for its themes of racial prejudice, morality, and social inequality, the role of language as a central mechanism of power has received comparatively less critical attention. In Maycomb, racism is not sustained solely through laws or physical acts of violence, but through the everyday use of words, phrases, and discursive practices that normalize inequality and silence marginalized voices. Racial slurs, courtroom rhetoric, and community gossip function as linguistic tools that reinforce white dominance while constructing African Americans as inferior and untrustworthy. This reveals that discourse does more than reflect existing prejudices as well as it actively produces and maintains them by legitimizing authority and shaping perceptions of truth, justice, and morality. Examining language as a weapon in the novel therefore opens up a deeper understanding of how systemic racism operates, not only in fictional Maycomb but also in the broader social and historical context it mirrors.

This research paper focuses on language weaponization, how language is used to assert power and dominance over African Americans, and how the choice of language shapes the characters and the society of Maycomb in Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Language weaponization is the use of language to harm, insult, and manipulate people. Historically, it has been used to marginalize people of color and minor ethnicities. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee makes use of various words such as racial slurs and scenes like the trial scene to demonstrate the power imbalance and racial discrimination between the white and black communities.

This study employs Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in conjunction with Michel Foucault's theory of power to critically examine the weaponization of language in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, particularly in scenes that expose systemic injustice and racial hierarchies. Fairclough's three-dimensional model with textual analysis, discursive practice, and social analysis enables a nuanced exploration of how language reflects and reinforces ideologies and power dynamics in society. Complementing this, Foucault's concept of power as dispersed, relational, and embedded in everyday discourse reveals how language operates not merely as a tool of communication, but as a mechanism of control and subjugation. As Foucault argues, "power is everywhere ... because it comes from everywhere" (*The History of Sexuality*, 208), meaning that even the most mundane linguistic exchanges carry the potential to uphold or disrupt dominant social orders. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, these frameworks expose how white characters use language to assert authority and maintain racial dominance, while also highlighting how Scout Finch's developing consciousness resists these inherited discursive norms. Together, CDA and Foucault's theory illuminate the deep entanglement of language, power, and identity within the novel's depiction of a racially divided society.

## 2. Literature Review

Over the years, many researches have been done on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and how it can be used to analyze text to understand the deeper hidden meanings that authors want to convey. Norman Fairclough in his book *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* emphasizes the impact language has on maintaining and challenging power relations in society. He argues that language is a social practice that both reflects and shapes social structures and power dynamics. The book delves into how dominant groups use language to perpetuate ideologies and maintain dominance over minor groups. Fairclough talks about how these dominant groups use language to legitimize their power and control over others. He studies how the way we speak can lead to changes in society and how changes in the use of language can reflect and cause bigger shifts in society. Fairclough encouraged individuals to become more aware

of their use of language, this awareness can prevent people from becoming manipulated and promote social justice.

In “Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis” Van Dijk discusses the principles, aims, and criteria of critical discourse analysis (CDA), focusing on the relations between discourse, power, dominance, and social inequality and how disparities are created depending on the level of participation and influence of certain groups (249). This paper demonstrates how dominant groups often exert over both the manner in which we communicate and the topics we are permitted to discuss leading to the oppression of marginalized groups. This suppression of discourse reinforces existing social inequalities (Van Dijk 249). Van Dijk advocated for equal access to discourse to create a just and inclusive society, where all groups could participate without any social injustice.

The study, “Critical Discourse Analysis” by Blommaert and Bulcaen emphasizes how language affects power dynamics, social inequalities, and ideologies (447). It focuses on how language can be weaponized to dominate, discriminate, and control groups. Blommaert and Bulcaen advocated for researchers to not only study language and its effects on society, but to take active actions to change unfair social and power dynamics (447). Their study focuses on the three main features of CDA: ideology, inequality and power, and social theory (456). It looks into how the way we speak is influenced by society and influences society. This study helps to understand how language is weaponized to strengthen or challenge social hierarchies. This study shows that language if used methodically, can be used as a weapon to influence public opinions and maintain control (447).

In “The Cosmopolitan Canopy,” Anderson examines the concept of a cosmopolitan canopy where people from different social, racial, and ethnic groups can come together in an urban place to interact peacefully without any discrimination and boundaries separating them (15). It focuses on a neutral ground, like Philadelphia’s Reading Terminal Market, where different people come together to form a positive interaction (23). People from various ethnicities and racial and social backgrounds come together to understand each other’s social and cultural backgrounds. These interactions in turn help break down racial and

ethnic barriers and help foster a sense of mutual respect and belonging in different people.

Contrary to Anderson's research, this paper focuses on language weaponization. While his paper focuses on the social interaction of different groups of people in public spaces in a positive way (15), language weaponization focuses on how language can be used to create divisions between different groups of people. Understanding how public spaces and positive interactions can help build a sense of unity rather than discord is, therefore, important. Anderson emphasizes that social understandings are constructed through interpersonal interactions, noting that "it is through interaction that people come to understand, trust, and live civilly with one another" (28). These interactions serve as the foundation for mutual respect and social cohesion among diverse groups. In contrast, the weaponization of language undermines these very processes by manipulating shared meanings to generate harmful stereotypes and reinforce social biases. While Anderson highlights the role of interaction in fostering trust and cooperation, language weaponization functions antithetically, intentionally disrupting cohesion by creating symbolic boundaries and cultivating division (28).

Bezar et al. focused on language weaponization by applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to Blake's poem "The Sick Rose" and Rashid's "Meri Bhi Hai Kuch Khaab" (223). They inspected how social, political, and religious conditions are influenced by language weaponization (230). The two poems, their research focuses on, show the harmful effects a corrupt dominant society has on those with less power. Their study uses Fairclough's three-dimensional model to examine how discourse is connected to creating social structures (225), showcasing how language influences power and social dynamics. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, similarly, this power and social disparity can be seen in the way the white community treats the black community in Maycomb.

Moreover, recent research in *To Kill a Mockingbird* using CDA shows how the use of language perpetuates racism, social injustice, and power dynamics. Afzal et al. used Wodak's theoretical framework for CDA to study the specific words and phrases used, the style of narration, and how the characters interacted with

each other in the book to show the ongoing racism in the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*. They analyzed the context of the book in-depth to show how language reinforced and reflected racial discrimination in the 1930s American South (ibid. 325). They delve into how churches, schools, and courts in the novel contribute to the continuing racism and do in-depth research into how specific choices of language create racial injustice and racial biases (330).

The study by Macaluso, similarly, focuses on the racial injustice and power dynamics faced by the characters and how the weaponization of language can impact social hierarchy (282). He explores contemporary discussions on race and racism and its relevance to the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Macaluso makes a distinction between Old Racism and New Racism, where old racism is being racist outright, whereas, new racism is more subtle (282). In his research, Macaluso encouraged students to read novels, including *To Kill a Mockingbird* to understand how language shapes societal views and creates power dynamics (286). His paper shows that language does affect people and their surroundings, as can be seen through Scout Finch's character development and awareness of language.

The research by Abdulla and Mansour focused on how language can be used as a tool of oppression by analyzing Tom Robinson's trial (108). Through this scene, they brought out how language can be used to oppress and show power dynamics by focusing on how the individual characters spoke, for example, Bob Ewell's use of inappropriate words, Mr. Gilmer's leading questions, and Atticus's polite way of speech (109). Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA is applied to understand the text, what it wanted to convey and the social context of the trial (108).

Likewise, Johnson Gregory's research focuses on the continuing racial injustice in the novel through the language used in the courtroom during Tom Robinson's trial (2). It reflects on the different dynamics presented by the characters in court. The racial injustice and the marginalization of African Americans are also highlighted through the courtroom scene where Tom sympathizes with Mayella for her lack of help is misunderstood as his arrogance (1). However, her article

mainly focuses on the courtroom scenes and does not delve much into the language pattern and its effects used in the novel.

Jay focuses on the cultural impact, historical context, and themes related to race, gender, and sexuality (499). He discusses the use of racial slurs, and oppression of African Americans in the novel to highlight how language is used as a weapon to perpetuate racism and marginalization of minor groups. His paper also examines the continuation of social and power dynamics and racial injustice (510) and how empathy is important to understand others (516). It also delves into traditional gender roles and Scout's tomboyish nature (508). However, this study is limited to the literary and historical analysis of the novel and does not dig deep into language weaponization.

Moreover, as Rahman argued in "Women and Madness in *Game of Thrones: A Feminist Critique*," language often becomes a mechanism of control that reinforces existing power structures and social hierarchies (85, 93). In that study, it is explored how female characters were linguistically and socially positioned as 'mad' in order to delegitimize their voices and reassert patriarchal dominance. A similar process of linguistic marginalization is evident in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, where racialized discourse is used to construct and maintain white supremacy. Just as female madness in *Game of Thrones* is framed through a discourse of fear and disorder, African American identity in Harper Lee's novel is marked by assumptions of criminality and inferiority, reproduced through courtroom rhetoric, community gossip, and institutional language. Drawing on this earlier analysis allows for a deeper understanding of how linguistic dominance operates across contexts of race, dominance, and power.

### **3. Power and Language Weaponization**

Michel Foucault's conceptualization of power radically shifts traditional understandings by framing power not as something held by a dominant class or institution but as something that "is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 93). He argues that power is not merely repressive but also productive, as it "produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (194).

These formulations are particularly pertinent when analyzing how race and social order are constructed and maintained through everyday discourse. Consequently, power relations are not instrumentalized and determined by an economy, but rather constitute the relations of production through “the disciplining of people” (112).

Foucault counters conservative-empirical and orthodox Marxist views, which understand power as the property of a group or a person, by saying that power is by no means possessed. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, such power is evident in the ways societal institutions, especially the legal system that shape and normalize racial hierarchies. Foucault’s theory helps unpack how the structures of whiteness are sustained not through overt acts of violence alone, but through what is said, how it is said, and who is authorized to speak. Thus, the novel’s depiction of the Jim Crow South can be seen as a space where power operates discursively to maintain racial injustice under the guise of legal and moral legitimacy.

Foucault’s theory of discourse furthers this argument by positing that discourse is a mechanism of control that “limits the rights of speech, excludes some from speaking, and determines who may speak and when” (*Power/Knowledge*, 52). He notes that “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge” (27), emphasizing how discourse and knowledge are interwoven to reinforce existing power structures. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the courtroom becomes a space where these Foucauldian dynamics unfold with precision: the black voice, though legally permitted to speak, is structurally discredited, while white testimonies are accepted as truth despite contradictions. The discursive framing of Tom Robinson as inherently untrustworthy is not a matter of individual bias alone but part of a broader racialized knowledge system that Foucault would describe as “regimes of truth.” By examining the novel through this lens, it becomes evident how power operates through the legitimization and delegitimization of speech acts, reinforcing racial dominance through the very language of justice.

#### **4. Locating Fairclough's Model in *To Kill a Mockingbird***

In Norman Fairclough's research article "Critical Discourse Analysis," he discusses how a transdisciplinary approach to analyzing contemporary social changes can allow for a better understanding of how discourse interacts with other social factors. Moreover, his Seminal works, *Language and Power* and *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* also provide a compelling framework for analyzing the relationship between discourse and social structure. In general, CDA in literature is used to analyze text to understand the hidden message and power dynamics that authors want to present through the setting or characters; while, Norman Fairclough's CDA model is a type of discourse analysis used to distinguish the relationship between language, power, and society. It is structured into three parts; textual analysis (description), discourse practice (interpretation), and Sociocultural practice (explanation), integrating linguistics with society and culture which has been elaborated in his seminal work, *Language and Power* (1996).

Textual Analysis (Description) is the analysis of the language used in a text. It focuses on grammar, vocabulary, and the structure of a text. One notable word in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the use of the "N-word" to refer to the African Americans by the white people of Maycomb, showing the deeply ingrained racism and prejudice they hold towards black people. The use of this derogatory word so frequently also reflects the superiority that the white people feel towards the black community. The two contrasting behaviors displayed by Atticus Finch while dealing with Tom Robinson, Bob Ewell, and Mr. Gilmer show the clear racial prejudice and the power dynamics that arise from it.

Discourse practice (Interpretation) refers to the choice of language used, how it spreads, and how it is used depending on the context. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout Finch's narration and the choice of language used by the characters allow for a deeper understanding of the imbalance of social power and prejudice in Maycomb. As the story progresses, Scout Finch becomes more aware of the disparities between the two communities and learns to be more sensible with her choice of words.

Sociocultural Practice (Explanation) is the broader aspect of social and cultural practices that helps shape and is shaped by language. Language plays a pivotal part in shaping power dynamics and social status. The years of slavery and oppression of African Americans have made them believe that they were inferior, giving white people a sense of superiority over the black community, this can be seen through the analysis of Tom Robinson's behavior in court when he gets questioned about him running away upon being caught by Bob Ewell. The All-White Men Jury's bias towards Bob Ewell, a white man, can also be observed through the conviction of Tom Robinson, a black man despite evidence proving he is innocent. Lee uses the Mockingbird to symbolize innocence and the injustice that stems from harming something innocent. She uses this to represent the injustice faced by Tom Robinson and the prejudice faced by Boo Radley.

### **5. Racial Slurs and Prejudice**

The novel itself starts with the introduction of the white people, namely the Finch's use of African Americans as slaves. In the small town of Maycomb, it seems completely normal that African Americans are treated as people of a lower class, this can be evidenced by the use of the word "Negroes" to refer to the black people throughout the novel.

Scout's anger at Cecil Jacobs for saying, "Scout Finch's daddy defended niggers" and at Francis for calling Atticus a "Nigger-lover" (Lee 98) shows Maycomb's rampant prejudice towards African Americans. The use of this specific word shows how language is weaponized to demean someone by putting them lower than some other people, showcasing power dynamics created from language weaponization. The use of the word "white-chillum" (Lee, 135) also shows the prejudice black people have towards white people in Maycomb.

In many instances, it is seen that the white people of Maycomb are prejudiced towards the black people, always assuming the worst of them, as evidenced by the lines "All Negroes lie, that all Negroes are immoral beings, that all Negro men are not to be trusted around our women, an assumption one associates with minds of their caliber" (232), said Atticus in the defense of Tom Robinson. Moreover, specific words like "colored folks" (142) and "trash" to refer to individuals show

how language creates boundaries and inequality between people, creating a sense of superiority and inferiority in the people of Maycomb. Bob Ewell used the word “stuck hog” to describe Mayella’s scream, showing the dehumanizing and demeaning of a woman through language.

The perpetuation of racism and power inequality can also be evidenced when Tom Robinson was asked why he ran away upon being discovered if he was innocent, to which he replied “If you were a nigger like me, you’d be scared, too” (Lee 222). This goes to show that despite being innocent he knew for sure that no one would believe him because “All Negroes lie” (232) and “No white person would ever kiss a Negro.” However, social injustice was not only faced by black people, Atticus Finch and his two children had to face an angry mob for defending Tom Robinson, a completely innocent man who gets convicted simply because he is black. They get mocked, ridiculed, and threatened for going against what the people thought was normal.

### **6. Rhetoric, Power, and Racial Prejudice**

The courtroom scene is one of the most impactful scenes that showcase the use of language and its power. Atticus Finch, as the lawyer and defendant of Tom Robinson, a black man, who was being accused of raping Mayella Ewell, a white woman, used calm and logical reasoning to appeal to the jury’s sense of justice. Despite knowing that Mayella Ewell might have been lying to hide her crime of harassing Tom Robinson, Atticus Finch uses a calm tone and body language to deal with her and Bob Ewell.

On the other hand, Bob Ewell uses derogatory terms and inappropriate language in the courtroom, cursing at Tom Robinson. Mayella Ewell also accuses Tom Robinson of a crime he did not commit with the confidence that people would believe her and not him because she is white and he is a colored man. Mr. Gilmer, the prosecutor in charge of Mayella’s case, also uses an aggressive tone and body language to question Tom Robinson, he also expects the Jury to understand his point of view despite all evidence pointing at Tom Robinson as innocent. All these actions are the cause of the preconceived notion that black people cannot be

trusted and show clear power disparities. Despite knowing it is a lost cause Atticus still tries to appeal to the court by saying,

“But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal— there is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller, the stupid man the equal of an Einstein, and the ignorant man the equal of any college president. ... I am confident that you gentlemen will review without passion the evidence you have heard, come to a decision, and restore this defendant to his family. In the name of God, do your duty” (Lee 233).

However, the years of racial prejudice towards black people won over the truth, and Tom Robinson was convicted guilty by a Jury full of white men. Again, providing a profound testament to how deeply rooted racism is in our society and proving how language as a medium can be weaponized in the name of racism.

## **7. Power of Language**

Scout’s growth as a person through the help of her father Atticus and her surroundings is also a show of language weaponization, albeit a positive one. “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view until you climb into his skin and walk around in it” (Lee 33). Here, Atticus acts as a moral compass for Scout, who teaches her and Jem that one needs to see things from others’ perspectives to understand someone. Under the guidance of Atticus Finch, Scout’s language eventually changes from the influences of society to a more sensible outlook. Through witnessing all the injustice and prejudice around her, Scout realizes the impact language has on people and society, this can be evidenced by the scene of Scout implicitly comparing Boo Radley- a prejudiced man- to a Mockingbird, “Well, it’d be sort of like shootin’ a mockingbird, wouldn’t it?” (Lee 317). Scout, here, implies that acknowledging that Boo Radley killed Bob Ewell is the same as shooting a Mockingbird, which is a sin. Words like “Boo Radley” and “The Phantom” are used to describe Arthur Radley, showing the fear and prejudice the children feel towards him for not being

seen much. This showcases how language is weaponized to create misunderstandings and misinterpretations about someone.

## **8. Conclusion**

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not simply a narrative of racial injustice in the American South. It is a profound study of how language becomes a site of power, control, and social hierarchy. Through the application of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper has revealed the linguistic mechanisms that reproduce racial prejudice and maintain the dominance of white voices over African American ones in the fictional town of Maycomb. The frequent use of racial slurs, the courtroom dialogues, and the differential treatment of characters based on their race all underscore how language in the novel functions as an instrument of ideological reproduction.

Building on Fairclough, Michel Foucault's theories further illuminate how language is not merely reflective but constitutive of power. For Foucault, power circulates through discourse and it does not reside in one place but operates through institutional practices, everyday speech, and the normalization of beliefs. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the courtroom becomes a Foucauldian microcosm of surveillance and regulation, where white authority is enacted and black subjugation is reasserted. Tom Robinson's silence, the manipulation of testimony, and the white jury's refusal to question inherited assumptions are all examples of how discourse maintains systems of control. Power, in this sense, is not only imposed but internalized, both by the oppressed and the oppressors.

Moreover, Scout's gradual moral development illustrates how language and discourse shape subjectivity. As she grows more conscious of the injustices around her, she begins to question the discursive norms that define race, morality, and justice in her society. This transformation aligns with Foucault's notion of resistance. It questions how individuals, through awareness and reflection, can challenge dominant discourses and open up spaces for alternative narratives.

Nevertheless, language is not just a means to cause harm. It can also be a tremendous force for good. This is seen in Scout Finch's growth, as she learns the impact her words can have on others. As she matures, Scout shows increased empathy and care in her speech, mirroring her developing sense of compassion and justice. By showing both the harmful and healing power of language, Lee reminds us of its profound impact on human connections. She highlights how words can deepen divides or build bridges, depending on how they are used. Through this, Lee invites readers to reflect on their own language choices and recognize the responsibility we all share in shaping a more understanding and compassionate world through the words we speak.

Ultimately, this paper has shown that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not just a literary depiction of racism, but a critical text that exposes how language is weaponized to uphold systemic inequality. The integration of Fairclough's CDA and Foucault's power theory offers a layered understanding of how discourse operates as a mechanism of control. In this context, discourse shapes identities, determines truth, and defines who has the right to speak and be heard. Recognizing and deconstructing these linguistic power structures is essential, not only for interpreting literature but also for challenging ongoing forms of social injustice in the real world.

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**Declaration of Interests:** *We, the author of this research manuscript, declare that we have no financial interest. We have provided written consent to publish the paper in this journal.*