

## Analysis of Social Meaning in “I Have a Dream” Speech

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**Abstract**-This study analyzed social meaning in Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, a pivotal civil rights text, to understand its reflection of 1963 America’s socio-cultural context. Despite extensive studies on the speech’s structure and emotional impact, none have applied Leech’s social meaning framework. This research aims to identify sentences conveying social meaning and analyze their linguistic construction using Leech’s theory. A qualitative close reading method was employed, selecting 17 sentences from the official transcript. Findings reveal metaphors like “bad check” and “bank of justice” that critique systemic racism, while phrases like “together” and “faith” foster interracial unity. These reflect voting barriers, segregation, and moral contradictions in America’s democratic ideals. The study advances semantics by applying Leech’s framework to historical discourse, offering insights for linguistic and civil rights scholarship. It underscores language’s role in advocating justice and inspiring change.

**Keywords:** civil rights, I Have a Dream; Leech’s theory; semantics; social meaning

### I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, speeches have played a significant role in shaping public opinion and social change, especially during times of political and racial conflict. On August 28, 1963, many people gathered in Washington, D.C. for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. They stood together at the Lincoln Memorial to support equal rights and fair treatment for African Americans. People came with hope, calling for an end to racism, poverty, and injustice. During this powerful moment in history, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous speech, “I Have a Dream.” In his speech, he shared his dream of a world where people are not judged by the color of their skin, but by their character. He spoke about justice, equality, and the hope that one day all people could live together in peace and freedom. His words touched hearts and became a symbol of the civil rights movement.

To understand language’s powerful impact, it is important to look beyond its content and examine how the language used conveys meaning. This is where semantics

becomes relevant. Semantics is a field of linguistics that studies meaning in language. It focuses on how words and sentences carry meaning and how that meaning is used in everyday communication (Salloum et al., 2020). Meaning in semantics refers to a concept or thought that can be communicated from a speaker’s mind to a listener’s mind through the use of language in various forms. To understand how meaning works in different contexts, there are seven types of meaning. One of them is social meaning, which refers to the meaning conveyed by language that reflects the social context, such as the speaker’s status, relationship with listener or the level of formality in a conversation (Leech, 1981).

The analysis of meaning in speeches has been widely done. In one of the speech analysis studies using Leech’s theory of meaning, it shows that speech gives social meaning by giving people the opportunity to express their own opinions, be confident and do all the things they want to do (Sitinjak et al., 2023). Some previous studies have analyzed this I Have a Dream speech with different fields. The use of

morphemes in this speech enriches the language structure, and also conveys deep social and emotional meaning (André, 2023). This shows that word structure plays an important role. The speech also not only voices Martin's personal dream, but also symbolizes the collective struggle for civil rights, social justice and racial equality (Jumiati, 2022). These two studies show that the I Have a Dream speech has strengths in terms of its content and use of language.

This research is important because there is no research that specifically uses Leech's theory to examine the social meaning in this speech. Previous studies have focused more on language structure, morphology, or emotional meaning. So, this research fills the void by looking at how the social meaning in the speech reflects the socio-cultural conditions of America at that time, as well as showing the power of language as a tool of struggle. The purpose of this research is to explore how Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech especially the sentences that carry strong social meaning, reflects the social and cultural context of America at that time. This study focuses on key words within those sentences and analyzes them using Geoffrey Leech's theory of social meaning. Through this approach, the research aims to uncover the deeper significance behind the speech, highlighting how King's words inspired hope, expressed struggle, and called for justice and equality in a divided society.

## II. METHODS

Martin Luther King Jr. is an important figure in the history of the civil rights struggle in America. He played a major role in the March on Washington, a peaceful action that brought great change to America. During that historic event, he delivered his famous I Have a Dream speech. Through it, Martin voiced his dream of a more just world – where all people, regardless of skin color, could live in equality, freedom, and mutual respect.

The data in this research were sentences, including phrases and clauses found in I Have a Dream speech that contain social meaning.

This research refers to Leech's social meaning which is one of his seven classifications of meaning, using qualitative method. Data collection in this research using close reading method.

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Social Meaning in “I Have a Dream” Speech

The Result of Analysis	
1	Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation
2	But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free
3	This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the “unalienable Rights” of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness
4	America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked “insufficient funds”
5	But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt
6	Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy
7	Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice
8	Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children
9	And there will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights
10	The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges
11	We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote
12	I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created

	equal
13	I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood
14	I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character
15	I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of "interposition" and "nullification" – one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers
16	This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with
17	With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day

Based on the analysis that has been done, seventeen sentences containing social meaning were found. These sentences were then analyzed to see their social meaning and also how the sentence became a reflection of the social and conditions at that time.

"Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation" (King, 1963). The phrase "Five score years ago" connects the struggle to American history and mimics Abraham Lincoln's style of language, signaling that the struggle is a continuation of the struggle Lincoln had waged. "A great American" refers to Lincoln without mentioning his name directly, to avoid the impression of patronizing. The words "symbolic shadow we stand today" describe the protection provided by Lincoln while also showing the shadow of failure, as the struggle for racial equality is not yet over. Meanwhile, "Emancipation Proclamation" is used to remind that although the proclamation

symbolizes freedom, the promise has yet to be fully fulfilled for both blacks and white Americans. This sentence shows that values like freedom and equality weren't truly experienced by the Black community at that time.

"But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free" (King Jr. 1963). This sentence reminds that it has been 100 years since the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 that was supposed to abolish slavery, but in reality, black people still do not feel the freedom that was promised. The number 100 years is used to highlight America's moral failure to keep its own promise. The phrase "not free" refers not only to physical freedom, but also to social injustices such as discrimination in education, employment, voting rights, and the law.

"This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (King Jr. 1963)." The phrase "this note was a promise" means that the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were promises that the U.S. government failed to keep for Black people. When it says "Black men as well as white men," it challenges the idea that only white people were included in "all men." The quote about "unalienable Rights" reminds us that basic rights like life, freedom, and happiness should belong to everyone, not just some. This shows a clear gap between what America claims to stand for and how it actually treats people. While the country called itself the "land of the free," Black people were still being treated unfairly.

"America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds" (King Jr. 1963). In his speech, Martin Luther King Jr. used the metaphors of a "bad check" and "insufficient funds" to show how Black people felt about the government's broken promises. Although the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution promised equality, Black people were still

treated unfairly. By using banking terms that many people, especially white middle-class citizens, would understand, King made his message clear: America owed Black people justice, but hadn't paid it. The "bad check" represents the empty promises of equality, and "insufficient funds" means that America (at that time) was morally failing to give Black citizens the rights they deserve.

*"But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt"* (King, 1963). The phrase "bank of justice" compares justice to a bank—something people trust and rely on. It suggests that justice should be easy to access, just like taking money from a bank. The word "bankrupt," usually used for failing businesses, is used here to criticize how the legal system failed Black people, especially during the time of racial segregation. The phrase "we refuse to believe" shows that King is not speaking alone—he represents a community that still believes in America's promises, even if reality is painful. By using legal and financial terms, he made his message easier for the white middle class to understand. He also pointed out how America cares more about money than justice.

*"Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy"* (King, 1963). "Now is the time" is a phrase that shows the urgency of change without sounding harsh, reflecting a firm but peaceful leader. Meanwhile, the phrase "make real the promises of democracy" highlights America's failure to fulfill the promise of democracy, especially for black citizens who still experience discrimination. The word "democracy" is used to demand justice for all citizens, not just for certain groups. In this sentence, King emphasizes that the responsibility of realizing social justice is everyone's duty. He is also careful not to appear anti-American, but rather invites the American people to see the contradiction between the country's ideals and the existing social reality.

*"Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice"* (King, 1963). King used strong contrasts like "dark and desolate valley of segregation" and "sunlit path of racial justice" to show the pain of racism and the hope for a better future. The phrase "Now is the time" shows urgency—it's a call to stop waiting and start making change, especially for those still unsure about ending segregation. "Dark and desolate" suggests deep spiritual pain, while "segregation" points to laws that allowed racial discrimination. On the other hand, the "sunlit path" represents hope, and "racial justice" means more than just equal rights—it means fairness for all races. As a pastor, King used religious language to connect with his community, reminding them of their shared struggles and dreams. He also sent a strong message to the government: keeping segregation means keeping people in darkness.

*"Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children"* (King, 1963). Phrase "Now is the time" showed urgency and called for immediate action, while "Make justice a reality" highlighted that justice was still not truly felt by Black people. When he said "All of God's children," he emphasized unity across races and raised the issue of justice to a moral level, not just a political one. As a pastor, King used religious language to speak to the Christian majority in America, making his message more powerful and harder to ignore. At that time, religion played a big role in society, so by using shared spiritual values, King strengthened his call for justice and encouraged people of all races to stand together.

*"And there will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights"* (King, 1963). The phrase "neither rest nor tranquility" means that America will not have peace as long as racism exists. The term "citizenship rights" is more specific than "human rights" because it points out



that many Black people in 1963 still couldn't vote and were treated as second-class citizens. King used the word "the Negro" (used in 1963 to denote Black Americans) to build unity among Black people and to challenge how white society saw them. At that time, the country was in a tense situation—especially in the South, where laws kept Black and white people apart, and violence against Black communities was common. King's civil rights movement focused on peaceful protest, even though some younger Black activists were starting to support more radical ideas. By using the word "tranquility," King pushed back against the media's claim that protests were the problem—he made it clear that racism, not protest, was the real threat to peace.

*"The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges"* (King, 1963). At the time, Black people protesting peacefully were often met with violence, leading some to consider fighting back. In this context, King used the phrase "whirlwinds of revolt" to describe the growing unrest—not as a threat, but as a natural, unstoppable force. He wanted to warn the government and unite different groups without encouraging violence. By speaking at the Lincoln Memorial, he highlighted the moral failure of a nation built on freedom yet denying it to many. Phrases like "shake the foundations of our nation" showed how racism weakens core American values, while "bright day of justice" offered hope, using religious language familiar and comforting to his audience, especially in the Black Southern community.

*"We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote"* (King, 1963). The phrase "we cannot be satisfied" shows the spirit of unity and determination to fight injustice. The word "we" brings

together Black people and their white allies as one group standing against racism. The phrase itself is a call to keep fighting, said in a way that feels like a church sermon—something that connected well with the many people in the audience who came from church communities. "A Negro in Mississippi cannot vote," he points to the South, where Black people were blocked from voting through unfair tests and laws. He uses the word "Negro" to highlight the racial identity of those being oppressed. "A Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote," to show that even in the North, where voting was allowed, many Black people felt their voices didn't lead to real change. In 1963, racism was widespread in both the South and North. By naming both states, he showed that injustice was happening across the country—not just in the South. The phrase "cannot be satisfied" is his way of urging people not to accept injustice, but to keep fighting it together. He wanted people to realize that racism was a national problem that needed everyone's effort to overcome.

*"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal'"* (King, 1963). The phrase "I have a dream" is not just King's personal hope, but a shared dream for justice and change, rooted in African-American religious tradition. When he says "this nation will rise up," he means a moral awakening—not violence—unlike the radical groups of the time. His words, "live out the true meaning of its creed," remind Americans of their founding promise that "all men are created equal." For white Americans, it's a powerful criticism of broken ideals; for Black Americans, it's a reminder that they, too, are part of that promise—despite the harsh reality of ongoing racism at that time.

*"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table*

of brotherhood" (King, 1963). The phrase "red hills of Georgia" refers to the South's history of slavery, but he turns it into a symbol of hope and healing—a place once filled with pain, now imagined as a place of unity. When he says "sons of former slaves and sons of former slave owners," he shows the deep divide in America's past but also expresses his hope that their descendants can come together in peace. The "table of brotherhood" represents equality and unity, using Christian values to show that all people should be treated like family. In 1963, places like Georgia still had strict racial segregation in schools, transport, and restaurants. By mentioning both sides of history and using religious language, he appealed to the Christian values of many white Americans, while giving hope to Black Americans.

*"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" (King, 1963).* When he says "my four little children," he speaks as a father, making the issue of racism feel personal and real, especially to other parents. The phrase "judged by the color of their skin" shows the harsh reality of racism at the time, like segregation and discrimination. "Content of their character" reflects hope that people will be judged by who they are, not their race. This is a subtle criticism of a society that claims fairness but still favors white people. Through his speech, he builds empathy, offers hope, and calls for peaceful change based on moral values.

*"I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of 'interposition' and 'nullification' – one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers" (King, 1963).* King chose words

that showed the reality of racism but still kept a peaceful and respectful tone. He called out Alabama's racism subtly and used strong metaphors, like saying the governor spreads poison, to show the danger of leaders who misuse power. He also gave hope for a future where children of all races live together in peace. At that time, segregation was everywhere—in schools, restaurants, and public places—and violence against civil rights activists was common. By mentioning legal terms like "interposition" and "nullification," King showed how laws were used to block racial equality. He used children as symbols of innocence and the future, to show that racism is taught, not natural.

*"This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with" (King, 1963).* The phrases "This is our hope" and "the faith" show unity in the struggle, not just King's personal dream. Saying "go back to the South" shows optimism and encourages people to keep fighting, even in the hardest places. The word "faith" adds a religious tone, linking the civil rights movement to Christian values. At the time, the Black church was a key place of hope and resistance, and most Black people in the South were Christian. King also used religious language to inspire and connect with his audience. He highlighted the South to show where the struggle was hardest and to strengthen unity and courage.

*"With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day" (King, 1963).* The word "together" is repeated to stress unity between Black and white people in the fight for justice. Phrases like "work together, pray together, struggle together" show that the movement is peaceful and shared by all. "Go to jail together" is shown as a brave, moral act, not a shameful one. "With this faith" uses religious language to inspire hope, and "we will be free one day" gives confidence that justice will come. King

used these words to unite people, challenge unfair American values, and show that protest is a moral, not violent, act. His goal was to keep the movement peaceful and give hope to those facing violence and jail.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Based on analysis discussion above, of King's "I Have a Dream" speech shows that its message is not mere rhetoric, but a profound reflection of the social injustices experienced by the black American community at the time. King cleverly used accessible language-such as the metaphors of "blank check" or "dark valley of segregation" – to denounce systemic discrimination, from voting barriers in Mississippi to black political powerlessness in New York. The speech highlights the fundamental contradiction between the promise of freedom in the US Constitution and the reality of racism that denies black people their basic rights. By invoking the Declaration of Independence and Christian values, King not only builds a moral argument that is difficult to refute, but also invites white audiences to introspect, especially those who consider peaceful protests as "disturbers of the peace".

The speech also symbolized hope and non-violent resistance. When King spoke of "little children holding hands", he offered a heartwarming vision of reconciliation, while criticizing the hatred passed down through generations. The repetition of the phrases "Now is the time" and "I have a dream" emphasized the urgency of change, while words like "together" and "faith" reinforced interracial solidarity. In the context of 1963-amidst rampant violence against activists and the burning of black churches-the speech is a reminder that injustice is the real threat to peace, not the protest that demands it. In doing so, King not only documented suffering, but

also raised the collective consciousness that freedom is the right of all human beings, regardless of skin color. This speech is proof that language can be a weapon against injustice, as well as a mirror that forces America to see its true face: a nation that is not yet free for all its citizens.

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