

## **The Representation of Tun Mahathir Pre and Post General Election 14: A Critical Discourse Analysis**

Siti Rahmah Abdullah\*, Nur Hazwani Mohd Muhrizda, Shanti C Sandaran & Fathiyah Syaakirah Seliman  
Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,  
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 UTM Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia

Nur Afifah Mohd Rosli  
Kolej Profesional Mara, Jalan Ungku Aziz, Bandar Penawar, Johor, Malaysia

Submitted: 1/4/2025. Revised edition: 1/9/2025. Accepted: 1/9/2025. Published online: 30/11/2025

### **ABSTRACT**

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the representation of Tun Dr Mahathir in the context of the 14th General Election in Malaysia. CDA views language as a social practice (Mullet, 2018), shaping and shaped by power dynamics within society. The research focuses on the lexical choices and discourse structures in Utusan Malaysia's coverage of Tun Dr Mahathir, both prior to and following his electoral victory. By applying Van Leeuwen's framework (2008) for analyzing the representation of social actors (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). This paper investigates how linguistic and social resources construct identities and social relations. Specifically, it investigates the nomination, identification, and functionalization of Tun Dr Mahathir, revealing the ideological implications of discourse in the portrayal of his prime ministerial role. The analysis spans a critical period, before the election (6 until 8 May 2018) and after the election (16 until 18 May 2018), highlighting shifts in discourse that may reflect changing power relations and institutional control of linguistic resources.

*Keywords:* Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Power, Identity, Representation

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach that views language as a form of social practice, analyzing how social and political power is reproduced through text and discourse (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). It sees language as both socially constitutive and shaped by societal structures (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), with particular attention to the lexical choices that reflect ideological underpinnings. CDA also highlights unequal access to discourse, often controlled institutionally (Wodak, 2001). In this study, CDA is used to explore the representation of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in Utusan Malaysia's coverage before and after the 14th General Election in 2018. By analyzing the lexical choices and discourse patterns, this paper aims to reveal how Tun Mahathir's identity is constructed in the media as both the opposition leader and, later, as the Prime Minister. Van Leeuwen's social actor framework (2008) will be applied to examine how key categories like nomination, identification, and functionalization are used in these representations.

---

\*Correspondence to: Siti Rahmah Abdullah (email: s.rahmah@utm.my)

**Given CDA's concern with how ideologies are embedded in texts, it provides a useful lens to investigate the political reporting of Mahathir during a crucial moment in Malaysian history.** The 14th Malaysian General Election on May 9, 2018, was historic as the opposition alliance, Pakatan Harapan (PH), led by Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, ended the 61-year rule of Barisan Nasional (BN) (BBC News, 2018). PH won 113 seats, forming the federal government, while BN secured only 79 seats. This election marked the first transition of power at the federal level in Malaysia, with Mahathir becoming the world's oldest elected leader at 92 (BBC News, 2018). Recent research shows that age-based framings remain significant in political reporting. Journalists often treat age with caution, yet descriptions of leaders frequently embed ageist assumptions and stereotypes (Chen *et al.*, 2023; Selvaraj & Sandaran, 2024). Broader studies also reveal that ageism is present in media discourse globally, shaping how older individuals are perceived in politics and society (Mannheim *et al.*, 2023). In Malaysia, scholars have highlighted how political identities are reconstructed through selective lexical choices in both traditional and online news (Saidin & Azrun, 2024). The study aims to analyze how Tun Mahathir is portrayed in *Utusan Malaysia*, focusing on ageism in media discourse during this significant political transition, using the social actor representation framework and examining articles from one week before and after the election in 2018.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Critical Discourse

CDA explores how texts influence readers and hearers, exposing hidden ideologies or covert beliefs (Fairclough, 2014). CDA emphasizes the role of language in relaying beliefs to the public and reveals ideological manipulation by separating ideologies from words (Fairclough, 2014). By analyzing text components, CDA aims to uncover hidden ideologies that shape perspectives. Analysts have studied various texts, such as political manifestos, advertising, and newspaper reports, to show how language use can be ideological (Evans, 2013). More recent studies highlight the importance of combining close textual analysis with corpus methods to capture larger discursive patterns across both print and digital platforms (Taylor & Marchi, 2018). This demonstrates that CDA continues to be a relevant and evolving method for analyzing political discourse.

### 2.2 Social Actor Theory

To analyze how Tun Mahathir was represented in *Utusan Malaysia*, Van Leeuwen's framework (2008), a comprehensive CDA framework based on a socio-semantic inventory, was adopted. This framework involves three transformation processes: deletion, rearrangement, and substitution, focusing on substitution in identification and functionalization. Identification defines social actors by age, gender, class, or other attributes, while functionalization refers to occupation or roles (Davari & Moini, 2016). Recent scholarship shows that social actor analysis is increasingly used in comparative media studies, including research on Malaysian political campaigns, to highlight how lexical choices construct in-group and out-group categories (Selvaraj & Sandaran, 2024).

## 2.3 Construction of Identity

Identity construction represents who individuals are and what they represent through linguistic discourse. It portrays a person's actions, thoughts, or speech, reflecting their personal and social life. Vygotsky (1978) noted that the presentation of self is complex, changing with different roles and cultural transformations. Individuals are categorized socially through culture, race, gender, and religion (Dowling, 2011). Recent studies emphasize that political identities are reconstituted discursively during regime changes, with news and digital media framing leaders' competence and legitimacy in ways that resonate with cultural expectations (Saidin & Azrun, 2024).

## 2.4 Ageism

Ageism, defined by Robert N. Butler, is discrimination based on age, comparable to sexism and racism (Butler, 1969). Negative attitudes towards age result in discriminatory practices against older people and reinforce stereotypes (Butler, 1969; Wilkinson & Ferraro, 2002). In politics, ageism is a significant factor influencing public perception of leaders, often alongside sexism and racism (Sigelman & Sigelman, 1982). Reinforcement of discriminatory views about old age can lead to implicit ageism, further reinforced by negative imagery and stereotypical associations (Levy & Banaji, 2002). Recent studies confirm that ageist discourse continues to appear in journalism and digital communication, shaping public perceptions of leadership competence (Chen et al., 2023; Mannheim et al., 2023; Selvaraj & Sandaran, 2024). This suggests that CDA of political reporting remains crucial for exposing implicit ageist ideologies.

## 2.5 Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (Ong, 2005)

Mahathir Mohamad, born in 1925 in Alor Star, Kedah, joined UMNO in 1945 at age 20 and was elected to Parliament in 1964. He left UMNO three times (1969, 2008, 2016) for different reasons. He served as the fourth and longest-serving Prime Minister of Malaysia from 1981 to 2003. After leaving UMNO, he joined Pakatan Harapan and became its chairman (Rodzi, 2017), leading them to win the 2018 General Election, making him the seventh Prime Minister of Malaysia (Ong, 2005). More recent scholarship notes that Mahathir's political persona is frequently framed through age-related discourses, particularly in 2018 when he became the world's oldest elected leader (Chen et al., 2023).

## 2.6 Utusan Malaysia

*Utusan Malaysia* began publishing on May 29, 1939, in Singapore, established as Utusan Melayu Press Limited in 1938. After Malaysia's independence, it moved to Kuala Lumpur, initially targeting the Jawi-literate audience. The newspaper went online in 1997, becoming the first in Malaysia to do so. *Utusan* had historically been closely linked to Barisan Nasional, often reflecting the ruling party's narratives (Weiss, 2012). However, after Pakatan Harapan's victory in May 2018, the newspaper's language shifted noticeably, with reports adopting a more critical tone toward the new government while softening portrayals of BN figures. More recent analyses also note that *Utusan*'s political discourse demonstrates how Malaysian media adapt narratives depending on shifts in power, yet still reproduce ideological positioning through lexical emphasis and omission (Selvaraj & Sandaran, 2024). Today, the paper's tone remains cautious and

adaptive, often balancing critical commentary with attempts to appeal to a wider readership in its digital platforms.

### 3.0 METHOD

This paper employed a qualitative critical discourse analysis to examine how Utusan Malaysia, a mainstream newspaper, represented Tun Mahathir before and after he won the recent 14th General Election. The analysis used the social actor framework, identifying lexis that reflected categories such as naming, identification, functionalization, and metaphors. A time frame was utilized to identify the necessary materials and to avoid ambiguity. The articles were selected from 6th to 8th May 2018 and 16th to 18th May 2018. Seven post-election articles were chosen within these three days, focusing on the presentation of Tun Mahathir himself. The study omitted post-election articles that did not discuss how Tun Mahathir's identity was presented in Utusan Malaysia. 8th May was the day before the general election when Tun Mahathir was still in the opposition party. The week following the election, during which the news reporting focused more on the victories and ministry appointments, was skipped.

The title of the articles are as follows:

**Pre-election:**

1. DAP akan menggunakan Dr. Mahathir sehabis mungkin (6 May 2018)
2. [VIDEO] Kerakusan DAP semakin terdedah (6 May 2018)
3. Sukar bagi Dr. Mahathir kawal DAP (7 May 2018)
4. Jangan m@%\$&s dulu (7 May 2018)
5. 'Saya sedar, saya sudah tua' (8 May 2018)
6. PRU14 Tun M tiada kuasa dalam pembangkang (8 May 2018)

### 4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Table 1** Social Actor Representations

	Pre	Post
<b>Nomination</b>	Dr Mahathir (60), Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (6), Mahathir (4) Tun M (2) Dr M	Dr Mahathir (20) Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (6) Tun M (4)
<b>Identification</b>		

	Pre	Post
<b>1. Classification</b>	Veteran Tua Umur Dr. Mahathir yang sudah terlalu tua 93 tahun	Tertua di dunia 93 tahun,
<b>2. Physical</b>	Tidak mempunyai kekuatan selain hanya bergantung kepada mainan persepsi	
<b>3. Relational</b>	-	
<b>Functionalization</b>	Musuh politik, Calon PKR Parlimen Langkawi(2), Pengerusi PPBM Calon Perdana Menteri sementara, Bekas Perdana Menteri (2) , Pengerusi PPBM(2) Pembangkang PKR (3) Pengerusi gabungan pembangkang PKR Musuh utama seolah-olah menguasai pembangkang Pemimpin Melayu	Perdana Menteri Malaysia (6), Perdana Menteri Ketujuh, Presiden Pakatan Harapan, pemimpin Pakatan Harapan, 'kredibiliti dan keupayaan', 'tidak boleh mungkir janji', 'Tetap melaksanakan' 'Melepaskan' 'Membuktikan' 'Membetulkan' 'dengan pantas melaksanakan'
<b>Metaphor</b>	memperkudakan Dr. Mahathir, kuda tunggangan, dedak, alat pakai buang, kuda tunggangan DAP, 'kuda' DAP, menjadi 'kuda' mereka, pemimpin 'heavyweight' Melayu, Shek Kin, 'Shek Kin yang sudah mahu mati' "ini 'game terakhir untuk Mahathir" Hanya diperkudakan (2)	'Solo'(3), 'pembersihan', 'membetulkan', 'kepincangan', 'terpaksa', dedak, 'terletak di bahu'

#### 4.1 Nomination

In analyzing the representation of Dr. Mahathir in the media before and after the election, the articles used two key forms of nomination: functionalization and identification. Nomination refers to how social actors are named and identified in texts, which can reveal their roles and significance (Van Leeuwen, 2008). Dr. Mahathir is primarily referred to as "Dr. Mahathir," highlighting his role as a doctor, not as a Prime Minister. This reflects his duties and responsibilities, rather than focusing on his official title. For instance:

- Pre-election: "Sukar bagi Dr. Mahathir kawal DAP" (6 May 2018).
- Post-election: "Pada usia 93 tahun, Dr. Mahathir masih berjaya membuktikan wibawanya" (16 May 2018).

However, the title "Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad" appears in more formal contexts, especially when connected with his position as the Prime Minister, signifying respect for his status and long service to the nation.

## 4.2 Identification

Identification of Tun Mahathir often emphasizes his age. Before the election, age was portrayed negatively, questioning his ability to lead due to his advanced age. Examples include:

- Pre-election: “Dr. Mahathir sudah 92 tahun” (8 May 2018).
- Post-election: “Pada usia 93 tahun Dr. Mahathir masih berjaya membuktikan wibawanya” (16 May 2018).

Post-election, the focus shifts to his status as the oldest Prime Minister, with a more positive tone, though his age remains a focal point. His presence on Instagram and family life are also highlighted, indicating his efforts to connect with the public and stay relevant in modern times.

## 4.3 Functionalization

Functionalization shows social actors through their roles or activities (Post, 2009). Pre-election, Mahathir is depicted as an opposition leader and political enemy:

- “Calon PKR Parlimen Langkawi” (7 May 2018).

Post-election, he is depicted as the Prime Minister with responsibilities to address national issues and implement changes:

- “Perdana Menteri Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad” (16 May 2018).

## 4.4 Metaphors

Metaphors play a significant role in pre-election articles, with Mahathir frequently compared to a “horse,” implying he is being controlled or used by other political forces, particularly the DAP. This metaphor reinforces the idea of Mahathir being manipulated, portraying him as a draft animal burdened with tasks and lacking autonomy.

- “Jangan biarkan Dr. Mahathir menjadi kuda tunggangan DAP” (6 May 2018).

After the election, the narrative shifts to depict him as the head of the new government, fulfilling promises such as abolishing the GST. The media also highlights his swift decision-making and his leadership in correcting the previous government's issues, often describing him as working “solo” to handle the nation's affairs.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

This study shows that *Utusan Malaysia*'s portrayal of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad shifted before and after GE14, with ageist discourse adapted to suit changing political contexts. Using Van Leeuwen's social actor framework, the analysis demonstrates how media language constructs identity and legitimacy in ways that reinforce ideological positions. The findings underline the value of CDA in revealing how political narratives are shaped through discourse. Future research could further investigate the role of ideology in shaping media narratives or compare how different newspapers represent him or other politicians, while also exploring intersections with age, gender, and race to provide a broader understanding of Malaysian media representation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my fellow co-authors for their invaluable contributions and collaboration throughout the development of this paper. I am also deeply thankful to the Language Academy for their continuous support and guidance. My appreciation extends to the organizers of the LSP 2024 Conference for the opportunity to present our work at such a prestigious platform. It is an honor to share our research and engage with the wider academic community.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

## REFERENCES

- BBC News. (2018). *Malaysia election: Opposition scores historic victory*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44036178>.
- Butler, R. N. (1969). Ageism: Another form of bigotry. *The Gerontologist*, 9(4), 243–246.
- Chen, K.-W., Lewis, N. P., & Altourah, A. F. (2023). Ageism, a remarkable election, and the journalism objectivity norm. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990231196086>.
- Chouliaraki, L., & Fairclough, N. (1999). *Discourse in late modernity: Rethinking critical discourse analysis*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Davari, S., & Moini, M. R. (2016). The representation of social actors in Top Notch textbook series: A critical discourse analysis perspective. *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 4(13), 69–82.
- Dowling, S. (2011). *Constructing identity: Identity construction* (Master's thesis). Georgia State University. Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1089&context=art\\_design\\_theses](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1089&context=art_design_theses)
- Fairclough, N., & Wodak, R. (1997). Critical discourse analysis. In T. A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse as social interaction* (Vol. 2, pp. 258–284). Sage.
- Fairclough, N. (2014). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Routledge.
- Evans, M. (2013). The author and the princess – An example of critical discourse analysis. *Language in Conflict*. Retrieved from <http://www.languageinconflict.org/component/content/article/90-frontpage/145-the-author-and-the-princess-an-example-of-critical-discourse-analysis.html>.
- James, T., & Lahti, T. (2001). *Ideology and discourse: The theory and practice of critical discourse analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2008). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- Levy, B. R., & Banaji, M. R. (2002). Implicit ageism. In T. D. Nelson (Ed.), *Ageism: Stereotyping and prejudice against older persons* (pp. 49–75). MIT Press.

- Mannheim, I., Wouters, E. J. M., Köttl, H., van Boekel, L. C., Brankaert, R., & van Zalen, Y. (2023). Ageism in the discourse and practice of designing digital technology for older persons: A scoping review. *The Gerontologist*, 63(7), 1188–1200. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnac144>.
- Ong, H. T. (2005). A doctor's duty is to heal the unhealthy: The story of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. *Annals of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore*, 34, 45C–51C.
- Post, J. (2009). Functionalization and the role of social actors. *Journal of Discourse Studies*, 5(2), 122–135.
- Rodzi, N. H. (2017). Mahathir named chairman, Anwar named de facto leader of Pakatan Harapan. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/mahathir-named-chairman-anwar-named-de-facto-leader-of-pakatan-rakyat>.
- Saidin, M. I. S., & Azrun, N. (2024). Digital media and religious sentiments in Malaysia: Critical discourse analysis of Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party and Democratic Action Party cyberspace campaigns in the 15th general election. *Religions*, 15(8), Article 920. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15080920>.
- Selvaraj, S., & Sandaran, S. C. (2024). Discourses of aging in a Malaysian online newspaper: Shaping of the perceptions of society. *Research on Ageing and Social Policy*, 12(2), 105–126. <https://doi.org/10.17583/rasp.14369>.
- Sigelman, L., & Sigelman, C. K. (1982). Sexism, racism, and ageism in voting behavior: An experimental analysis. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 263-269.
- Taylor, C., & Marchi, A. (2018). *Corpus approaches to discourse: A critical review*. Routledge.
- Utusan Malaysia. (n.d.). *Malaysian newspaper history*. Retrieved from <http://www.utusanmalaysia.net/history-behind-the-utusan-malaysia.html>.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological functions*. Harvard University Press.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2008). *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*. Oxford University Press.
- Weiss, M. L. (2012). *Politics in cyberspace: New media in Malaysia*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- Wilkinson, J., & Ferraro, K. (2002). Thirty years of ageism research. In T. D. Nelson (Ed.), *Ageism: Stereotyping and prejudice against older persons* (pp. 13–30). MIT Press.
- Wodak, R. (2001). What CDA is about: A summary of its history, important concepts, and its developments. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (pp. 1–13). Sage.