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**SOCIAL CLASS, RESISTANCE, AND IDENTITY IN SOUTH KOREAN  
DRAMA: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SPEECH PATTERNS  
AND POWER IN *ITAEWON CLASS***

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***Abstract***

*This study explore the role of language in the South Korean drama *Itaewon Class* as it works as a tool to determine power, control, belonging, and resistance. This study employs Van Dijk's sociocognitive model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to link the speech patterns with cognition and social context. Through the purposive random sampling, selective dialogues have been chosen from the South Korean drama *Itaewon Class* where linguistic choices emphasize the conflict between advantaged and disadvantaged groups by adopting a qualitative approach. By using CDA, the study uses formal language and rigid power structures to reflect how the strong and confident speech changes and exposes racism in the country. The findings of this study shows that discourse in *Itaewon Class*, both speech and silence, does not just allow people to share their emotions and information but also gives them space to resist, gain power, and deal with beliefs, values, and customs. Additionally, the results show that the drama does not just imitate South Korean society, but also challenges it by displaying how digital media can change public's perception of justice, belonging, identity, and social hierarchies.*

***Keywords:*** *Power, Identity, Resistance, Social Hierarchy, Cognition, Social Context, Ideology, Media Studies*

***Introduction***

The language use in South Korea works as an important tool that functions not just to share information and express emotions but also to handle hierarchical social order. Language use serves as a powerful system in mediated settings, especially in dramas, exposing and affecting larger socio-political actualities. Media discourse is important in regularizing power and control systems, and creating pathways for resistance through scripts, narrative structures, and



representations. As Stuart Hall (1997) studied in his work *Culture and power*, media discourses work as locations for the active construction, application and circulation of cultural contexts.

South Korean speech patterns and titles, based on Confucian traditions, shape and mold relationships and describe the social standing of an individual (Lee, 2020). The growth of the South Korean Wave, i.e., Hallyu has made South Korean dramas a main platform to discuss these changing values and practicality, letting digital media support or challenge typical viewpoints on social class, gender, and race (Samosir & Wee, 2024). Furthermore, South Korean media progressively reflects on how the country deals with culture and identity which have been highlighted and discussed topics in public discussions and school curriculum.

CDA is a significant structure applied to investigate how language visualizes and constructs power relations in society. Teun A. van Dijk shows that discourse is never neutral; it can be used to construct, control, reproduce and resist power relations. Media is chief way to this process, as it forms public perception of social affairs. With language use, the media can validate and promote dominant ideologies and suppress resisting voices. Van Dijk's sociocognitive model is engrossed in a way that examines media discourses shape public's perceptions and incorporates power relations.

*Itaewon Class* illustrated the interaction between identity, language, and power. The character Park Sae-Royi's negation to use socially accepted, respectful and submissive language goes in opposition to power in social classes, while the transgender character, Hyeon-yi, and Toni, a Black-South Korean character, utilize their speeches and silences to hold their place in society and resist being marginalized. These portrayals reflect with bigger changes and multiple interpretations in language usage and culture of South Korea, where critical discourse practices are employed to challenge unjust power dynamics and focuses on the importance of individual's identity in both real and online groups (AlAfnan, 2025).

By investigating how language, digital media, and social power and control connect, this study adds in ongoing discussions on linguistic studies and media analysis. It desires to show the speech and silence in *Itaewon Class* displays not only the fictional disputes but also real-life social issues about justice, voice, and identity. Utilizing Van Dijk's sociocognitive model, this study connects speech patterns to cognition and social interactions and practices that keep up or break down injustice. Additionally, this study points out how popular South Korean culture acts as a place where marginalized people are seen and where language becomes a way to fight against control by the system.

### **Research Objectives**

- i. To analyze how linguistic patterns in *Itaewon Class* builds power structures and show resistance to powerful social groups.
- ii. To examine how beliefs and mental models affect the construction of identity and power in the drama.
- iii. To explore how the dialogues of *Itaewon Class* reflect, negotiate, and subvert current social and political power structures.



### **Research Questions**

- i. How does *Itaewon Class* use language to create power dynamics and represent resistance against hegemonic groups?
- ii. How do the underlying ideologies and mental model patterns influence the power and identity in the drama?
- iii. How does the conversation in *Itaewon Class* mirror and question the main social and political system?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study explores how the language in the South Korean drama *Itaewon Class* creates and question power, identity, and hierarchies through dialogues. With the help of Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, it shows how speech, respect, control, and silence help create ideas about social class, authority and belonging. The study is substantial as it shows that South Korean dramas mirror and change audience's perception about inequality and changes in culture, adding to larger discussions about language, power, and how things are displayed on TV.

### **Problem Statement**

The popularity of South Korean culture in the world has made South Korean media more admired, but limited attention has been given to how linguistic choices creates and questions power dynamics. South Korean dramas like *Itaewon Class* greatly influence how people view social status, identity, and resistance. *Itaewon Class*, the socially relevant drama, presents affluent linguistic and discursive moments that reveal tensions between powerful and subaltern groups. This study bridges this gap by exploring the ways language constructs, reiterates, and undermines relations of power, ideology, and social hierarchy in the drama. Using Van Dijk's model, this research at *Itaewon Class* shows language as a way to deal with problems of unfair social classes, being left out, and identity in today's South Korean community.

### **Delimitation**

This research is delimited to the analysis of selected dialogues from the South Korean drama *Itaewon Class* analyzing certain dialogues that highlights only those scenes that emphasize power dynamics, class struggle, and resistance. The research limited to linguistic and conversational elements that show power and cognition work in the drama. Guided by Van Dijk's model, this research looks closely at conversations, cognition, and communities which are connected through the language create and show the social ideas in the drama.

### **Literature Review**

The aim of this section is to review previous research works about language, authority, identity, and social hierarchies in media and communication.

Dildar and Batool (2025) used critical discourse analysis to qualitatively explore power and beliefs in Pakistani morning TV programs. Their work studied how the words used in well-known media create ideas about men and women, strengthen power, and spread certain beliefs within entertainment. The findings of this research showed that presenters and people in the dramas often use language tricks that make patriarchal systems seem normal and affect what people think about it, as it is shown in Pakistani morning shows.



AlAfnan (2025) aimed to investigate in his work *Language, Power, and Social Dynamics in Online Gaming: A Discourse Analysis of Toxicity and Inclusivity in Digital Spaces*, that how people interact online to investigate how speech affects belonging and marginalization on digital platforms like online games. The findings showed that language is not just used to transfer information, and emotions and feelings, but also a place where people decide their identity and power relations. By qualitatively studying chats, the research focuses on how players' speech creates identities and hierarchy in online groups. Based on the ideas about language use in society and important discourses, the research found that discourse in online games can mimic power or help people feel stronger and dominant, deciding if digital platforms are friendly and harmless or causing insecurities and instability in society.

Samosir and Wee (2024) studied in his research *Impoliteness, identity and power in South Korean: Critical discourse analysis and perception study of impoliteness*, language part of the South Korean Wave (Hallyu) by qualitatively investigating how socio-linguistics helped South Korea's culture's expansion and appreciation around the world. The study concluded by situating its findings within the context of global culture, demonstrating how language effects attitudes towards South Korea, both domestically and internationally. The results showed that Korean digital media uses language tricks to display the advancement of the country, how proud public is, and its influence on the world, which makes the nation's soft power stronger.

Syafe'i (2024) conducted qualitative research on racism and social injustice are displayed in the K-drama *Itaewon Class*, examining how linguistic choices and speech patterns exposes who is marginalized and treated unfairly. The objective of this research to analyze characters' language to find how dialogues and expressions show the levels of superiority and inferiority in society. Based on the idea of important discourses, the research found that language in *Itaewon Class* helps to expose and resist unfair social structures. The results showed that language is used in the drama matches real-life issues of social class, race and injustice in South Korea.

Ullah et al. (2024) aimed to investigate in his work *A critical discourse analysis of language patterns and power dynamics in social media discourse*, how linguistic choices and speech patterns help create and resist power in social media communication. Utilizing critical discourse analysis, the research qualitatively studied that language acts as a tool to control or empower people online. The findings suggest that language use on online platforms has two roles, keeping power relations in place while also promoting acts of resistance and liberty on social, cultural and digital level in today's world. The results demonstrated that social media discourses and speeches often make power relations stronger and sturdier, but it can also make space for resistance and change in society.

Cho (2023) investigated, through his research, *Critical Language Pedagogy in a Neoliberal Space (Hagwŏn) in South Korea: Student Awareness and Engagement in Critical Dialogue* that language is being taught in a critical and analytical way in South Korean schools that function in competitive, business-focused ways. By studying classroom interactions and conversations, the research focused on students' cognition patterns about their language use to question control, power and injustice. The results showed that learning language critically, helps students gain knowledge and consciousness about social levels of superiority and let them challenge the power



and control of schools. The study situated its results in the ideas of critical ways of teaching and conversation, finding that language learning can be a tool for helping students know about their society and justice.

Lee (2016) qualitatively examined how South Korea teaches about different cultures by focusing on the official discourses that support including different cultures. Using critical discourse analysis, this research studied how language in official settings builds ideas of belonging, variety, and excluding. The results showed that even though talking about many cultures is stressed, the discourses often strengthen national identity and injustice in society. The results show that in the social and political setting of South Korea, language is used to both maintain and make acceptable the current power situations and push people aside.

Yoon (2016) analyzed how migrant women are shown in South Korean media by using discourse analysis to find language habits of using stereotypes and racism. The study aimed to expose how media perception builds cultural and gender hierarchies. The results showed that immigrant females are often shown through finite and stereotypical views that empower social injustice and power dynamics. In feminist and media talk ideas, the study decided that language and media are key in forming how the public sees gender, race, and fitting in in South Korean society.

Fairclough (2013) explored the linked connection between language and power, stressing that talks are a social habit that both form and are formed by beliefs. Using critical discourse analysis, the study explores how language structures copy control, power, and social injustice while also giving chances to fight back. The results highlighted that power is part of everyday talking and that talks are a main place where social rankings are both kept up and fought against. Fairclough's work gave a starting idea frame for knowing how language, beliefs, and power connections meet in society.

### **Research Methodology**

This study uses qualitative method by employing Van Dijk's sociocognitive model of CDA. The objective of this research is to examine to understand how language and control are shown in the South Korean drama *Itaewon Class*. Using Van Dijk's idea of how CDA works in society and the mind, the research looks at speech, cognition, power and society which are connected through the language. The study employs purposive random sampling, selective dialogues were chosen from *Itaewon Class* and specific scenes that clearly show problems of control, unfair treatment, and social difference. Dialogues were transcribed manually in English from the official website of Korean drama. The design of this study works well for qualitative analysis as it allows an in-depth understanding of language being used and what it means within media. Combining discourse analysis and knowing the background, the study shows how *Itaewon Class* talks about and argues against strong social and cultural beliefs.

### **Research Framework**

This study is backed up by Van Dijk's sociocognitive model of Critical Discourse Analysis, which provides the lens of language, power and ideology. This framework focuses on how speech, cognition, and society affect each other and suggesting the way we use language and creates ways of thinking (social cognition) that change how we act and how power works (van Dijk, 1990).



According to Van Dijk's model, discourse is not a neutral medium for expressing emotions and share information, but is a leading social and cultural practice by which dominance inequality and injustice are created and recreated. His model has three integrated dimensions: discourse, cognition, and social context. The cognitive dimension directs how discourse links to cognitive models and ideologies, which influence how people conceive and understand reality. The social part of it, positions discourse within the larger power structures and relations, enhancing how dominant and superior groups manage public's viewpoint to legitimize their beliefs and exclude and marginalize others. Through connect, micro level text analysis and macro level power relations, van Dijk's framework helps with more insight into how media discourse serves as a platform for shaping and sustaining ideologies and power.

This model is especially useful for *Itaewon Class*, which revolves around language being a key to showing social inequalities, resisting power, and figuring out identity. It helps study the scenes and dialogues, showing how discourse, both creates and questions strong and rigid ideas in South Korean culture. (van Dijk, 1990)

### **Data Analysis**

This study uses Van Dijk's sociocognitive model of CDA to explore how the speech in *Itaewon Class* creates, maintains, and resist the way power works in social hierarchies and identity through the dialogues. The analysis is derived on three connected levels: analyzing the dialogues themselves, thinking about what they mean (cognition) and how they affect society.

In one of the early episodes, Park Sae-Royi says to CEO Jang Dae-Hee, "*I don't respect you. You don't deserve my respect,*" he goes against the typical practice of using polite language while interacting to someone from higher social class. Cognitively, the dialogue shows his feeling that respect must be earned through good deeds and high morals, not with social status or wealth. His cognitive view of the world and wealthy people of the country focuses on justice, not on ranks of authority. Socially, this informal way of speaking rebels against the strong and rigid rules and customs of language use and culture of South Korea, which maintains the social order through different levels of politeness. The protagonist, Sae-Royi's choice not to follow this rigid rule, becomes a social act of resistance, which Van Dijk would call strategic resistance.

Park Sung-Yeol, Sae-Royi's father, said, "*Do what's right, even if it's hard,*" builds the foundation of Sae-Royi's cognition and thought process. Cognitively, this dialogue makes a guide that influences how Sae-Royi perceive what is right and wrong, conducting what is right is a part of how he sees himself. In societal level, this dialogue is used in the drama as a kind of opposing and resisting language to the Jang Dae-Hee's speech patterns on power, success, and authority. It displays a linguistic pattern about honesty and effort that challenges the main system where following orders of someone from higher social class or earning money determines worth in society.

Jang Dae-Hee's opposing statement, "*Money and power decide what's right,*" showcases the cognitive and social differences between the two men from different social classes. On the cognitive level, Jang Dae-Hee sees what is right as subjectively flexible and leaning on control and money. His view of the world is molded by practical and materialistic thinking. On the social level, this dialogue solidifies the idea of capitalism, that materialistic success brings moral value



and power. Van Dijk argued that discourse of elites, either its speech or silence, keep authority alive by making injustice seem natural. Jang's dialogue did just that, it changed moral correctness into a money calculation, making his use of people for control and power, seem normal and efficient.

Moreover, when Hyeon-yi says, "*I wasn't confident before... but now, I'm proud of who I am,*" her words determine a huge cognitive change and sense of liberty. Cognitively, she regenerates her view of herself from shame to self-acceptance and confidence. Her confusion goes away through her own words and determination that makes space where identity that is marginalized gains attention and power. Her new inner picture of herself is not hidden but proud and complete. On the social level, her dialogue questions how society silences and ignores transgender individuals. Yoon (2016) would call it rewriting identity with the help of discourse, and Van Dijk sees it as using speech to rebuild self-image against being marginalized in society.

Toni's dialogue, "*I'm South Korean too,*" works in a similar way. On societal level, him, being flawed Korean, shows how society connects identity and belonging to align language and ethnicity. As Cho (2023) states, this "*imperfect speech*" can be a tool, through which Toni uses language, that isn't normal to challenge who gets to be seen as Korean. His speech patterns make imperfection a strength, using his speech itself as a form of protest.

Furthermore, Jang Dae-Hee's dialogue, "*You're only valuable when you produce results,*" displays another way of thinking of South Koreans and their society. Cognitively, it shows a belief that a person's worth depends on how much they can achieve materialistically, he views people as tools to be used for control and social power. Socially, it makes injustice seem natural and practical, not cruel and inhumane.

Sae-Royi's negating dialogue, "*We're all equal here,*" reveals the opposing and resisting idea. Cognitively, he believes in justice, fairness, collectivity and community. Socially, he creates an establishment where speech breaks down the typical social hierarchical system, no titles, no forced politeness in speech. These dialogues show a transition towards what Ullah et al. (2024) believes, using language in a democratic way, where speaking differently creates new possibilities in cultures, traditions and societies.

Hyeon-yi says, "*I'm a woman, and I'm proud to be DanBam's chef,*" her dialogue shows confidence and a sense of complete freedom inside and out. On the social level, it questions what is expected of both women and people in the workplace. Her dialogues act as a social action, taking back her right to define and defend herself.

Likewise, Toni's broken dialogue, "*I... South Korean. My mom... South Korean,*" works the same way but shows vulnerability. In his view, he clearly knows who he is, even if he can't express it through speech perfectly. Socially, this "*imperfect speech*" resists the belief that only people who speak fluently belong. It changes public perception about the use of language, identity and belonging to a social class, shaping speech into a challenge to the concept of national and racial purity.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> Episode, when Sae-Royi stays silent while Jang Dae-Hee tries to embarrass him, his silence itself becomes a part of discourse. In cognitive terms, it shows that he takes control through his silence and he won't let his anger influence his judgment and reaction. In social



terms, his silence becomes a sort of opposition and resistance. Van Dijk (1990) points out that not speaking can also be a way of communicating, silence here negates Jang's attempt to control the conversation. It represents a quiet strength, showing how refusal to participate can itself challenge power and provoke the idea of superiority.

Moreover, in the last episodes, Sae-Royi's brief dialogue, "*I forgive you,*" wraps up the story by using a change in moral values and priorities instead of getting even. At the cognitive level, it reveals a solution, an answer; he has completed his personal set of principles of righteousness, reciprocating anger for acceptance. In the social context, those words alter what conquest really means. Fairclough (2013) says that changing the way something is said or communicated can change how people perceive it. By letting go and moving on, Sae-Royi changes the standard of control from retaliation to doing the right.

Using Van Dijk's model, *Itaewon Class* communicates that language holds the cognition and the society as one. The discussed dialogues serve as challenges to the social systems that decide who gets to speak, who belong and who is superior. The drama transform speech into resistance and silence into opposition, emphasizing that discourse is always more than just communicating, it is a tool for having control, power, and making things different.

### **Conclusion**

By deeply studying the dialogues and important scenes of *Itaewon Class*, using Van Dijk's CDA model, the research found that the language in the drama does more than just allow people to speak, it turns into a platform that shape, sustain, and challenge the social hierarchies and ideas on morality in modern South Korean society.

Jang Dae-Hee's speech patterns, full of sense of superiority, make the idea of a power system based on materialism and social class hierarchies stronger, while Park Sae-Royi's refusal to use formal and respectful language changes it into an act of exercising moral agency. His repeated dialogue, "*Do what's right, even if it's hard,*" is very different from Jang's concept that "*Money and power decide what's right,*" showcasing how discourse becomes a place where honesty and justice fights against being superior and wealthy.

Furthermore, *Itaewon Class* uses both dialogues and silences to question South Korea's values through Hyeon-yi's dialogues show her resistance against being left out of South Korean society, while Toni's dialogue, "*I'm South Korean too,*" that questions racism and changes what it means to belong in South Korean society, the drama focuses on money, turning language into a moral and social war where class, race, and gender problems are disputed. The study backs up Van Dijk's idea that discourse creates and fights power dynamics of society, showing that media can work as a strong social medium that displays and alters cultural ideas.

In conclusion, *Itaewon Class* shows that language in South Korean dramas, holds the rigid beliefs and ideas that shape how society perceives justice, belonging, and equality. Through the discourse, the drama becomes a tale of resistance, reminding the audience that power to speak, challenge, and change the concept of belonging, starts with discourse itself.



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