How the ANC. EFF, MKP and SACP use language to camouflage their real political intent

Credit: Written and compiled by Tony Stone

The way political groups, including the left, use language to frame debates is a widely studied topic in political science and linguistics. Analysts often examine how specific rhetorical strategies and terminology are employed to shape public perception, build consensus, and advance particular policy goals.

Key framing and rhetorical strategies

Political communication often relies on specific framing techniques to make policies more broadly appealing or to shift the focus of a debate:

- **Value-laden terminology:** Both sides of the political spectrum utilize words that carry strong positive or negative connotations. Terms like "fairness," "equality," "justice," and "freedom" are frequently used to build consensus, as few people inherently oppose these values. The debate centres on how these concepts are defined and implemented.
- **Euphemisms and emotive language:** Communicators may use softer, more abstract terms to describe complex or potentially controversial policies. This approach helps frame an issue in a way that highlights its intended benefits or humanitarian goals.
- **Reframing debates:** Political language is often used to change the fundamental terms of a discussion. By introducing new terminology or emphasizing specific aspects of an issue, groups attempt to steer public conversation toward their preferred perspective.
- **Solidarity building:** Using specific, in-group vocabulary helps mobilize supporters, foster a sense of shared identity, and clearly signal ideological alignment.

Academic perspectives

Scholars who study political discourse, such as linguist George Lakoff, emphasize that all political language is framed. According to this view, framing is not necessarily intended to deceive, but rather to activate specific moral worldviews and make certain ideas easier to comprehend and accept.

Conversely, critics of these communication styles argue that such language can oversimplify complex issues and obscure the practical implications of certain policies. They contend that by focusing on the moral framing of an issue, the tangible trade-offs, costs, or alternative viewpoints are sometimes marginalized.

Ultimately, the analysis of political language depends heavily on one's own ideological perspective. What one group views as a necessary and effective way to communicate a vision for society, another may perceive as an attempt to bypass critical analysis and push a specific political agenda.

The African National Congress (ANC)

The ANC often uses ideological terminology and liberation rhetoric to frame its policies, which critics argue masks more pragmatic or self-serving political objectives. By employing the language of "transformation" and "revolution," the party can pursue state-centric governance while maintaining the moral high ground of the struggle. This discursive strategy is most visible in the following ways:

- **The National Democratic Revolution (NDR)**
  The ANC frequently invokes the National Democratic Revolution (socialist revolution) as its guiding ideological framework. While terms like "democratic" imply constitutional consensus, the NDR's strategic goal is to establish state control over the economy and social institutions. Critics argue this long-term objective allows the ANC to justify policies that centralize power—such as cadre deployment or state-owned enterprise monopolies—under the guise of "liberation" rather than governance. There is nothing democratic about socialism and communism, its purely authotarian.
- **"Transformation" vs. Systemic Inefficiency**
  The ANC utilizes the broad concept of transformation (reverse racism) to address historical inequalities in South Africa. However, analysts contend this language is frequently used to deflect criticism regarding service delivery failures, infrastructure decay, or corruption. By framing

administrative shortcomings as ongoing battles against "untransformed" or "neo-colonial" forces, the party shifts the blame for systemic issues away from its own governance record.

- **"The People" as a Political Monolith**
  In political speeches and manifestos, the ANC frequently uses inclusive pronouns ("we," "our people," "the masses") to blur the lines between the party, the state, and the citizenry. This rhetorical tactic is used to delegitimize opposition by suggesting that only the ANC represents the authentic, unified will of the nation. Consequently, disagreement with ANC policy is often framed as betrayal of the liberation struggle itself.
- **"National Interest" in the GNU**
  Since the 2024 elections, the ANC has led a Government of National Unity (GNU), which it describes in official statements as a "constitutional mechanism" for inclusive governance. Observers point out that this rhetoric helps obscure deep ideological fractures within the GNU. The ANC uses this language to maintain the appearance of a unified front, even as its leftist alliance partners push back against the more pragmatic, market-friendly elements of the coalition.
- **“Redress”**
  For the ANC, "redress" (legislated discrimination against whites) means correcting the systemic economic, social, and spatial injustices of apartheid (that no longer legally exist). It is viewed as a mandate to de-racialize (actually to racialize) the economy and ensure all historically disadvantaged (black) South Africans have equitable access to resources, land, and opportunities.
- **“Equity or equitable” instead of equality or equal**
  For the African National Congress (ANC), "equity" means unequal treatment through preferential policies such as racially restrictive discriminatory policies legislated against whites, to ensure a “fair outcome”, rather than simply offering equal opportunity.

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) (spawned by the ANC)

The Eff (often used as a colloquial phonetic spelling for the letter "F," referring to the FBI or an anonymous/censored entity) uses layered linguistic techniques—such as obfuscation, coded framing, and strategic vagueness—to camouflage real intent. This allows agencies and individuals to mask true motives, maintain plausible deniability, and control public narratives. Common deceptive language tactics include:

- **Strategic ambiguity:** Using deliberately vague or broad language (e.g., "gathering information" instead of "active surveillance") to prevent the public from pinpointing the exact nature of an operation.
- **Bureaucratic jargon:** Substituting everyday terms with complex, sterile terminology (e.g., "enhanced interrogation" instead of "torture"). This distances the speaker from the moral reality of the action.
- **Passive Voice:** Shifting the focus away from the actor by saying "mistakes were made" instead of "we made a mistake," successfully obscuring responsibility or intent.
- **Semantic framing:** Rebranding controversial objectives with positive or neutral concepts. For instance, framing data collection mandates as "ensuring public safety" or "protecting national security" reframes the intent from intrusion to protection.
- **Dog whistling:** Using coded language, acronyms, or symbols that sound benign to the general public but signal specific directives or warnings to insiders, allies, or targets.

"Dubula ibhunu", “Kill the Boer, Kill the Farmer”

At the ANC’s conference in Kabwe, Zambia, in June 1985, a major shift in ANC strategy occurred. The ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), formally decided to escalate the armed struggle and shift it from the black townships into white urban and rural areas. Rural white farmers were designated as "legitimate targets". This is where the chant first surfaced as a struggle song. In new South Africa, it was popularized in 1993 by Peter Mokaba, the former president of the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL), of which Julius Malema was a member and who later became the

president (of the ANCYL (2008 to 2012)). Malema was expelled by the ANC from the ANCYL for "ill-discipline" and bringing the party into disrepute.

The uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MKP) (spawned by the ANC)

The MKP uses specific rhetorical strategies and political framing to advance its agenda. By combining revolutionary rhetoric, ethno-nationalism, and populism, the party seeks to broaden its appeal while pursuing its strategic and institutional goals.

Key framing and rhetorical strategies

- **Revolutionary and liberationist language:** The MKP often frames itself as the true custodian of the liberation struggle, frequently evoking the spirit of the original armed wing of the ANC. By using terms like "people's mandate," "total emancipation," and "revolution," the party positions its agenda as an urgent continuation of the fight for freedom. This language is designed to connect with voters who feel the promises of 1994 remain unfulfilled.
- **Constitutional and institutional challenges:** The party frequently challenges the legitimacy of South Africa's constitutional and parliamentary framework. It has advocated for the supremacy of an unchecked parliament over the current constitutional court system and has even sought to challenge the terminology used for formal political arrangements like the Government of National Unity (GNU). This rhetoric aims to question the established democratic order and position the MKP as a radical alternative.
- **Economic and Social populism:** The MKP utilizes the language of "Radical Economic Transformation" (RET) and indigenous sovereignty to address widespread socio-economic grievances. By framing deep structural crises—such as unemployment and inequality—as entirely the fault of neoliberal policies and foreign influences, the party offers a populist narrative that resonates with disillusioned citizens.
- **Ethno-Nationalism and cultural identity:** Analysts note that the party's messaging often carries strong undertones of ethno-nationalism, deeply tied to Zulu cultural identity and tradition. While maintaining a facade of broad national inclusivity, the party's rhetoric and leadership structure heavily leverage historical and cultural symbolism to consolidate a localized, traditional support base

Key slogans and chants

- **"Amandla! Ngawethu!"**: Translated from isiXhosa/isiZulu to mean "Power! To the people!". This is the quintessential rallying cry.
- **"Mayihlome!"**: Meaning "Let the people go to war/be prepared." Historically used to call the masses to action.

Liberation movements still cling to the use of historical "struggle" terminology to anchor their political authority in the national memory, and to portray themselves as the sole authentic defenders of freedom.

Coded or resonant language is often used to mask policy decisions or governance shortcomings in sympathetic terms, ensuring public trust and solidarity endure through changing political realities.

By adapting liberation terminology to modern democratic contexts, political parties frame contemporary socioeconomic challenges (such as Economic Inequality) as direct continuations of the historical struggle, keeping mass support mobilized.

However, after 32 years of the ANC's corrupt rule, people are beginning to see through their rhetoric.