



Derivational Suffixes in Speech Entitled “I Have a Dream” By Martin Luther King Jr

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze the use of derivational suffixes in Martin Luther King Jr's speech titled “I Have a Dream.” A total of 42 instances of derivational suffixes were identified in the speech. This research applies Katamba's (1993) morphological theory within a qualitative descriptive analysis framework to examine how suffixation alters word classes and enhances rhetorical impact. The analysis shows that noun derived from verb derivation is the most productive process (64.3% of cases), reflecting the rhetorical function of abstracting actions into powerful ideological concepts. Derivational suffixes are used extensively to strengthen emotional appeal, convey abstract ideals, and reinforce persuasive messages. Words formed through suffixation contribute to the speech's stylistic depth and ideological clarity, particularly in themes of justice, equality, and freedom. The findings highlight the significant role of derivational morphology in shaping persuasive political discourse and suggest practical implications for discourse analysis and English language teaching.

Keywords: Derivation Suffixes, Morphology, Nominal Suffixes, Martin Luther King Jr Speech

Introduction

Morphology is a fundamental branch of linguistics that investigates the internal structure of words and the ways in which these structures convey meaning. According to Katamba (1993), morphology focuses on morphemes—the smallest units of meaning in language—and their combinations to form more complex words. Morphemes are generally classified into two types: free morphemes, which can stand independently as words, and bound morphemes, which must attach to other morphemes to convey meaning (Rastle, 2019; Bunau & Yusof, 2018).

Bound morphemes typically appear as affixes, which may occur in the form of prefixes, infixes, and suffixes (Kusumawardhani, 2020). These affixes are essential in constructing new words, altering grammatical categories, and enriching

vocabulary.

Among these, derivational affixes play a particularly important role because they not only modify the form of a word but also change its grammatical category and semantic scope. Katamba (1993) emphasizes that derivational suffixes such as -ness, -ion, and -ity can transform adjectives into nouns or verbs into abstract concepts. For example, adding -ness to kindness, which shifts both the lexical category and semantic depth of the word. Plag (2003) further categorizes suffixes into nominal, verbal, adjectival, and adverbial types, each contributing differently to the process of word formation and syntactic flexibility.

Similarly, Plag (2002) notes that nominal suffixes such as -ship, -ism, and -dom are frequently used in formal contexts to construct abstract concepts, while adjectival suffixes like -ful and -less allow speakers to extend descriptive capacity. The study of derivational morphology is not limited to everyday communication but also extends to rhetorical and political texts. Speeches, in particular, are shaped by deliberate lexical choices that rely heavily on morphological processes to highlight meaning and evoke emotional resonance. One of the most powerful examples in modern history is Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech "I Have a Dream" (1963), delivered during the March on Washington.

This speech, recognized as a milestone in the American civil rights movement, is rich in morphological constructions. It makes extensive use of derivational suffixes to transform base words into abstract nouns and concepts such as freedom, justice, brotherhood, and equality, which function as the ideological pillars of the speech. While there is extensive research on morphology in general (Katamba, 1993; Plag, 2003; Lieber, 2009; Crystal, 2008; Haspelmath & Sims, 2010), fewer studies have examined how derivational suffixes are employed in oral discourse, particularly in political speeches.

Previous works have tended to focus on written corpora such as newspapers, academic texts, or literary works (e.g., Plag, 2003; Lieber, 2009). As a result, the role of derivational suffixes in spoken rhetorical contexts remains underexplored. This gap is important because oral discourse, unlike written texts, is performed in real time and shaped by audience interaction, rhythm, and rhetorical strategies such as repetition, parallelism, and metaphor. Political speeches in particular require lexical choices that are not only grammatically correct but also emotionally persuasive and ideologically powerful.

In this context, derivational suffixes serve more than a morphological function; they operate as linguistic resources that allow speakers to transform simple words into abstract ideals that resonate with collective values. However, limited attention has been given to this dynamic role of morphology in oratory. Therefore, investigating derivational suffixes in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech provides a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between structural linguistic analysis and rhetorical effectiveness, showing how word formation processes contribute to persuasive political communication.

Based on this context, the present study aims to identify and analyze the use of

derivational suffixes in Martin Luther King Jr.'s titled "I Have a Dream" speech. The analysis focuses on how derivational suffixes contribute to changes in grammatical category and meaning, as well as how these changes enhance the rhetorical and emotional power of the text. The theoretical framework draws on the works of Katamba (1993), Plag (2002, 2003), Lieber (2009), Crystal (2008), and Haspelmath & Sims (2010), all of whom emphasize the interplay between morphological processes and semantic development.

To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) What categories of derivational suffixes are found in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, and (2) which types occur most frequently, reflecting the linguistic patterns of the text. The significance of this research lies in its dual contribution. First, it enriches the field of morphological studies by extending the analysis of derivational suffixes into oral political discourse, an area that has received comparatively little attention.

Second, it offers pedagogical value in the context of English language teaching, where understanding word formation can improve students' lexical awareness and appreciation of rhetorical strategies in authentic texts. By analyzing one of the most influential speeches in history, this study demonstrates how morphology is not merely a structural component of language but also a powerful tool for persuasion and ideological communication.

Method

This study employed an observation method combined with a qualitative descriptive approach to collect and analyze the data. The primary data source was Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech "I Have a Dream," delivered on August 28, 1963, during the March on Washington. The written transcript, consisting of approximately 1,600 words, and the oral performance, lasting around 17 minutes, were selected because of their historical significance and the richness of their morphological structures. Since this speech is regarded as one of the most influential rhetorical works in modern history, it provides an ideal context for analyzing the role of derivational suffixes in shaping persuasive discourse.

Data Collection

The observation technique was applied to identify words in the speech containing derivational suffixes. An observation guide was prepared, including a list of common suffixes such as -tion, -ness, -ity, -ment, -dom, -ance, -hood, -ize, and -ic. Each identified word was recorded along with its base form, word class transformation, and contextual meaning.

Analytical Framework

The analysis followed several steps. First, the transcript was segmented into

units to facilitate the identification of candidate words containing derivational suffixes. Second, suffixes were classified using Katamba's (1993) framework, supported by Plag's (2002, 2003) classification of suffixes into nominal, verbal, adjectival, and adverbial categories. Third, each identified form was examined both grammatically (to determine changes in word class) and semantically (to assess how meaning shifted as a result of suffixation). Fourth, the rhetorical function of these derived words was analyzed to explore how they contributed to the speech's persuasive impact. To illustrate the morphological processes, labeling and bracketing notation (Lieber, 2009) was applied to the data.

Reliability and Validation

To ensure validity, the data were independently checked by two raters with a background in linguistics. Inter-rater comparison was carried out, and differences in classification were discussed until consensus was reached. This process minimized subjectivity and strengthened the reliability of the analysis. In addition, the results were cross-referenced with dictionary definitions (e.g., Cambridge Dictionary) to confirm the accuracy of the identified derivational processes.

Tools and Software

No specialized linguistic software was employed. The data were analyzed manually using Microsoft Word for annotation and spreadsheet tools for classification and organization.

Limitations

This study focused only on derivational suffixes and did not examine inflectional morphology or other word-formation processes such as compounding and conversion. Furthermore, the analysis relied on the written transcript rather than the oral delivery, which lasted 17 minutes, meaning that aspects such as tone, stress, and intonation were not fully captured in this research. Finally, as a qualitative descriptive study, the findings emphasize interpretive analysis rather than statistical generalization, which means that the results should be understood as context-specific rather than universally representative.

Results

This study identified a total of 42 instances in Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech titled "I Have a Dream" that contain derivational suffixes. The analysis shows that the most frequently found suffixes include -tion, -ness, -ity, -ment, -ion, -dom, -ance, -hood, -ize and -ic. These suffixes are commonly used to change the lexical category of a word most often from verbs or adjectives into nouns or adverbs and they play a significant role in building the speech's persuasive and emotive tone.

The total number of derivational nominal suffixes found in the data source is

shown in the table below. The table categorizes these suffixes based on the types of base words they are attached to. This data provides the foundation for a deeper analysis of the morphological processes involved. Here is the data:

Table 1: Data Found in Martin Luther King Jr.'s Speech Titled " I Have A Dream"

No	Derivation Suffixes Process	Nominal Suffixes	Accurance	Percentage	Example From Speech
1	Noun Derived from Verb	-dom, -hood	27	64.3%	Freedom, Brotherhood, Satisfaction
2	Noun Derived from Adjective	-ity, -ness	13	31%	Equality, Happyness, Creativity
3	Verb Derived from Noun	-ize	1	2.4%	Dramatize
4	Adjective Derived from Noun	-ic	1	2.4%	Symbolic
42					100%

The table above presents the classification of derivational suffixes found in Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech "I Have a Dream." From the total of 42 occurrences, the most dominant type is Noun derived from Verb, with 27 data (64.3%). The second type is Noun derived from Adjective, which consists of 13 data (31%). Meanwhile, both Verb derived from Noun and Adjective derived from Noun occur only once (2.4% each). This distribution indicates that verb-to-noun derivation is the most productive process in the speech, reflecting the rhetorical function of abstracting actions and processes into nominal forms to convey powerful ideological messages. The frequent use of nominalization through derivational suffixes contributes to the speech's formal tone, conceptual clarity, and persuasive depth.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that derivational suffixes in Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech titled "I Have a Dream" play a crucial role in shaping both grammatical structures and rhetorical force. The analysis shows that the most frequent derivational process is verb-to-noun derivation (64.3%), followed by adjective-to-noun derivation (31%), and finally noun-to-noun and verb-to-adjective derivations (2.4% each). This hierarchy reflects King's rhetorical strategy of transforming actions and qualities into enduring ideological concepts.

1. Noun Derivation From Verb

Data 1

Let **freedom** ring from every hill and molehill of mississippi...

"I Have A Dream " (Speech)

[[Free]N –dom]N

The data: "freedom" is formed by attaching the suffix "-dom" to the noun "free". According to the Cambridge Dictionary, free means "not limited or controlled" or "able to act as one wishes," while freedom means "the state of being free, especially the right to live as you wish without being controlled or restricted. The suffix "-dom" creates abstract nouns denoting a state or domain. In this case, freedom expresses the condition of being free from oppression or constraint. Morphological, the word class remains a noun, but semantically, it gains an abstract, ideological dimension. In the speech, "freedom" becomes a central theme symbolizing civil rights and liberation from racial injustice.

Data 2

"...the table of **brotherhood**."

"I Have a Dream" (speech)

[[Brother]N –hood]N

The noun "brotherhood" is formed by adding the suffix "-hood" to the noun "brother". The suffix "-hood" denotes a state, condition, or relationship. This derivation process retains the noun category but abstracts the meaning into a collective human bond. In the speech, "brotherhood" represents racial unity and harmony a central theme advocating peaceful coexistence and shared humanity.

Data 3

"We will not be satisfaction until justice rolls down like waters..." "I Have a Dream" (speech)

[[Satisfaction]V–tion

The word "satisfaction" is derived from the verb "satisfy" through the addition of the suffix "-tion". This suffix forms nouns that describe the result or process of an action. Morphological, the verb becomes a noun; semantically, "satisfaction" expresses a condition of fulfillment. In this context, it signifies the ultimate goal of achieving justice, indicating that fulfillment cannot occur until equality is realized.

2. Noun Derived from Adjective

Data 4

"...until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and **equality**." "I Have a Dream" (speech)

[[Equal]Adj -ity]N

The Data: "Equality" is derived from the adjective "equal" using the suffix "-ity". This suffix changes adjectives into nouns that describe states or qualities. Morphologically, the derivation results in a noun that can serve as the subject or object. Semantically, it conveys the principle of equal status, rights, or opportunity. Within the speech, "equality" reflects the demand for racial justice and the vision of a society where all are treated fairly.

Data 5

"...the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of **happiness**." "I Have a Dream" (speech)

[[Happy]Adj -ness]N

The Data: "Happiness" is formed by adding the suffix "-ness" to the adjective "happy". This derivation process shifts the word class from adjective to noun, enabling the concept to be treated grammatically as a subject or object. Semantically, it conveys the emotional or psychological state of joy. In the speech, "happiness" is presented as an inalienable right, reinforcing the promise of personal well-being alongside freedom and equality.

Data 6

We must not allow our **creativity** protest to degenerate into physical violence. "I Have a Dream" (speech)

[[Creative]Adj -ity]N

The noun creativity is formed by adding the suffix -ity to the adjective creative. The suffix -ity functions to nominalize adjectives, producing abstract nouns that denote a state, quality, or condition. Morphologically, this derivation changes the word class from adjective to noun. Semantically, creativity refers to the quality of being imaginative or inventive. In the context of the speech, it highlights the speaker's call for innovative and peaceful methods of protest. The use of creativity emphasizes intellectual and moral strength over physical confrontation, aligning with the speech's broader themes of dignity and nonviolence.

3. Verb Derived from Noun

Data 7

"So we have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check."

"I Have a Dream" (speech)

[[Drama]N -tize]V

The data: "dramatize" is formed by attaching the suffix "-ize" to the noun "drama". According to the Cambridge Dictionary, drama refers to "an event or situation, especially an exciting or emotional one," while dramatize means "to make something seem more exciting or important than it really is" or "to present something as a drama." The suffix "-ize" creates verbs from nouns, often indicating the act of becoming or making something have the qualities of the root word. Morphologically, the word class changes from noun to verb. In this context, the word dramatize is used by King to emphasize the importance of bringing attention to the injustice of racial inequality to present the civil rights struggle in a powerful, vivid way that moves the conscience of the nation. The verb helps the speaker deliver a message that evokes both emotion and urgency.

4. Adjective Derived From Naun

Data 8

"In whose symbolic shadow we stand today..."

"I Have a Dream" (speech)

[[Symbol]N -ic]Adj

The data 8: "symbolic" is derived from the noun "symbol" by adding the suffix "-ic". According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a symbol is "a sign, shape, or object that is used to represent something else," and symbolic means "serving as a symbol of a greater meaning or concept." The suffix "-ic" forms adjectives from nouns, indicating that something relates to or is characteristic of the noun. Morphologically, the word class changes from noun to adjective. In King's speech, symbolic emphasizes that the present moment is more than just historical it carries deep meaning for the ongoing struggle for freedom. The use of symbolic enhances the rhetorical weight of the moment, portraying it as a powerful image of justice and remembrance.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis, a total of 42 derivational suffixes were identified in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, which were classified into four categories: nouns derived from verbs, nouns derived from adjectives, verbs derived from nouns, and adjectives derived from nouns. The findings reveal that noun derived from verb was the most dominant type (64.3%), followed by noun derived

from adjective (31%), while verb derived from noun and adjective derived from noun occurred less frequently (2.4% each).

This distribution highlights that nominalization, particularly verb to noun derivation, functions as the most productive morphological process in the speech, enabling the transformation of concrete actions and qualities into powerful abstract concepts such as freedom, justice, equality, and brotherhood. The frequent use of such derivational forms not only enriches the lexical variety of the text but also strengthens its rhetorical impact by providing conceptual clarity, emotional resonance, and persuasive force.

Therefore, the study confirms that derivational morphology plays an essential role in political discourse, functioning beyond mere word-formation to serve as a rhetorical instrument that conveys ideological meaning. Moreover, this research contributes to the field of morphology by extending analysis into oral discourse, and it also offers pedagogical implications for English language teaching, where an understanding of derivational processes can enhance students' lexical awareness and critical engagement with authentic rhetorical texts.

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