

THE INTERFACE OF LANGUAGE AND STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRACY IN CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF ADMINISTRATIVE COMMUNICATION IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

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DOI:<https://doi.org/10.57233/zjpd.v6i1.20>

ABSTRACT

This study examines the interface between language and street-level bureaucracy in contemporary public administration through a critical discourse analysis of administrative communication in Shakespeare's Hamlet, Macbeth and Henry V. It responds to the limited attention given in public administration scholarship to the linguistic mechanisms through which frontline bureaucrats interpret policies, exercise discretion, frame public problems and engage citizens during policy implementation. The study adopts qualitative document analysis, combining content analysis and critical discourse analysis to interpret Shakespearean dramatic texts as illustrative cases of administrative communication, power, persuasion and crisis framing. The analysis is supported by selected public administration literature on street-level bureaucracy, policy implementation, citizen engagement, motivational language and collaborative governance. Findings reveal four main language mechanisms relevant to street-level bureaucracy: language as a mechanism of power; language as a tool of bureaucratic discretion, language as a driver of policy framing and language as a means of citizen engagement. Hamlet demonstrates how language can expose, conceal and contest authority; Macbeth illustrates the manipulative and agenda-setting capacity of rhetoric; and Henry V shows how directive and motivational language can mobilize actors during crisis. The study contributes to street-level bureaucracy theory by showing that implementation is not only technical or procedural but also discursive. It also contributes to practice by emphasizing the need for frontline public officials to use clear, inclusive, accountable and context-sensitive language when interacting with citizens.

Keywords: Street-Level Bureaucracy; Policy Implementation; Administrative Language; Shakespeare's Plays; Critical Discourse Analysis; Citizen Engagement

1. Introduction

Public administration is not only a system of rules, structures and procedures; it is also a communicative practice through which public authority is interpreted, negotiated and experienced (Farmer, 1995; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007). Policies may be formulated at the political or managerial level, but they become meaningful to citizens largely through the everyday encounters between citizens and street-level bureaucrats (Eckhard, et al, 2022). These frontline officials include police officers, teachers, health workers, social welfare officers, local government officials and other actors who interact directly with the public (Lipsky, 2010). In such encounters, language becomes a central instrument of policy implementation because it clarifies rules, explains entitlements, frames problems, manages disagreement, justifies decisions and influences citizens' perceptions of fairness (Bartels, 2013)..

The problem addressed in this study is the insufficient attention given to the specific language mechanisms through which street-level bureaucrats enact policy decisions and shape citizen-state relations. Public administration literature has long recognized the importance of discretion, accountability and service delivery in frontline work (Lipsky, 2010; Hupe & Hill, 2007). However, the linguistic dimension of implementation is often treated as secondary to administrative rules, institutional design or resource constraints (Eckhard, et al, 2022, Eckhard, & Friedrich, 2024). This creates a gap in understanding how spoken and written administrative language influences the behaviour of frontline officials, the

interpretation of policy and the willingness of citizens to participate in governance processes.

The study therefore narrows the broad concept of public administration to policy implementation and focuses specifically on street-level bureaucracy as the site where language and administrative authority most visibly interact. Street-level bureaucrats do not merely transmit policy instructions; they translate them into action (Lipsky, 2010; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014). Their words can simplify or complicate access to services, build trust or deepen suspicion, empower citizens or reproduce exclusion. For this reason, the study treats administrative language as a practical and theoretical variable capable of affecting frontline discretion, citizen engagement and the perceived legitimacy of public institutions.

To explore this issue, the study uses selected Shakespearean plays as interpretive texts. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Henry V* are not public administration manuals, yet they offer powerful dramatic representations of authority, persuasion, crisis, manipulation, legitimacy and decision-making. These themes are central to the work of public administrators, especially those who must communicate complex decisions to citizens in conditions of uncertainty, conflict or pressure. The use of Shakespeare is therefore justified not as historical evidence of modern bureaucracy but as a literary lens for examining enduring patterns in the relationship between language, authority and administrative conduct.

The core argument of the study is that language shapes street-level bureaucracy

in at least four ways. First, it operates as a mechanism of power by authorizing, concealing or challenging decisions. Second, it serves as a tool of discretion because frontline officials use words to interpret rules and determine how citizens experience policies. Third, language drives policy framing by defining what counts as a problem, who is responsible and what response is considered legitimate. Fourth, it enables or restricts citizen engagement depending on whether communication is clear, inclusive and dialogic.

The study is guided by the following research questions: How do Shakespeare's plays represent the relationship between language, authority and administrative conduct? What linguistic mechanisms can be identified from the plays that are relevant to street-level bureaucracy? How can these mechanisms improve understanding of policy implementation and citizen engagement in contemporary public administration? The study contributes to public administration scholarship by connecting literary discourse analysis with street-level bureaucracy theory and by foregrounding language as a central element of policy implementation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Shakespeare, Language and Administrative Authority

Shakespeare's plays have often been read as works that dramatize power, legitimacy, leadership, persuasion and moral judgment. Although they are literary texts, they contain rich depictions of how authority is produced and contested through speech. Kings, nobles, soldiers, advisers and ordinary subjects use

language to command, deceive, motivate, accuse, confess and justify action. These communicative acts are relevant to public administration because administrative authority also depends on the ability to communicate decisions in ways that are understandable, legitimate and actionable (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Lipsky, [1980] 2010; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2000). In Hamlet, language is closely tied to uncertainty, investigation and legitimacy. Claudius uses diplomatic and performative speech to stabilize his rule, while Hamlet uses questioning, irony and staged performance to expose hidden wrongdoing. The play shows that administrative authority can be sustained by persuasive language but also challenged when language is used to reveal contradiction. In Macbeth, language is a mechanism of manipulation and agenda setting. Lady Macbeth's persuasive speech redirects Macbeth's judgment, while the witches' ambiguous language frames his expectations and decisions. In Henry V, language operates as motivation, crisis management and collective identity formation. Henry's speeches convert fear into duty and transform military action into a shared moral project.

These plays therefore provide a useful interpretive foundation for examining public administration as a discursive practice. They show that language does not simply describe authority; it helps create the conditions under which authority becomes accepted, resisted or abused. This insight is relevant to street-level bureaucracy because frontline officials frequently operate in situations where citizens require explanation, reassurance, persuasion or procedural guidance (Frederickson & Hart, 1985;

Jensen & Pedersen, 2017; Keiser, 1999; Lipsky, [1980] 2010; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014).

2.2 Administrative Language and Policy Implementation

Policy implementation refers to the process through which governmental decisions are translated into practical action (Tummers & Bekkers, 2014). Within this process, language functions as the bridge between policy design and citizen experience (Christensen & Laegreid, 2005). Administrative rules may be written in formal terms, but citizens encounter those rules through letters, forms, notices, interviews, public announcements, consultations and face-to-face conversations (Döring, 2022, p. 801). When administrative language is clear, citizens are more likely to understand their rights and responsibilities (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007; Hansen, 2021; Kampen, Van De Walle, and Bouckaert, 2006; Rothstein, 2009; Van Ryzin et al., 2004; Yackee and Lowery, 2005). When it is vague, technical, intimidating or exclusionary, it can create administrative burden and reduce trust (Andersen & Guul, 2019).

The relevance of administrative language becomes particularly visible at the point of implementation. Street-level bureaucrats interpret policy instructions, communicate eligibility criteria, explain procedures, request documents and sometimes negotiate compliance (Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2019). In doing so, they exercise discretion not only through decisions but also through the words they use to explain those decisions. A citizen who receives a respectful and clear explanation may perceive an unfavourable

decision as legitimate, while a citizen who receives confusing or dismissive communication may interpret even a lawful decision as unfair (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2017; Guul, 2018; Kingsley, 1944; McCrea, 2021; Meier, 1993; Vinopal, 2017).

This study therefore conceptualizes administrative language as the spoken and written communication through which frontline officials interpret, transmit and justify policy action. This includes directive language, explanatory language, persuasive language, motivational language, procedural language and symbolic language. Each form has implications for how policy is understood and how citizens relate to public institutions.

2.3 Street-Level Bureaucracy and Linguistic Discretion

Street-level bureaucracy theory emphasizes the role of frontline public officials in the actual delivery and implementation of policy. Lipsky (2010) argues that street-level bureaucrats work under conditions of limited resources, high demand and ambiguous rules, which require them to exercise discretion. This discretion is not merely procedural; it is also communicative. Frontline officials must decide how to interpret rules for citizens, how much explanation to provide, what tone to use and how to frame compliance or non-compliance (Picciotto, 2007, p. 11, cf. Bartels, 2015; Bruhn and Ekström, 2017; Hand and Catlaw, 2019; Holzinger, 2020; Kasdorp and Schakel, 2022; Picciotto, 2007; Raaphorst and Loyens, 2020).

The linguistic dimension of discretion is important because citizen-state encounters

are often mediated through talk. Bureaucrats may use language to simplify policy, but they may also use it to distance themselves from citizens, conceal discretion behind technical terms or reproduce unequal treatment. Studies on interactional justice, representative bureaucracy and administrative burden show that citizens judge public institutions not only by outcomes but also by the quality of interaction (Herd & Moynihan, 2019; Raaphorst&Groeneveld, 2019, (Abbo, 2024). Language therefore becomes part of the citizen's experience of fairness, respect and legitimacy.

In multilingual and socially diverse contexts such as Nigeria, language is even more consequential. Citizens may differ in educational background, class, ethnicity, language competence and familiarity with bureaucratic procedures. A frontline official who uses rigid, overly technical or exclusionary language may unintentionally restrict participation. Conversely, an official who uses accessible and respectful language can reduce distance between the state and citizens and promote more active engagement.

2.4 Citizen Engagement, Co-production and Collaborative Governance

Citizen engagement refers to the ways through which citizens receive information, express views, participate in decision processes and collaborate in the implementation of public programmes. In this study, the emphasis is on active citizen engagement rather than passive receipt of information. Active engagement requires citizens to understand public problems, deliberate on possible solutions and participate in implementation or monitoring. Language is central to this

process because citizens cannot meaningfully participate in what they do not understand.

The literature on co-production and collaborative governance strengthens this point. Collaborative governance requires public actors to work with non-state stakeholders in addressing public problems, while co-production involves citizens and public officials jointly contributing to the design or delivery of services (Bartels, 2018; Morse, 2014). In both cases, language is not a minor tool but a condition of collaboration. Public officials must frame problems, clarify expectations, invite participation, manage conflict and sustain trust. Morse's discussion of collaborative public leadership, for instance, highlights strategic issue framing and facilitation as important competencies for public leaders.

For street-level bureaucrats, this means that language has a participatory function. It can open administrative processes to citizens by making rules intelligible and inviting feedback. It can also close those processes when officials rely on command, silence, technical language or manipulative framing. The study therefore links administrative language to the active mode of citizen engagement, especially in contexts where frontline officials mediate the relationship between policy goals and community realities.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the study links language to street-level bureaucracy through policy implementation. Language is treated as the independent interpretive mechanism, while street-level bureaucratic practice is treated as the administrative site affected by that mechanism. The

framework proposes that language influences street-level bureaucracy through four pathways: power, discretion, policy framing and citizen engagement.

Language as power refers to the use of words to authorize, legitimize, conceal or challenge decisions. Language as discretion refers to the way frontline officials interpret rules and communicate choices to citizens. Language as policy framing refers to the presentation of public problems in ways that shape perception and action. Language as citizen engagement refers to the use of clear, inclusive and dialogic communication to support citizen participation. These four pathways guide the analysis of the selected Shakespearean plays and the discussion of their relevance to contemporary public administration.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on document analysis. The primary documents are three plays by William Shakespeare: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Henry V*. These texts were purposively selected because they contain sustained representations of authority, crisis, persuasion, manipulation, legitimacy and collective mobilization. The secondary documents consist of relevant public administration literature on street-level bureaucracy, policy implementation, administrative language, citizen engagement, collaborative governance and crisis communication.

The choice of Shakespeare as a data source is justified on interpretive rather than historical grounds. The study does not claim that Shakespeare directly describes modern public administration. Rather, it

treats the selected plays as literary documents that dramatize communicative patterns relevant to governance and administration. Literature can provide conceptual insight into the human dimensions of administrative life, including power, loyalty, judgment, persuasion and accountability. In this sense, the plays serve as illustrative texts for understanding how language functions in situations involving authority and decision-making.

The study uses two analytical techniques. First, content analysis was used to identify recurring communicative themes across the three plays. Passages and dramatic situations involving command, persuasion, manipulation, explanation, public address, crisis communication and moral justification were coded. Second, critical discourse analysis was used to interpret how language constructs power relations, legitimizes action and shapes perception. Critical discourse analysis is appropriate because the study is concerned not only with what is said but also with how speech produces authority, frames responsibility and influences action.

The analysis followed four steps. The first step involved reading the selected plays to identify scenes where language influenced judgment, authority or collective action. The second step involved coding those scenes according to the four conceptual categories: power, discretion, policy framing and citizen engagement. The third step involved interpreting the coded evidence in relation to street-level bureaucracy and policy implementation. The fourth step involved comparing the emergent themes with existing public administration literature. This sequence was adopted to ensure that the findings

emerge first from the textual analysis before being discussed in relation to theory.

The study is limited by its reliance on literary texts rather than direct observation of bureaucratic encounters. However, this limitation is consistent with the study's interpretive purpose. The aim is not to measure the behaviour of actual street-level bureaucrats but to develop explanatory themes that can enrich understanding of administrative communication. Future studies may test or extend these themes through interviews, ethnography, and observation of public service encounters or analysis of administrative records.

4. Findings

The findings are organized around four interpretive themes that emerged from the analysis of Hamlet, Macbeth and Henry V. These themes are presented first as textual findings from the plays and then briefly linked to their relevance for street-level bureaucracy. A fuller theoretical interpretation is reserved for the discussion section.

4.1 Language as a Mechanism of Power

The first theme is language as a mechanism of power. In Hamlet, Claudius uses formal, diplomatic and emotionally controlled language to consolidate his authority after the death of King Hamlet. His public speech presents the transition of power as orderly and legitimate, even though the moral foundation of that authority is deeply corrupt. His language performs an administrative function: it stabilizes uncertainty, manages public perception and conceals the violence behind his rule.

Hamlet responds by using language as investigation and resistance. His questions, irony and theatrical speech expose the gap between official appearance and hidden reality. The play therefore presents language as both an instrument of authority and a means of accountability. Authority depends on speech, but speech can also reveal the contradictions of authority.

This finding is relevant to street-level bureaucracy because frontline officials often speak on behalf of institutions. Their language can reinforce institutional authority, but it can also make authority appear arbitrary or accountable. When bureaucrats explain decisions clearly and truthfully, language legitimizes administrative action. When they conceal, intimidate or confuse, language becomes a mechanism of domination.

4.2 Language as a Tool of Bureaucratic Discretion

The second theme is language as a tool of discretion. Although Shakespeare's characters are not bureaucrats in the modern sense, the plays show how actors with authority interpret situations and use speech to guide action. In Hamlet, the uncertainty surrounding the king's death creates a situation in which characters must interpret evidence, motives and obligations. Hamlet's use of language reflects the difficulty of acting under ambiguity. His delay is partly a struggle over interpretation: what is true, what can be proven and what response is justified.

This interpretive struggle parallels the discretionary work of street-level bureaucrats. Frontline officials frequently operate under rules that do not fully determine action. They must interpret

eligibility, urgency, credibility and compliance. Their explanations to citizens are therefore not neutral descriptions; they are part of the discretionary act itself. The way a bureaucrat phrases a rule may expand or narrow a citizen's practical access to a service.

The finding suggests that discretion is communicative as well as administrative. Language gives shape to judgment. A frontline officer can use language to humanize a rule, explain alternatives or guide a citizen through a process. The same officer can also use language to discourage claims, close discussion or present discretion as if no discretion exists.

4.3 Language as a Driver of Policy Framing

The third theme is language as a driver of policy framing. Macbeth provides the clearest illustration of this theme. Lady Macbeth uses persuasive and morally inverted language to reframe murder as courage, ambition and masculine duty. The witches also use ambiguous language to frame Macbeth's expectations, encouraging him to interpret future possibilities in ways that support violent action. In both cases, language does not merely persuade; it constructs the frame through which a problem and its solution are understood.

The relevance for public administration is that policy problems do not enter implementation spaces as neutral facts. They are framed through official speeches, forms, guidelines, public notices and citizen encounters. A welfare claim may be framed as entitlement, dependency or fraud. A policing issue may be framed as public safety or community distrust. A health directive may be framed as

protection or control. These frames shape how frontline officials act and how citizens respond.

The finding from Macbeth shows that language can narrow judgment when it frames one course of action as inevitable, heroic or urgent. In street-level bureaucracy, such framing may influence how officials classify citizens and how they justify decisions. Therefore, administrative language must be examined not only for clarity but also for the assumptions and values embedded in it.

4.4 Language as a Means of Citizen Engagement and Crisis Mobilization

The fourth theme is language as a means of engagement and mobilization. Henry V presents language as a tool for creating collective identity in crisis. Henry's speeches to his soldiers frame danger as shared duty and transform fear into unity. His language is directive because it points the soldiers toward a course of action, motivational because it strengthens commitment and symbolic because it gives meaning to sacrifice.

This finding has direct relevance to street-level bureaucracy in crisis situations. During public health emergencies, security crises, disasters or community conflicts, frontline officials must communicate instructions in ways that citizens can understand and trust. Their language must provide practical guidance, reduce fear, explain reasons and sustain cooperation. Communication that is purely technical may fail to mobilize citizens, while communication that is manipulative may undermine long-term trust.

Henry V also shows the limits of motivational language. Powerful rhetoric

can mobilize collective action, but it can also simplify complex realities. For public administration, this means that crisis communication must balance motivation with accountability. Frontline officials need language that encourages cooperation without hiding risks, suppressing dissent or exaggerating certainty.

5. Discussion

The findings show that language is central to the practice of street-level bureaucracy because implementation is mediated through communication. The four themes identified in the analysis correspond to major concerns in public administration: power, discretion, policy framing and citizen engagement. This section explains how those themes contribute to the understanding of policy implementation.

First, the theme of language as power strengthens the argument that public authority is experienced discursively. Citizens encounter the state through forms, notices, speeches, interviews and conversations with officials. In these encounters, language can either make authority transparent or hide it behind technical vocabulary. The analysis of Hamlet shows that official language may stabilize public order while concealing moral or administrative failures. In modern street-level bureaucracy, this means that accountability requires more than procedural compliance; it also requires communicative honesty.

Second, the theme of language as discretion extends street-level bureaucracy theory by emphasizing that discretion is not only found in decisions but also in explanations. A bureaucrat's decision may be formally correct, yet the language used

to communicate it may either support or undermine justice. For example, clear explanation can help citizens understand why a benefit is delayed, what document is missing or what appeal procedure is available. In contrast, dismissive or obscure language can turn policy implementation into exclusion. The study therefore adds a linguistic dimension to the analysis of administrative discretion.

Third, the theme of language as policy framing links the study to agenda-setting and collaborative governance literature. The analysis of Macbeth shows that language shapes action by defining what a situation means. This is relevant to street-level bureaucracy because frontline officials often frame public problems in daily interactions. They may frame a citizen as cooperative or troublesome, a community as deserving or irresponsible, and a policy as supportive or punitive. Such framing influences the exercise of discretion and may reproduce inequality if left unexamined.

Fourth, the theme of language as citizen engagement shows that implementation is not complete when rules are enforced; it also requires understanding, participation and trust. The analysis of Henry V illustrates the motivational capacity of language in moments of uncertainty. In public administration, however, motivation must be linked to democratic accountability. Citizens should not merely be persuaded into compliance; they should be informed, respected and enabled to participate actively in decisions affecting their lives.

The study also clarifies the relationship between public administration, governance and street-level bureaucracy. Governance

is a broad concept that includes coordination, authority and collective problem-solving. Public administration provides the institutional field in which governmental decisions are organized and implemented. Street-level bureaucracy is the specific implementation site where citizens most directly encounter the state. This study therefore uses street-level bureaucracy as its main object of analysis because it is the point where language has immediate practical consequences.

The practical implication is that public organizations should treat communication competence as a core administrative skill. Training for frontline officials should include not only procedural knowledge but also plain-language communication, active listening, multilingual sensitivity, conflict de-escalation, ethical persuasion and crisis communication. These skills are especially important in societies with diverse languages, literacy levels and social identities. Effective language use can reduce administrative burden, improve citizen satisfaction and strengthen trust in public institutions.

The theoretical implication is that public administration scholarship should pay closer attention to the discursive aspects of implementation. Existing studies of street-level bureaucracy often focus on discretion, workload, coping mechanisms, bias and institutional constraints. This study suggests that the language through which these processes occur deserves equal attention. Future research can build on this framework by observing actual bureaucratic encounters and examining how different linguistic patterns affect citizen outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the interface between language and street-level bureaucracy in contemporary public administration through a discourse analysis of Hamlet, Macbeth and Henry V. It argued that language is not a secondary feature of administration but a central mechanism through which policy implementation is interpreted, justified and experienced. By focusing on street-level bureaucracy, the study moved beyond the broad idea of governance and identified the frontline encounter as the practical site where administrative language has direct consequences for citizens.

The study found that language functions in four main ways. It operates as a mechanism of power, as seen in the official and resistant speech patterns in Hamlet. It functions as a tool of discretion by shaping how ambiguous situations are interpreted and acted upon. It drives policy framing, as illustrated by the manipulative rhetoric in Macbeth. It also enables citizen engagement and crisis mobilization, as demonstrated in Henry V. Together, these findings show that the work of street-level bureaucrats is discursive as well as procedural.

The contribution of the study to theory lies in its attempt to connect literary discourse analysis with street-level bureaucracy theory. It shows that the discretion of frontline officials should be understood not only through decisions and actions but also through language. The contribution to practice lies in its emphasis on clear, accountable and inclusive communication as a requirement for effective policy implementation. Public administrators should be trained to use language that

explains rather than obscures, engages rather than excludes and motivates without manipulation.

Future research should empirically examine the types of language used in real public service encounters, especially in policy implementation settings such as local government offices, police stations, schools, hospitals and social welfare agencies. Such research can test the four mechanisms identified in this study and assess how administrative language affects trust, compliance, participation and perceptions of fairness.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that public administration training programmes should include modules on administrative language, plain-language writing, citizen-centred communication and ethical persuasion. Public organizations should review official documents, forms and public notices to ensure that they are understandable to citizens with different levels of literacy and language competence. Street-level bureaucrats should also be trained to recognize how tone, framing and explanation influence citizen trust and participation.

The study further recommends that future empirical work should observe and analyse real frontline encounters in order to identify the linguistic patterns that promote or hinder effective policy implementation. Such studies should pay attention to multilingual settings, power imbalance, administrative burden, citizen participation and the ways frontline officials use discretion through speech.

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