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Performing Legitimacy, Constructing Unity: A Speech Act Analysis of President Hichilema's 2026 Zambian Inauguration Address

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Abstract

The article analyses the Zambian inaugural address of President Hakainde Hichilema in 2026 through the lens of J. L Austin's speech act theory and John Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts. It employs qualitative textual analysis to show that speech is a multidimensional performative act that does not just describe political reality but constitutes it. The analysis presents four performative dimensions: putting on the mantle of the presidency; the strategic use of gratitude to build institutional and political coalitions; the issuance of binding policy directives; and the performative construction of national unity. Linguistic strategies like first-person declaratives, repetition, inclusive pronouns, kinship metaphors and directive utterances work together to provide legitimacy for the renewed mandate, acknowledge electoral contestation, express the 'Grow Zambia' agenda and perform national cohesion in a polarised political environment. The study shows how the address reacts to contested election results, economic hardship and ethnic tension by converting division into unity and criticism into commitment. The results show a complex rhetorical strategy negotiating humility and authority, gratitude and direction, reconciliation and determination. It adds to scholarship on African political discourse, inauguration rhetoric, and the performative power of language in democratic transitions.

Keywords: Speech act analysis; political speech; inaugural rhetoric; performative legitimacy; national cohesion

I. Introduction

Inauguration speeches occupy a singular position within the landscape of political communication. They are ritual performances that transcend mere information dissemination; they constitute the very act of assuming power, legitimising authority, and setting the ideological direction for an administration. As Kenyan President William Ruto observed at the same ceremony, elections are designed to settle *who governs*, while the responsibility of democratic leadership is to ensure they never determine *who belongs* (The Kenya Times, 2026). This observation captures the dual nature of the inauguration address: it is simultaneously a legal formality and a profound act of national construction.

On 1 September 2026, President Hakainde Hichilema of Zambia delivered his second inauguration speech at the National Heroes Stadium in Lusaka, having secured re-election in elections that were, by several accounts, marked by political tension. His main opponent, Brian Mundubile, faced treason charges, and international observers noted allegations of intimidation and restrictions on political opposition (News24, 2026). In this fraught context, the speech carried an unusually heavy burden. It was required not only to celebrate an electoral victory but to heal political wounds, reassure international partners, and articulate a credible vision for economic transformation.

This article argues that Hichilema's address functions as a sophisticated performative act, a speech that does things with words in J.L. Austin's influential formulation. Drawing on Austin's speech act theory and its subsequent elaborations by John Searle and others, the analysis examines how the speech's linguistic features work collectively to achieve four distinct performative goals: the assumption of the presidential mantle, the strategic deployment of gratitude to build institutional and political coalitions, the issuance of binding policy directives, and the performative construction of national unity.

The analysis is situated within a growing body of scholarship on political discourse in Africa, which has demonstrated the critical role of language in shaping political realities on the continent. Recent studies have examined the rhetorical strategies of Zambian presidential addresses (Kaunda,

2025), the speech acts employed in American inauguration speeches (Suartika and Gita Ardiantari, 2025), and the broader relationship between political discourse and national identity formation (Chiluwa and Odebunmi, 2023). This article extends this scholarship by offering a focused analysis of a single speech that exemplifies the performative dimensions of political language.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on speech act theory, political discourse, and African political communication. Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework derived from Austin and Searle. Section 4 describes the methodological approach employed in the analysis. Section 5 presents the findings and discussion, organised around the four performative dimensions identified above. Section 6 concludes with reflections on the broader implications of the analysis for understanding political discourse in democratic transitions.

II. Literature Review

A. Speech Act Theory: From Austin to Searle

The foundational contribution of J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) was to challenge the assumption that the primary function of language is to describe or assert propositions that can be evaluated as true or false. Austin observed that many utterances are not constative, or descriptive, but performative. They do not merely report on reality but actively change it. The classic example is the marriage ceremony: the utterance 'I do' does not describe a preexisting state of affairs but creates a new one. Similarly, promises, bets, warnings, and appointments are performative acts accomplished through language.

Austin (1962) identified three dimensions of any speech act: the *locutionary act*, the act of saying something with a particular meaning; the *illocutionary act*, the act performed *in* saying something, such as promising, warning, or appointing; and the *perlocutionary act*, the effect achieved *by* saying something, such as persuading or intimidating. For Austin (1975), the success of a performative utterance depends on what he called 'felicity conditions': the speaker must have the appropriate authority, the circumstances must be appropriate, and the speaker must be sincere in their intentions.

John Searle (1969) extended Austin's framework by developing a systematic taxonomy of illocutionary acts, categorising them into assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations (Searle, 1976). This classification has proven particularly useful for analysing political discourse, as it enables researchers to identify the specific functions of political utterances. For instance, assertives commit the speaker to the truth of a proposition; directives attempt to get the hearer to do something; commissives commit the speaker to future action; expressives convey psychological states; and declarations bring about changes in institutional reality through the utterance itself (Searle, 1979).

B. Inauguration Speeches as Performative Genres

Inauguration speeches have attracted substantial scholarly attention as particularly rich sites for performative analysis. This is because they occur at the intersection of legal formality and political ritual, requiring the speaker to accomplish multiple objectives simultaneously: legitimising authority, articulating a policy vision, unifying a divided electorate, and establishing a governing narrative (Harris, 2024).

Research on American presidential inaugurations has demonstrated the characteristic linguistic features of the genre. A study of Donald Trump's 2025 inauguration speech identified 56 assertive utterances across five types, including claiming, stating, complaining, reporting, and explaining, with the claiming type being most frequent. This indicated an emphasis on strengthening the speaker's message and shaping audience perception (Suartika and Gita Ardiantari, 2025). Similarly, analysis of Trump's second inaugural address identified representative speech acts as the most frequently used illocutionary type (Suartika and Gita Ardiantari, 2025).

These findings suggest that inauguration speeches are primarily oriented toward establishing the speaker's authority and legitimacy, which they accomplish through assertives that present the speaker's perspective as authoritative and definitive. However, they also contain significant proportions of commissives, or pledges and commitments, and directives, or calls to action, reflecting the dual orientation of the genre toward both establishing legitimacy and setting an agenda.

C. Political Discourse in African Contexts

Scholarship on political discourse in African contexts has grown substantially, reflecting the continent's democratic transitions and the central role of rhetoric in political mobilisation (Mwansa, 2025). A recent study of President Hichilema's 2021 inaugural address employed Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis framework to examine the strategic deployment of redundancy in the speech (Kaunda, 2025). The study found that deliberate lexical, thematic, and structural repetitions of key terms such as 'unity,' 'economic restoration,' and 'servant leadership' functioned to demarcate a rupture from the preceding era, appropriate legitimising historical narratives, and distil complex policy agendas for public assimilation (Kaunda, 2025). This 'calculated redundancy' served as a potent instrument for ideological transformation and the solidification of a new political consensus (Zenodo, 2025).

This analysis is particularly relevant to the present study because it demonstrates the importance of rhetorical strategy in Zambian political discourse. The 2021 speech, like the 2026 speech analysed here, was delivered at a moment of democratic transition and required the President to accomplish similar performative goals. The continuity of rhetorical strategies across the two speeches, including the emphasis on unity, the framing of economic policy, and the deployment of repetition, suggests a coherent approach to political communication that warrants detailed investigation.

D. Zambian Political Context

The 2026 Zambian elections occurred in a context of significant political tension. President Hichilema secured reelection with 60% of the vote, followed by former provincial government minister Brian Mundubile with 38% (News24, 2026). However, the electoral period was marked by allegations of intimidation, progovernment media bias, and restrictions on political opposition (News24, 2026). Mundubile faced treason charges, which his party rejected, and a former cabinet minister was killed during a security operation (News24, 2026). These tensions created a backdrop of political polarisation against which the inauguration speech was delivered.

Hichilema's first term was credited with significant economic achievements, including debt restructuring, reduced inflation, increased international reserves, and the introduction of free education (News24, 2026). However, critics argued that these gains had not reached ordinary households, with over 70% of Zambia's population living on less than three dollars a day (News24, 2026). The speech, therefore, also needed to acknowledge continuing economic hardship while maintaining optimism about the future.

This complex political context, marked by both achievement and criticism, electoral victory and political contestation, frames the performative dimensions of the speech. The address needed to accomplish the conventional performative work of an inauguration while also responding to the specific challenges of the moment.

III. Theoretical Framework

This analysis is grounded in speech act theory, as developed by J.L. Austin and elaborated by John Searle and others. Speech act theory provides a framework for understanding how utterances function not merely as vehicles for conveying information but as actions that shape social and political realities.

A. Austin's Performative Constative Distinction

Austin's (1962) central insight was that many utterances are not true or false but 'happy' or 'unhappy' depending on whether the conditions for their success are met. A performative utterance succeeds when the speaker has the appropriate authority, follows the correct procedure, and is sincere in their intentions. A marriage ceremony is valid only when performed by an authorised person according to established rituals; a promise is binding only when the promisor genuinely intends to fulfil it.

For Austin (1975), the felicity conditions for performatives include:

1. **Procedural conditions**: The utterance must conform to an accepted conventional procedure, and the circumstances and persons must be appropriate.
2. **Execution conditions**: The procedure must be executed correctly and completely.
3. **Intentional conditions**: The speaker must have the requisite thoughts, feelings, and intentions.

When these conditions are met, the performative utterance creates a new social or institutional reality. When they are not, the performative 'misfires' or is 'abused' (Austin, 1975).

B. Searle's Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts

Searle (1976) developed Austin's framework by classifying illocutionary acts into five categories:

1. **Assertives** (for example, stating, claiming, reporting): Committing the speaker to the truth of a proposition.
2. **Directives** (for example, ordering, requesting, advising): Attempting to get the hearer to do something.
3. **Commissives** (for example, promising, pledging, offering): Committing the speaker to future action.
4. **Expressives** (for example, thanking, apologising, congratulating): Expressing the speaker's psychological state.
5. **Declarations** (for example, appointing, declaring, resigning): Bringing about a change in institutional reality (Searle, 1976).

This taxonomy is particularly useful for analysing political discourse because it enables the analyst to identify the specific functions of different types of utterances and to examine how these functions combine to achieve political objectives (Searle, 1979).

C. Speech Act Theory and Political Discourse

The application of speech act theory to political discourse is premised on the recognition that political utterances are performative in the strongest sense: they do not merely describe political reality but actively constitute it. When a president says, 'I accept this renewed mandate,' they are not just describing a state of affairs but performing the act of accepting a mandate. When they say, 'I pledge to serve with integrity,' they are not just expressing an intention but making a commitment that creates new obligations.

Richard Ohmann's (1971) adaptation of speech act theory to literary analysis is relevant here, as he recognised that Austin's framework can be extended to analyse utterances that are not direct, sincere, or straightforward. However, as critics have noted, applying Austin's categories to political discourse requires attention to the specific contexts and conventions that govern political speech, including the ritual settings, institutional constraints, and audience expectations that shape how political utterances are produced and received (Skinner, 2002; Van Dijk, 2008).

For the purposes of this analysis, the speech is treated as a unified performative act comprising multiple illocutionary acts. The analysis examines how these acts combine to achieve the speech's overarching performative goals: legitimising the President's mandate, unifying the nation, and articulating the 'Grow Zambia' agenda.

IV. Methodology

A. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, text based approach to the analysis of President Hichilema's 2026 inauguration speech. The approach is consistent with established traditions in discourse analysis and rhetorical criticism, which prioritise close reading and contextual interpretation over quantitative measurement (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak and Meyer, 2015).

B. Data Source

The primary data source is the full text of President Hichilema's inauguration speech, delivered on 1 September 2026 at the National Heroes Stadium in Lusaka. The text was made available in official PDF format by the Zambian Cabinet Office.

C. Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages.

Stage 1: Structural and Thematic Mapping. The speech was reviewed to identify its major structural divisions and thematic concerns. This stage was informed by the speech's own headings and the broader genre conventions of inauguration addresses.

Stage 2: Identification of Performative Utterances. The speech was systematically analysed to identify utterances that function as performatives in Austin's sense. This involved examining the use of first-person declarative utterances ('We accept,' 'We pledge'), directive utterances ('Let us,' 'There must be'), and expressive utterances ('We thank,' 'We honour'). Each utterance was classified according to Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts.

Stage 3: Interpretation and Contextualisation. The performative utterances were interpreted in light of their context: the political circumstances of the 2026 election, the broader discourse of Zambian politics, and the conventions of the inauguration genre. This stage drew on secondary sources, including news reports and scholarly analysis, to contextualise the linguistic analysis.

V. Findings and Discussion

A. Assumption of the Mantle

The most fundamental performative act accomplished by an inauguration speech is the assumption of the presidential mantle. This is not merely a statement about taking office but an act of taking office, a declaration that creates a new political reality. As Skinner (2002) argued, political speech acts are not merely descriptive but constitutive of political reality.

In Hichilema's speech, this performative act is accomplished through several linguistic strategies.

Acceptance of the Mandate. The speech explicitly frames the election result as a renewed mandate: 'WE ACCEPT THIS RENEWED MANDATE WITH PROFOUND GRATITUDE, DEEP HUMILITY AND A RENEWED SENSE OF DUTY.' This is a declaration in Searle's (1976) sense, an utterance that changes institutional reality. The word 'accept' performs the act of accepting the mandate, creating the legal and political basis for the new term. Following Searle's (1969) taxonomy, this utterance functions as a declaration that brings about a change in the institutional reality of the presidency.

Acknowledgment of Sovereignty. The speech begins by celebrating the 'sovereign will of the people': 'TODAY, WE HONOUR AND CELEBRATE THE SOVEREIGN WILL OF THE PEOPLE. YOU, THE PEOPLE OF ZAMBIA HAVE SPOKEN.' This is both an expressive, expressing gratitude and respect, and a declaration, declaring the people's sovereignty as the foundation of presidential authority. By framing the mandate as belonging to the people ('THIS MANDATE, THEREFORE, BELONGS TO THE PEOPLE OF ZAMBIA'), the speech performs the act of returning authority to its source while simultaneously claiming it. This performative act aligns with what Fairclough (2013) identifies as the democratic legitimation strategy in political discourse.

The 'Servant President' Framing. The speech concludes with a personal pledge: 'I WILL CONTINUE TO BE A SERVANT PRESIDENT FOR ALL ZAMBIANS.' This is a commissive, a commitment to future action (Searle, 1976), but it is also a declaration that redefines the nature of presidential authority. The phrase 'servant president' is itself a performative act of self constitution, establishing a particular type of presidential identity. As Kaunda (2025) observed in his analysis of Hichilema's 2021 speech, the 'servant leader' framing is a deliberate rhetorical strategy to distinguish the President from his predecessors.

Historical Framing. The speech frames the new term as the 'birth of the "Grow Zambia" agenda,' linking it to the 'new dawn' ushered in five years earlier. This temporal framing, from 'new dawn' to 'birth,' constructs a narrative of progress and development that legitimises the renewal of the mandate. The use of the metaphor 'birth' is particularly significant, as it positions the new agenda as a natural and inevitable outgrowth of the previous term. As Rappaport (1999) argued, ritual language often employs such metaphorical framings to create a sense of continuity and inevitability.

These linguistic strategies collectively constitute the act of assuming the presidential mantle. They are not merely descriptive but performative: they create the very political reality they describe. This is a classic example of what Austin (1962) called a 'declarative' illocutionary act: an utterance that brings about a change in institutional reality through the very act of uttering it.

B. The Gratitude Coalition

The extensive acknowledgments in the speech, including those to God, to the Zambian people, to family, to the Vice President, to party members, to national institutions, and to international friends, are more than social niceties. They are performative acts of recognition that build and legitimise a coalition of support. As Van Dijk (2008) observed, such expressions of gratitude are strategic discursive moves that construct ingroups and outgroups while managing political relationships.

Gratitude to the Zambian People. The speech thanks those who voted for the President and, crucially, those who did not: 'TO THOSE WHO PLACED THEIR TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN US, WE SAY: THANK YOU. ... TO THOSE WHO CHOSE OTHER CANDIDATES OR OTHER PARTIES, WE SAY WITH EQUAL SINCERITY: WE HAVE HEARD YOU, WE RESPECT YOUR CHOICE, AND WE VALUE YOUR VOICE.' This double gratitude is a sophisticated performative act. It performs gratitude to supporters, reinforcing their loyalty, while also performing respect to opponents, extending an olive branch. The effect is to construct a national audience that transcends partisan divisions. This aligns with what Chiluwa and Odebunmi (2023) identify as the discourse of national unity in African political communication.

Gratitude to National Institutions. The speech thanks the church, traditional leaders, civil society, the media, and the Electoral Commission: 'WE COMMEND THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION OF ZAMBIA AND ALL ELECTORAL OFFICIALS FOR THEIR DEDICATION IN ADMINISTERING THESE ELECTIONS.' This is more than politeness. By thanking the Electoral Commission, the President performs the act of legitimising the election result. By thanking civil society and the media, he positions himself as a leader who values democratic institutions. By thanking traditional leaders, he acknowledges sources of authority beyond the state. Wodak and Meyer (2015) note that such institutional acknowledgments are crucial discursive strategies for establishing political legitimacy.

Gratitude to International Partners. The speech thanks the heads of state and international dignitaries in attendance: 'YOUR PRESENCE IS A PROFOUND EXPRESSION OF FRIENDSHIP, SOLIDARITY AND PARTNERSHIP WITH THE GOVERNMENT AND PEOPLE OF ZAMBIA.' This is a performative act of international recognition. By expressing gratitude, the President performs the act of accepting Zambia's place in the international community and renewing its partnerships. As Mwansa (2025) argued, Zambian presidents have consistently employed such international gratitude as a strategy for securing foreign investment and diplomatic support.

Gratitude to Party and Campaign Supporters. The speech thanks party members, volunteers, and supporters: 'TO THE MEMBERS OF THE UNITED PARTY FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, OUR ALLIANCE PARTNERS, CAMPAIGN TEAMS, FOOT SOLDIERS, VOLUNTEERS AND SUPPORTERS ACROSS OUR COUNTRY: WE THANK YOU. WE HONOUR YOU!' This gratitude performs two functions. It acknowledges the party's role in the electoral victory, reinforcing party loyalty. But it also issues a directive: 'THERE MUST BE NO TAUNTING, NO PROVOCATION AND NO HUMILIATION OF THOSE WHO VOTED DIFFERENTLY.' This is a performative act of discipline, telling supporters how to behave in victory. Searle (1976) would classify this as a directive, an attempt to get the hearer to behave in a certain way. The cumulative effect of these expressions of gratitude is the construction of what might be called a 'gratitude coalition,' a broad coalition of supporters, institutions, and international partners who are recognised and legitimised by the speech. This performative act of recognition is essential to the speech's success, as it positions the President as a unifying leader who respects all legitimate stakeholders (Harris, 2024).

C. Directing the Nation

The speech contains numerous pledges and policy commitments that function as performative directives, utterances that commit the President to future action and create expectations that will be used to judge his administration. As Searle (1979) noted, commissive utterances create obligations that can be used for accountability.

The 'Grow Zambia' Agenda. The centrepiece of the speech is the articulation of the 'Grow Zambia' agenda, encapsulated in the memorable numeric sequence: 10-10-5-3-3-1-1-1. This represents 10 million tonnes of maize, 10,000 megawatts of electricity, 5 million tourists, 3 million tonnes of copper, 3 million tonnes of soya, 1 million tonnes of wheat, 1 million tonnes of sugar, and 1 billion USD in beef export revenue. This is a commissive, a commitment to future action, but it is also a directive, setting targets that will guide the administration's work. The specificity of the numbers performs the act of making the agenda tangible and accountable. It transforms the abstract goal of 'economic growth' into a measurable set of objectives. As Kaunda (2025) observed in his analysis of Hichilema's 2021 speech, this use of specific targets is a characteristic feature of the President's rhetorical style.

Pledges to the People. The speech contains a series of pledges: 'WE PLEDGE TO SERVE YOU WITH INTEGRITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY. WE PLEDGE TO LEAD A GOVERNMENT IN WHICH EVERY VOICE MATTERS AND EVERY CITIZEN IS HEARD. WE PLEDGE TO LEAD A GOVERNMENT THAT TAKES TANGIBLE DEVELOPMENT TO EVERY COMMUNITY.' These are commissives, commitments to future action, that create expectations and obligations (Searle, 1969). By stating them so publicly and forcefully, the President is performing the act of committing his government to these standards. The repetition of the word 'pledge,' from the Old French 'pleger,' to promise, is itself a performative act of promising. As Austin (1962) noted, the explicit use of performative verbs such as 'pledge' is a characteristic feature of successful performative utterances.

Directives to Citizens. The speech also contains directives to citizens. The most notable is the instruction to 'HARD AND SMART WORK': 'LET US DEDICATE OURSELVES TO HARD AND SMART WORK. HARD AND SMART WORK FOR SUSTAINED ECONOMIC GROWTH ... HARD AND SMART WORK FOR ACCESSIBLE, QUALITY HEALTHCARE ... HARD AND SMART WORK FOR A MORE UNITED, PEACEFUL, INCLUSIVE AND PROSPEROUS ZAMBIA.' This is a directive, it attempts to get the hearer to do something, but it is also an expressive, expressing a call to collective action. The repetition of the phrase 'hard and smart work' performs the act of inculcating a work ethic that will be necessary for the success of the 'Grow Zambia' agenda. Fairclough (2013) would identify this as a form of ideological discourse that constructs subjects through interpellation.

Directives to Public Servants. The speech also directs public servants to prioritise the national interest: 'EVERY PUBLIC SERVANT SHOULD PUT THE NATIONAL INTEREST FIRST, ABOVE THEIR PERSONAL INTEREST. WHEN WE ALL PUT NATIONAL INTERESTS FIRST, OUR PERSONAL INTERESTS WILL BE TAKEN CARE OF.' This is a directive, an attempt to shape the behaviour of public servants, but it is also a justification, explaining why this behaviour is in everyone's interest. The framing of personal interest as derivative of national interest is a performative act that constructs a particular relationship between the individual and the state. As Van Dijk (2008) argued, such discursive moves are central to the legitimation of authority in political discourse.

These directive utterances collectively perform the act of directing the nation. They commit the government to specific policies, set expectations for citizens, and establish standards of conduct for public servants. They are not just descriptions of future action but the creation of future obligations (Searle, 1979).

D. The Performative Construction of Unity

The speech's most significant performative goal is the construction of national unity. In a context marked by political polarisation and ethnic tension (News24, 2026), the speech uses language to perform the act of unifying the nation. As Ruto observed, 'One Zambia, One Nation' is a foundational idea that 'our differences should never become our divisions; that political contest need not become national conflict; and that what unites a people must ultimately be greater than what separates them' (The Kenya Times, 2026).

The Invitation to 'Together'. The speech repeatedly invokes the idea of moving forward 'together': 'WITH DETERMINATION LET US MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER. WITH HUMILITY AND GRATITUDE LET US MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER. WITH INCLUSIVITY AND FAIRNESS LET US MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER. AS BROTHERS AND SISTERS, UNITED BY THE LAND WE LOVE, AND THE FUTURE WE SHARE, LET US MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER.' The repetition of 'together' is itself a performative act, attempting to perform national cohesion into being. It is a directive, it tells citizens to act together, but it is also a declaration, declaring that, despite political differences, the nation is and will remain one. Searle (1976) would classify this as a directive, as it attempts to influence the behaviour of the audience. However, its repeated iteration elevates it to a performative act of nation building (Rappaport, 1999).

The Hand of Unity. The speech extends 'an extended hand of unity' to political opponents: 'WE THEREFORE EXTEND OUR HAND TO THOSE WHO OPPOSED US, NOT AS A GESTURE OF POLITICAL CONVENIENCE, BUT AS AN EXPRESSION OF OUR CONVICTION THAT THIS REPUBLIC BELONGS EQUALLY TO ALL OF US.' This is a performative act of reconciliation. By extending a hand, the President is not just describing reconciliation but performing it. The qualification, 'not as a gesture of political convenience,' is an attempt to ensure the sincerity condition for the performative (Austin, 1975). As Ohmann (1971) noted, such qualifications are often necessary to establish the felicity conditions for political performatives.

The Sibling Metaphor. The speech repeatedly refers to Zambians as brothers and sisters: 'THE PERSON WHO VOTED AGAINST US IS NOT OUR ENEMY. HE IS OUR BROTHER. SHE IS OUR SISTER. THEY ARE FELLOW ZAMBIANS.' This sibling metaphor is a powerful performative act. It reframes political competitors as family members, redefining the relationship from adversarial to familial. The repetition of 'brother' and 'sister' performs the act of creating a new relationship between political opponents. As Mwansa (2025) argued, such kinship metaphors are characteristic of African political discourse, drawing on traditional values of community and solidarity.

The 'One Zambia' Creed. The speech invokes the founding creed of 'One Zambia, One Nation': 'ABOVE ALL, LET US REMAIN ONE ZAMBIA, ONE NATION, ONE PEOPLE.' This is a performative act that invokes the country's foundational ideology. It is a declaration that, despite political differences, the nation remains one. As President Ruto observed in his own address at the ceremony, 'One Zambia, One Nation' is an African idea: 'that our differences should never become our

divisions; that political contest need not become national conflict; and that what unites a people must ultimately be greater than what separates them' (The Kenya Times, 2026). This invocation of the founding ideology is a classic performative act that draws on shared cultural and political memory (Rappaport, 1999).

The Rejection of Ethnic Politics. The speech implicitly rejects ethnic politics by insisting on the primacy of national identity: 'WE ARE HERE TO SERVE ALL THE PEOPLE OF ZAMBIA, REGARDLESS OF POLITICAL AFFILIATION, REGION, ETHNICITY, RELIGION, GENDER OR SOCIAL STATUS.' This is a performative act of commitment to inclusive governance. By specifying the characteristics that are irrelevant to citizenship, the speech performs the act of rejecting discrimination and affirming equality. As Chiluwa and Odebunmi (2023) argued, such inclusive discourse is crucial for managing ethnic tensions in African democracies.

The De-escalation of Political Conflict. The speech explicitly tells supporters not to taunt or provoke opponents: 'THERE MUST BE NO TAUNTING, NO PROVOCATION AND NO HUMILIATION OF THOSE WHO VOTED DIFFERENTLY.' This is a directive that seeks to de-escalate political conflict (Searle, 1976). It is also a performative act that tells supporters how to behave, shaping postelection political reality. The success of this performative depends on whether supporters actually comply, but the speech at least establishes the expectation of civil behaviour. As Fairclough (2013) noted, such directives are crucial for maintaining political stability in contested elections.

These linguistic strategies collectively perform the act of unifying the nation. They invite citizens to act together, extend reconciliation to opponents, reframe political competition as familial, invoke the founding ideology of the nation, reject ethnic politics, and de-escalate political conflict. The cumulative effect is an attempt to perform national cohesion into being.

VI. Conclusion

This analysis has examined President Hichilema's 2026 inauguration speech as a multidimensional performative act. Drawing on J.L. Austin's (1962) speech act theory and John Searle's (1976) elaboration, the analysis has identified four primary performative dimensions of the speech: the assumption of the presidential mantle, the strategic deployment of gratitude, the issuance of policy directives, and the performative construction of national unity.

The analysis demonstrates how the speech's linguistic features, including pronoun usage, repetition, metaphorical framing, inclusive address, and directive utterances, work collectively to accomplish these performative goals. The speech does not merely describe political reality; it actively constitutes it. It creates a new political reality in which the President has a renewed mandate, the nation is united, and a transformative policy agenda is underway.

The analysis also reveals the sophistication of Hichilema's rhetorical strategy. The speech responds to the specific challenges of the moment, including political polarisation, economic hardship, and contested election results, by deploying language that addresses each challenge performatively. It acknowledges the political divisions while performing unity, it acknowledges economic hardship while performing commitment to growth, and it acknowledges the contested nature of the election while performing the acceptance of the mandate.

Several limitations of this analysis should be acknowledged. First, it focuses on the text of the speech rather than its reception. The success of a performative utterance depends not only on its linguistic features but on whether the audience accepts it as valid (Austin, 1975). Future research might examine the reception of the speech; how different audiences interpreted its messages and whether they were persuaded by its performative dimensions.

Second, the analysis does not explore the relationship between this speech and other political speeches in Zambia. A comparative analysis could reveal whether the strategies identified here are consistent with Hichilema's broader rhetorical approach or reflect the specific demands of the

inauguration genre. Kaunda's (2025) analysis of the 2021 speech provides a starting point for such comparison.

Third, the analysis does not examine the role of delivery, including tone, gesture, and facial expression, in the speech's performative effectiveness. Future research might explore the multimodal dimensions of political communication, examining how verbal and nonverbal elements combine to accomplish performative goals (Fairclough, 2013).

Despite these limitations, the analysis contributes to a growing body of scholarship on political discourse in African contexts (Chiluwa and Odebunmi, 2023; Mwansa, 2025). It demonstrates the continued relevance of speech act theory for understanding contemporary political communication and offers a detailed analysis of a speech that exemplifies the performative dimensions of political language. The analysis also contributes to understanding Zambian political discourse specifically, revealing how President Hichilema uses language to consolidate authority, build coalitions, and construct national unity.

As President Ruto observed at the ceremony, democracy is tested not when we agree but when we disagree (The Kenya Times, 2026). The inauguration speech is a moment when political leaders attempt to move the nation from contestation to governance, from division to unity. This analysis has shown how language performs that movement.

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