

# A Critical Discourse Analysis of Blackmail in Some Selected Songs

Asst. Lect. Nahla Mahmoud Hadi

University of Babylon, College of Education for Human Sciences, Department of English, Iraq

Asst.Prof.Dr.Wafaa Mokhlos Faisal

University of Babylon, College of Education for Human Sciences, Department of English, Iraq

**Received:** 22 May 2025; **Accepted:** 18 June 2025; **Published:** 20 July 2025

**Abstract:** The present study critically aims at highlighting the emotional blackmailers' social power in the genre of songs. The qualitative and quantitative methods are adopted so as to analyze three songs; namely, Don't Leave Me, If You Leave Me, I'll... and Stay With Me. The findings prove that the tantalizer and the sufferer types of emotional blackmails are frequently employed to arrive at the percentages (60%) and (40%) respectively, whereas the pressure and the demand elements of emotional blackmails are mostly with the percentages (40%) and (30%) respectively. The main conclusion is that the tantalizer type and the pressure element are appropriate types to achieve emotional blackmails.

**Keywords:** CDA, social power, emotional blackmail, tantalizer and pressure.

**Introduction:** Critical discourse analysis is defined as 'a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power, abuse, dominance and inequalities are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context' for the sake of revealing and resisting social injustice. The emergence of critical methods is attributed to the new orientation of analysis that of the critical linguistics in 1970s. The main focus of critical linguistics is to highlight the intertwined relationships between language and ideology. As such, one of the methods of critical discourse analysis is to show how singers' social power is enacted and (re)produced when using emotional blackmails.

The latter concept is coined by the psychologist Susan Forward (1997) in her book *Emotional Blackmail: When the People in Your Life Use Fear, Obligation, and Guilt to Manipulate You*. Hence, Forward's (1997) refers to the kind of behaviour by which emotional blackmailers try to control other's behaviours through emotions. She classifies emotional blackmails into four types: punisher, self-punisher, sufferer and tantalizer; and six elements: demand, resistance, pressure, threat,

compliance and repetition. 2 Accordingly, the present study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is meant by emotional blackmail?
2. What are the types and elements of emotional blackmail? And which ones are dominantly used in the genre of songs?
3. How do singers' social powers are revealed through employing the emotional blackmail with regard to critical discourse analysis?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) is a branch of discourse studies that investigates the role of language in the reproduction of power, inequality, and dominance in society. Van Dijk (2001: 352) defines CDA as "a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context." Similarly, Fairclough (2010: 12) asserts that CDA is primarily concerned with interpreting how social practices are constructed and realized through discourse. Wodak (2001: 9) further emphasizes that

CDA focuses on how power is created and maintained through discourse, revealing how dominant social actors use language to assert control, and how marginalized groups may resist such control. In this sense, CDA does not merely describe language use but critically engages with how discourse structures shape, reinforce, or challenge social power relations. Additionally, Fowler et al. (1979: 3) argue that CDA serves as an analytical tool for uncovering hidden ideologies embedded in discourse, particularly those that may appear neutral or objective on the surface but, in fact, reflect and support dominant social interests.

Central to CDA is the concept of power. Power is not only a matter of overt coercion but is often exercised through subtle discursive means. Fairclough (1989: 43–45) defines power as a social property that emerges in relationships among individuals and groups within speech communities. It allows members of dominant groups to control the discourse and behavior of others, often through institutional access to resources such as media, education, and political structures. Van Dijk (1996: 84) expands on this by stating that social power involves the ability to influence others' actions and beliefs—whether through verbal or non-verbal means. This influence results in a societal division between dominant (higher) groups and subordinate (lower) groups. The former hold privileged access to platforms of communication and decision-making, enabling them to shape ideologies and maintain control over the latter. In this context, CDA is employed to expose how such asymmetrical power relations are normalized and perpetuated through language, thus providing a framework for understanding how discourse both reflects and constructs social realities.

### 1 Emotional Blackmails

The coinage of the term of emotional blackmail is attributed to the therapist, author, and lecturer Dr. Susan Forward (1997) in her book *Emotional Blackmail: When the People in Your Life Use Fear, Obligation, and Guilt to Manipulate You*. Emotional blackmails, according to Forward (1997: 1-2), refers to a type of manipulated behavior where by feelings and emotions are controlled by others so as to make someone behaves in accordance with their wants. In other words, achieving others' needs and aims requires them to utter a linguistic and/or non linguistic behavior for the sake of persuading and controlling a person's feeling and emotions, and, thus, that person will abnormally behave. Emotional blackmail is also defined as 'a term used to describe a manipulative style where a person tries to get their way by using your emotions and to control your behavior. The individual may also try to persuade you with emotional blackmailing to see things

their way'. Beside it is also mentioned that emotional blackmail is not a good way to ask or control others' behavior. Instead, speakers must try to compromise and respect the ways things are (web source 1). For Karnani and Zelman (2019 (2019: 165), emotional blackmail refers to 'a form of repetitive emotional manipulation in which to exact compliance, a perpetrator threatens to hurt or abandon a person close to him or her, by inducing fear, obligation or guilt'. Further, emotional blackmailers' behaviours are categorised into three; namely, clear (i.e., in this category, the emotional blackmailers' behaviours are clear and unambiguous when threatening), mixed (i.e., in this category, the emotional 4 blackmailers' behaviours are mixed, that is, different behaviours are acted, when threatening) and forceful (i.e., in this category, the emotional blackmailers' behaviours are direct and forceful when threatening (Ibid:1997, 3)

#### 1. 1 Elements of Emotional Blackmail

According to Forward (1997: 4-6), emotional blackmail is achieved due to six elements: demand, resistance, pressure, threats, compliance and repetition. Firstly, the demand element of emotional blackmail is achieved when someone directly or indirectly asks someone else (depend on the kind of relationship) to accept, act in accordance with his will. Forward's example illustrates that Jim demands Helen, his beloved, to move to her apartment so as to live together. Secondly, the resistance element is fulfilled when someone expresses his unwillingness and resistance against another person's demand. Hence, Helen expresses her refusal and unwillingness to Jim's demand that of moving to live with her. Thirdly, the emotional blackmail of pressure element is accomplished when a person uses a behaviour so as to get a response to his demands from another person. In Forward's example, Jim uses the emotional blackmail of pressure for the sake of pushing Helen to change her mind, and, thus, accept letting Jim to live with her. Fourthly, the emotional blackmail of threats element is exploited when a person does not get his wants, and, accordingly, begins behaving to threat the other person by threatening him/her of the future consequences. With regard to Forward's example of Jim and Helen, the former starts threatening her by saying he will leave her, her refusal will harm him and the like. Fifthly, the emotional blackmail of compliance is achieved when a person realises that he/she will lose the other person. In other words, it is understood that it is wrong to resist denying the other person's wants or demands, the element of 5 compliance is launched. Hence, Helen realises that she and her beloved's matters are superficially discussed and their relationships become not like the past, thus, she accepts letting Jim to move

and live with her, with regard to Forward's demands. Finally, the emotional blackmail of repetition element is employed when a person sees that threatening and pressuring the other person's behaviours is the only way to get his demands. In relation to Forward's example, Jim uses this element to get his wants since he shows Helen the value of being together.

## 1. 2 Types of Emotional Blackmails

Due to its various manipulative elements, emotional blackmails are categorised into four types, according to Forward (1997: 18-38):

1. Punishers: this type is fulfilled when a person pushes so as to make his needs accomplished from the other person. In doing so, the former will employ threats and pressure as possible as he can for the sake of getting his demands.
2. Self-punishers: people of this type will usually start using expressions or behaviours that indicate self-harm and threats if the other person does not accept or resist to the former's demands.
3. Sufferers: people become sufferers if they are the victims of others' behaviours. That is, if a person does not comply with his partner, the former will suffer from the latter's pressures and threats, as in: "After all that I've done for you, you are going to let me suffer...?"
4. Tantalizers: this type is regarded the most manipulative and ambiguous one, since blackmailers promise the addressees that if they comply, they will become better. However, the threat and pressure is still echo in their behaviors.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study is limited to the analysis of three song lyrics, namely: Don't Leave Me (a Japanese song translated into English) by J. Y. Park, If You Leave Me, I'll... by Fonzie, and Stay With Me by Sam Smith. These songs were purposefully selected from online sources (see Appendices) based on their thematic relevance to emotional blackmail. The rationale for choosing these particular songs is to critically highlight the types and elements of emotional blackmail, as categorized by Forward (1997). According to Forward, the types of emotional blackmail include the Punisher, the Self-Punisher, the Sufferer, and the Tantalizer. The elements involved in emotional blackmail encompass the Demand, the Resistance, the Threats, the Pressure, the Compliance, and the Repetition. More precisely, the current study aims to critically examine how emotional blackmail functions as a form of social power within the selected lyrics.

## 1 Data Analysis

Due to Forward's (1997) model of types and elements of emotional blackmails, the data are firstly analyzed

and then the results are discussed in this section.

### Extract 1

It deepens the more time passes Right now I am in between your past and future 1 Don't leave me I believe, I start running No ending...You are my heartbeat Even if I'm struck by rain Even if I'm erased by darkness I will definitely save you You are not alone (Don't Leave Me by J. Y. Park, web source 2)

In extract, the singer employs the emotional blackmail types of sufferer and tantalizer. The former, on the one hand, is achieved when the singer mentions that leaving him will lead him to shadow and no way. He begs him to stay with her. He threatens that her that if she leaves him he will suffer. Hence, the emotional blackmail element of threat and pressure is observed while using the former type of emotional blackmail. On the other hand, the latter is fulfilled when the singer says that if she stays with him, he will definitely save her. Hence, he keeps pressuring and tries to make her comply to his demands. In doing so, the singer employs the emotional blackmail elements of pressure and demand. In relation to CDA, the singer exerts his social power as being the man, the dominant gender, in comparison with his love. He use the imperative structure to reflect the social power, that is, he keeps using threats and pressures so as to make her comply and resist with his demands. Again, the singer's social power is revealed via saying that if she stays with him he will definitely save her.

### Extract 2

Wanna tell you that I love you girl I wanna show you all the things That I can do for you again I never met a girl like you That turns me on I'll be mad If you leave me, I'll become shorter 8 If you keep me, I'll become a lover You have to feel what I feel for you I wanna hold your hand and make you ...Any word, any touch, means A lot of love for you (If You Leave Me I'll... by Fonzie, web source 3)

It is the sufferer and tantalizer types of emotional blackmails that are used by the singer in extract two. Firstly, the sufferer type is manifested due to the singer's statement that if his love leaves him, he will become a shorter. That is, her leave will make him die. Secondly, the tantalizer type is observed owing to the singer's statement that if his love keeps him, he will become a lover. That is, her love gives him the life. As for the elements of emotional blackmail, it is authenticated in extract 2 that the singer employs three ones; namely, the demand, the pressure and the threat. As such, the singer keeps saying that he loves her and he is nothing without her, and, thus, he wants to tell her that he has never met a girl like her and he will be mad if she leaves him. His insistence to

demanding, pressuring and threatening so as to get his wants and, accordingly, the emotional blackmail is achieved. In relation to the CDA, the use of the social power of the singer is reflected via using the constructions 1'I'll be mad and 2You have to feel what I feel for you. The singer's social power echo via using the threats and pressure so as to persuade her and make her to behave in accordance with his will.

### Extract 3

Guess it's true, I'm not good at a one-night stand But I still need love 'cause I'm just a man These nights never seem to go to plan I don't want you to leave, will you hold my hand? Oh, won't you stay with me? 1 'Cause you're all I need 2 This ain't love, it's clear to see But, darling, stay with me Why am I so emotional? No, it's not a good look, gain some self-control And deep down I know this never works But you can lay with me so it doesn't hurt Oh, won't you stay with me? 'Cause you're all I need This ain't love, it's clear to see But, darling, stay with me Oh, won't you stay with me? 'Cause you're all I need This ain't love, it's clear to see But, darling, stay with me Oh, won't you stay with me? 'Cause you're all I need this ain't love, it's clear to see But, darling,

stay with me (Stay with Me by Sam Smith, Web source 4)

Using the emotional blackmail type of tantalizer is exploited by the singer in extract 3. The reason behind doing so is that the speaker tries to make her girl to comply with his wants. That is, the singer wants to control his girl's behavior for the sake of making her accepting to stay with him. He employs the expressions stay with me, you're all I need and I don't want you to leave to reflect the emotional blackmail of tantalizer. The demand, repetition, pressure elements of emotional blackmail are fulfilled in extract 3. During the whole song, the singer keeps pressuring, demanding and repeating that she represents his life, and her departure will cause a problem to him, and, thus, he keeps saying stay with me, you are all I need and I don't want you to leave. As for the CDA, it is observed that singer's social power is revealed in extract 3. The constructions 'Cause you're all I need' and 'This ain't love, it's clear to see' represent that social power through which the singer tries to control and dominate his girl's behaviors.

**Table 1**  
**The Use of Emotional Blackmails in the Three Songs**

Emotional Blackmails					
Types			Elements		
Name	Freq.	Per.	Name	Freq.	Per.
Punisher	0	0	Demand	3	30
Self-punisher	0	0	Resistance	0	0
Sufferer	2	40	Pressure	4	40
Tantalizer	3	60	Threat	2	20
			Compliance	0	0
			Repetition	1	10
total	5	100%	total	10	100%

With regard to the types of emotional blackmail, it is authenticated in Table 1 that the priority is given the tantalizer type in comparison and followed by the sufferer type with the percentages that amount to (60%) and (40%) respectively. However, the punisher and self-punisher are not employed in the three songs and record the percentage (0%) for each. As for the elements of emotional blackmails, it is found in Table 1 that the repetition, threat, demand and pressure get

approximate percentages that amount to (10%), (20%), (30%) and (40%) respectively, whereas the compliance element gets the percentage (0%). As such, the gradual order indicates that the emphasis is given to the pressure and demand elements.

### CONCLUSIONS

The presents study arrives at the following:

1. Critical discourse analysis aims at highlighting the equalities, power abuse and ideological differences



that are embodied in discourse.

2. Emotional blackmail is a term that is firstly used by Forward in 1997 to refer to the kind of behavior that is aimed at controlling other's decisions and actions so as to achieve their demands. 3. Emotional blackmails are divided into four types; namely, the punisher, the self-punisher, the sufferer and the tantalizer. It is found that the most dominant types in the selected genre are the emotional blackmail of tantalizer and followed by the emotional blackmail of sufferer. Besides, the elements of emotional blackmails are categorized into six elements: the demand, the resistance, the pressure, the threat, the compliance and the repetition. The frequent elements that are used to achieve the emotional blackmail are the pressure and followed by the demand.

3. As for the emotional blackmail types, the results of Table 1 shows that the emotional blackmail is frequently fulfilled via using the tantalizer and sufferer types. The justification for this conclusion is that they get the higher percentages that amount to (60%) and (40%) respectively. However, the emotional of blackmail is not used when employing the punisher and self-punisher types since both of the types record the percentage (0%).

4. As far as the elements of emotional blackmail, table 1 manifests that it is the element of pressure that is highly employed and followed by that of demand, threat and then repetition, since the percentages read as follow: (40%), (30%), (20%) and (10%) respectively.

5. It is found that the singers' social power is highly revealed in the three songs. In doing so, the singers, as men, want to prove that they can control their lovers' behaviors through employing the emotional blackmail.

## REFERENCES

- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (2010). *Critical discourse analysis*. Taylor & Francis.
- Forward, S. (1997). *Emotional blackmail: When the people in your life use fear, obligation, and guilt to manipulate you*. Harper Collins.
- Fowler, R., Hodge, R., Kress, U., & Trew, T. (1979). *Language and control*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Genius. (2021, November 27). Sam Smith - Stay with me lyrics. <https://genius.com/Sam-smith-stay-with-me-lyrics>
- Hamilton, D. (Ed.). (n.d.). *The handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 352-372). Blackwell Publishers.
- Karnani, S. R., & Zelman, D. C. (2019). Measurement of emotional blackmail in couple relationships in Hong

Kong. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*, 8(3), 165–180.

Lyrics K-pop. (2021, November 25). BTS - Don't leave me English translation. <https://lyricskpop.net/lyrics/bts-dont-leave-me-english-translation/>

Relationships MDD. (2021, November 20). Emotional blackmail. <https://relationshipsmd.com/emotional-blackmail/>

Songsear.ch. (2021, November 25). If you leave me I'll - Fonzie. <https://songsear.ch/song/Fonzie/If-You-Leave-Me-III/1919209>

Van Dijk, T. (1996). Discourse, power and access. In C. R. Caldas-Coulthard & M. Coulthard (Eds.), *Texts and practices: Readings in critical discourse analysis* (pp. 84-104). Routledge.

Van Dijk, T. (2001). Critical discourse analysis. In D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, & H. E. Hamilton (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 352-372). Blackwell Publishers.

Wodak, R. (2001). The discourse-historical approach. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (pp. 63-95). Sage.

## Appendix

<https://lyricskpop.net/lyrics/bts-dont-leave-me-english-translation/> 25/11/2021- 11: 10 a.m.

<https://songsear.ch/song/Fonzie/If-You-Leave-Me-III/1919209> 25/11/2021- 11: 40 a.m.

<https://genius.com/Sam-smith-stay-with-me-lyrics> 27/11/2021- 9: 00 a.m.