



**International Journal of Education, Social Studies,  
And Management (IJESSM)**

e-ISSN : 2775-4154

**Volume 6, Issue 1, February 2026**

The International Journal of Education, Social Studies, and Management (IJESSM) is published 3 times a year (**February, Juny, October**).

**Focus** : Education, Social, Economy, Management, and Culture.

**LINK** : <http://lppipublishing.com/index.php/ijessm>

## **Différance in Regional Development Discourse: A Deconstructive Semiotics Analysis of Local Political Rhetoric in South Sulawesi**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article explores how “development” is discursively constructed and strategically mobilized in local political rhetoric in South Sulawesi through Derrida’s concept of différance and deconstructive semiotics. In recent regional elections, development has become a dominant rhetorical resource, with candidates invoking notions such as “progress,” “modernization,” and “prosperity” as central signifiers. Yet these terms rarely carry stable or measurable meanings; instead, their meaning is deferred to an uncertain future and adapted to shifting contexts. Using a qualitative, interpretive discourse-analytic approach, the study examines speeches, debate transcripts, campaign slogans, and visual materials from mayoral and gubernatorial campaigns in 2023–2024. The analysis maps key development signifiers, identifies recurring binary oppositions, and traces how différance appears through ambiguities, contradictions, and deferred meanings. The study finds that “development” operates as a floating, overdetermined signifier that enables politicians to occupy multiple discursive positions without clear accountability. The use of development rhetoric thus relies on strategic vagueness and temporal deferral. The article contributes theoretically by integrating différance into regional political discourse analysis and methodologically by demonstrating how deconstructive semiotics enriches critical discourse studies. Practically, it offers a critical lens for citizens, educators, and media practitioners to interrogate development narratives in local campaigns.

### **ARTICLE INFO**

*Article history:*

Received

10 January 2026

Revised

25 January 2026

Accepted

20 February 2026

### **Keywords**

*Différance, Deconstructive Semiotics, Development Discourse, Political Rhetoric, South Sulawesi*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Development (pembangunan) has long functioned as a dominant signifier in Indonesian political discourse, especially during regional electoral cycles where candidates frequently promise infrastructure expansion, economic modernization, and social welfare improvements as indicators of progress. In the 2024 general election, this rhetorical pattern became more visible as political

actors increasingly employed development-oriented language supported by multimodal strategies such as posters, social media visuals, and campaign videos. These techniques allow candidates to encode ideological messages through symbolic images, gestures, and slogans, reinforcing development as a horizon of hope and collective aspiration (Ahmad, 2023; Panggabean et al., 2025). Rather than merely outlining policy agendas, development in this context emerges as a persuasive narrative device that legitimizes political authority and mobilizes voter support.

Studies on Indonesian campaign rhetoric reveal that political discourse is deeply connected to power relations, identity formation, and ideological positioning. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been used to demonstrate how candidates naturalize political stances and frame electoral competition through strategic linguistic choices, particularly in digital campaign spaces (Setyonegoro, 2025). Sociosemiotic and transitivity-based analyses further show how political actors construct themselves as agents of transformative change while depicting citizens as passive recipients of development outcomes (Manik et al., 2025; Rafi'i, 2025). Although these studies provide important insights, they often treat "development" as a relatively fixed category. They generally ask whose development is prioritized or how development is framed, but they seldom question the internal instability of development as a sign.

Poststructuralist and deconstructive perspectives offer a contrasting view. Scholars such as Gill (2024), Tamas (2004), and Yu (2022) argue that development is not a stable referential object but a signifier whose meaning is continuously shaped by difference, contradiction, and deferral. Derrida's concept of *différance* which posits that meaning is always constituted through relational differences and endlessly postponed provides a productive theoretical lens for analyzing the semantic ambiguity embedded in development rhetoric (Derrida, 1976; Lawlor, 2006). Within this framework, development appears not as an objective condition but as a promise oriented toward a "not-yet," a future whose realization remains perpetually deferred. This theoretical lens highlights why development promises remain rhetorically powerful even when measurable outcomes are absent.

The regional context of South Sulawesi amplifies the relevance of this perspective. As a province marked by diverse cultural, religious, and socio-economic landscapes, South Sulawesi has long witnessed political campaigns that emphasize modernization of coastal tourism, rural infrastructure improvement, Islamic educational development, and economic empowerment for fishermen and farmers. These recurring promises, often rearticulated across multiple election cycles, indicate a persistent pattern of deferred development

outcomes. Furthermore, existing regional discourse studies often conducted in areas such as Central Kalimantan or Jakarta focus primarily on thematic priorities or ideological framing rather than the textual instability of development as a sign (Setiawan, 2024). This highlights a notable gap in research on South Sulawesi's political rhetoric.

This study therefore aims to investigate how development is discursively constructed in local political rhetoric in South Sulawesi and how *différance* operates within these constructions. It examines how development emerges as a floating and overdetermined signifier, how binary oppositions such as progress/backwardness and modern/traditional shape and destabilize campaign narratives, and how rhetorical strategies allow politicians to occupy multiple, sometimes contradictory, discursive positions. Ultimately, this research seeks to address a theoretical-methodological gap in Indonesian political linguistics by integrating deconstructive semiotics into regional political discourse studies. At the same time, it fills a contextual gap by focusing on South Sulawesi as a site where development rhetoric engages with cultural identity, historical memory, and contested political imaginaries (Herzog, 2024).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive discourse-analytic approach grounded in deconstructive semiotics. The method is designed to enable a close, theoretically informed reading of political texts and images, allowing other researchers to replicate the analytical procedures by following the steps described in this section. The study does not seek statistical generalization; instead, it aims to explore the unstable, deferred, and relational meaning of the concept of development within South Sulawesi's political rhetoric. The choice of a deconstructive approach is based on Derrida's notion of *différance*, which emphasizes the perpetual postponement of meaning and the role of binary oppositions in shaping discursive structures (Derrida, 1976; Lawlor, 2006; Herzog, 2024).

The research was conducted in South Sulawesi, a region characterized by strong Bugis-Makassar cultural traditions, the influence of Islamic educational institutions, and persistent socio-economic disparities between urban and rural areas. The region's political landscape during the 2023-2024 electoral cycle featured campaign narratives centered on modernization, coastal tourism revitalization, digital transformation, rural infrastructure development, and social welfare improvement. Previous studies on Indonesian campaign rhetoric (Ahmad, 2023; Manik et al., 2025; Panggabean et al., 2025) indicate that these narratives often reflect ideological, symbolic, and identity-based constructions,

making the region a relevant site for investigating the instability of development discourse.

Data for this study consist of political speeches, televised debates, campaign slogans, and visual materials such as posters, banners, billboards, and digital campaign content sourced from Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and candidate websites. Speeches and debate segments were selected from mayoral and gubernatorial campaigns across Makassar and other regencies in South Sulawesi. The texts were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on materials that explicitly referenced development themes and were widely circulated or publicly visible. This aligns with methodological recommendations for purposeful text selection in interpretive discourse studies, allowing researchers to examine the most salient forms of political messaging (Setyonegoro, 2025; Yu, 2022).

Data collection involved three stages. First, archival retrieval was carried out by gathering speech transcripts, televised debate recordings, and official campaign documents from media outlets and campaign channels. Second, visual documentation was conducted by photographing campaign billboards, posters, and banners in public spaces, and by downloading digital campaign visuals from verified social media accounts. Third, all spoken and written materials were transcribed and, when necessary, translated into English while retaining key lexical items associated with development, such as *pembangunan*, *kemajuan*, *infrastruktur*, *kesejahteraan*, and *pemerataan*. This ensures that the cultural and political nuances embedded in local linguistic expressions are preserved for analysis.

The analytical procedure followed the core principles of deconstructive semiotics as articulated in contemporary discourse theory (Gill, 2024; Tamas, 2004; Yu, 2022). The first stage involved identifying recurrent development signifiers such as “progress,” “modernization,” “inclusive development,” “smart city,” and “equitable welfare.” These signifiers were analyzed in relation to the broader discursive structures within which they appear. The second stage involved mapping binary oppositions that shape development discourse including progress/backwardness, modern/traditional, and center/periphery mirroring Derrida’s argument that meaning is produced through hierarchical differences. The third stage involved tracing *différance* by examining how meaning is deferred across temporal references such as future promises, roadmaps, and long-term plans, and by identifying slippages, contradictions, or ambiguities that reveal textual undecidability.

Semiotic analysis was also applied to visual materials, interpreting images, colors, spatial arrangements, and symbolic representations that reinforce or

complicate verbal development narratives. Following socio-semiotic approaches in political communication (Ahmad, 2023; Panggabean et al., 2025), visual elements such as highways, skies, skyscrapers, community scenes, and local cultural symbols were treated as signifying systems that interact with textual rhetoric to construct particular visions of development.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, triangulation was conducted across multiple data types speeches, written texts, and visual artifacts to cross-check emerging interpretations. The analysis also drew on existing scholarship in Indonesian political semiotics and discourse studies (Manik et al., 2025; Setiawan, 2024), ensuring theoretical consistency and methodological rigor. Dependability was strengthened through analytic memoing, which documented interpretive decisions throughout the research process. Ethical considerations included ensuring accurate representation of public campaign materials and avoiding defamatory interpretations of political actors; the analysis focused strictly on textual and visual discourses rather than personal judgments or political endorsements.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### *Development as a Floating and Overdetermined Signifier*

The findings reveal that the term “development” operates as a floating and overdetermined signifier within political discourse in South Sulawesi. Candidates employ varied discursive formulations such as “*accelerated development*,” “*inclusive development*,” and “*digital development*,” each embedding different ideological orientations while maintaining the impression of a unified developmental agenda. This discursive elasticity aligns with Derrida’s concept of *différance*, wherein meaning is constituted through relational difference and perpetual deferral (Derrida, 1976; Lawlor, 2006).

Similar observations appear in contemporary Indonesian political semiotic studies, which show that campaign language often carries symbolic and moral connotations that exceed measurable policy content (Ahmad, 2023; Panggabean et al., 2025). The absence of stable referents allows “development” to function as a persuasive but ambiguous political resource. This confirms Gill’s (2024) argument that development rhetoric gains strength from its indeterminacy, enabling it to be reconfigured to suit different constituencies, contexts, and strategic aims.

### *Temporal Deferral and the Politics of the Promise*

The analysis shows that development promises are consistently articulated as future-oriented commitments, framed within phrases such as

*"in the next five years"* or *"soon our region will become..."*. This reflects what Derrida describes as the inherent openness and incompleteness of the promise, which relies on the projection of a future event that can never be fully stabilized in the present (Derrida, 1976; Herzog, 2024).

Scholars of political discourse have noted similar temporal patterns, where campaign narratives rely on the imagined future to legitimize present political action (Setyonegoro, 2025; Manik et al., 2025). The deferral of outcomes makes the promise simultaneously compelling and unverifiable. The present findings reinforce this theoretical position, showing that development gains rhetorical power precisely because its realization is perpetually postponed. This aligns with contemporary critiques that highlight how political promises function as instruments for voter mobilization rather than concrete mechanisms of accountability (Yu, 2022; Gill, 2024).

### ***Binary Oppositions and Hierarchical Positioning***

The discourse of development is structured around recurring binary oppositions such as progress/backwardness, modern/traditional, and center/periphery. These binaries enable candidates to construct themselves as agents of progress while framing opponents or marginalized regions as impediments to development. This mirrors Tamas' (2004) observation that development narratives often depend on hierarchical constructions that privilege certain identities or spaces.

However, the data also reveal moments where these binaries become unstable for example, when traditional cultural values are reframed as assets for modern development. Such discursive shifts reflect the deconstructive insight that binaries are never fully secure; each term depends on the other to produce meaning (Gill, 2024; Yu, 2022). The findings illustrate how political rhetoric simultaneously reproduces and destabilizes hierarchical oppositions, allowing candidates to appeal to both modernist and traditionalist constituencies.

### ***Visual Semiotics of Development***

Visual campaign materials reinforce development narratives through imagery associated with progress, modernity, and prosperity such as infrastructure, skyscrapers, and smiling communities. Semiotic studies show that political imagery functions as a symbolic system that shapes public perception through visual cues (Ahmad, 2023; Panggabean et al., 2025).

The findings demonstrate that these images do not depict actual development but instead gesture toward an anticipated future,

participating in the same deferral mechanism identified in the verbal discourse. Color schemes such as blue (trust), green (growth), and red (energy) further construct emotional associations with development promises. This interaction between text and image affirms multimodal discourse theory's claim that political meaning is produced through the interplay of linguistic, visual, and symbolic elements. Such patterns are consistent with findings in recent multimodal analyses of Indonesian elections (Manik et al., 2025).

### **Internal Contradictions and Discursive Slippages**

The discourse analysis reveals contradictions in how development is framed. Candidates emphasize rapid industrialization while simultaneously advocating sustainability, promote modernization while pledging to preserve cultural heritage, and claim inclusivity while prioritizing specific sectors. These discursive tensions reinforce Derrida's position that texts inherently contain internal contradictions that undermine any attempt at definitive meaning (Derrida, 1976; Lawlor, 2006).

These findings resonate with recent Indonesian discourse studies showing that political actors often navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting, rhetorical positions to appeal to diverse audiences (Rafi'i, 2025; Setiawan, 2024). The contradictions in development rhetoric thus reflect not rhetorical weakness but strategic ambiguity an adaptive mechanism for sustaining broad political appeal.

### ***Différance and the Instability of Development***

The findings illustrate that development functions as a floating signifier whose meaning is never fixed. The analytical framework of *différance* explains why development discourse remains rhetorically powerful: its indeterminacy allows political actors to continually reshape its meaning without being held to measurable standards (Derrida, 1976; Gill, 2024).

This aligns with contemporary CDA and semiotic research indicating that political language often relies on ambiguity to maximize strategic flexibility (Ahmad, 2023; Manik et al., 2025). The instability of development as a signifier enables politicians to project optimism, maintain ideological coherence, and adapt narratives to evolving political conditions.

### **Deconstructing Binary Oppositions in Local Political Rhetoric**

The binary oppositions identified in the finding's progress/backwardness, modern/traditional, center/periphery reveal how political discourse organizes meaning through hierarchical structures. Yet, the instability of these binaries demonstrates that no hierarchy is absolute.

This supports poststructuralist discourse theory, which emphasizes the contingent and negotiable nature of discursive constructs (Yu, 2022; Tamas, 2004).

The study contributes to this theoretical field by showing how South Sulawesi's political rhetoric re-signifies tradition, rurality, and local culture as strategic assets rather than liabilities. This re-articulation destabilizes developmentalist hierarchies and produces hybrid discourses that reflect the region's socio-cultural complexity.

#### *The Politics of the Promise and the Ethics of Futurity*

The findings support Derrida's view that promises rely on the anticipation of a future that can never be fully realized. Political promises of development mobilize voters through hope, yet their temporal deferral undermines accountability. This dual nature mobilizing yet unverifiable is central to their political function (Herzog, 2024; Gill, 2024). The persistence of deferred promises reflects broader patterns in Indonesian political culture, where future-oriented narratives sustain political legitimacy despite limited material change (Setyonegoro, 2025; Setiawan, 2024). The study thus advances the argument that development discourse must be read not only empirically but also philosophically as an ethics of futurity.

#### *Integrating Deconstructive Semiotics with Existing Approaches*

This study demonstrates the value of combining deconstructive semiotics with CDA, socio-semiotics, and multimodal discourse analysis. While CDA illuminates power structures and ideological strategies, deconstruction exposes internal contradictions and semantic instability, offering a deeper understanding of how political discourse functions. Recent scholarship encourages such methodological integration to address the complexity of political communication in the digital era (Yu, 2022). The present study contributes to this movement by showing how *différance* can reveal hidden tensions within development rhetoric, providing a more nuanced framework for analyzing political language in Indonesia.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of development discourse in South Sulawesi's regional political rhetoric demonstrates that "development" functions as a floating and overdetermined signifier whose meaning is continually reshaped, deferred, and negotiated across linguistic and visual texts. Through Derrida's concept of *différance* and deconstructive semiotics, the study reveals how development promises gain rhetorical force from their inherent ambiguity, temporal postponement, and reliance on unstable binary oppositions such as

progress/backwardness, modern/traditional, and center/periphery. The examination of campaign speeches, slogans, and multimodal materials shows that development is repeatedly projected as a future-oriented ideal rather than a concrete, measurable reality, enabling political actors to occupy multiple and sometimes contradictory discursive positions without being held to immediate accountability. Visual representations such as infrastructure imagery, urban skylines, and portrayals of community prosperity further reinforce this deferred promise by anchoring abstract narratives in symbolic forms that gesture toward a desired but not-yet-existing future.

These findings highlight the theoretical value of integrating deconstructive semiotics into Indonesian political discourse studies, complementing existing approaches such as Critical Discourse Analysis and socio-semiotics by foregrounding the textual undecidability that sustains political narratives. Methodologically, the study offers a replicable model for examining the interplay between verbal and visual signs in campaign communication. Practically, the analysis underscores the need for greater critical literacy among voters, educators, and civil society actors, particularly in contexts where development rhetoric is used as symbolic capital during electoral competition. By recognizing how meaning is deferred, contested, and strategically manipulated, the public can engage more critically with political messaging and contribute to more accountable democratic processes.

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