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CONNOTATIVE MEANINGS AS MUSLIM IDENTITY IN ZOHRAN MAMDANI'S SPEECHES

MAKNA KONOTATIF DAN IDENTITAS MUSLIM DALAM PIDATO ZOHRAN MAMDANI

Sabrina Satriawati [1], Ruminda [2] & Fourus Huznatul Abqoriyyah[3]
[1,2,3]English Literature Department, Faculty of Adab and Humanities,
UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung
Jl. AH Nasution No. 105, Cibiru, Kota Bandung, Jawa Barat, 40614, Indonesia
Email: sabrinasatriawati03@gmail.com[1], ruminda@uinsgd.ac.id[2],
fourusabqoriyyah@uinsgd.ac.id[3]

Abstract

This study investigates connotative meaning in Zohran Mamdani's speeches and its relation to Muslim identity. It addresses the limited discussion of how connotative meaning functions in political discourse, particularly in relation to minority identity. This study aims to identify positive and negative connotative meanings and explain how they relate to the expression of Muslim identity. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the study analyzes 13 lexical items selected from two speeches delivered in different political contexts. The analysis is based on Leech's (1981) theory of connotative meaning and Joseph's (2004) view of language and identity. The findings show that 6 lexical items carry positive connotations, reflecting affirmation, dignity, belonging, visibility, and solidarity, while 7 lexical items carry negative connotations, indicating marginalization, stigma, prejudice, and social pressure. The study finds that connotative meaning is closely related to identity because it shows how Muslim identity is expressed, experienced, and understood through lexical choices. Overall, the study suggests that speech is not only used to deliver messages, but also to shape identity within a broader social context.

Keywords: *connotative meaning, identity construction, lexical semantics, muslim identity, political speech*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji makna konotatif dalam pidato Zohran Mamdani serta kaitannya dengan identitas Muslim. Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh masih terbatasnya kajian mengenai peran makna konotatif dalam wacana politik, khususnya dalam merepresentasikan identitas kelompok minoritas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi makna konotatif positif dan negatif serta menjelaskan hubungannya dengan ekspresi identitas Muslim. Metode yang digunakan adalah deskriptif kualitatif dengan menganalisis 13 item leksikal yang diambil dari dua pidato Mamdani dalam konteks politik yang berbeda. Analisis dilakukan menggunakan teori makna konotatif dari Leech (1981) serta konsep bahasa dan identitas dari Joseph (2004). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa 6 data memiliki konotasi positif yang mencerminkan afirmasi identitas, martabat, rasa memiliki, visibilitas, dan solidaritas, sedangkan 7

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data memiliki konotasi negatif yang berkaitan dengan marginalisasi, stigma, prasangka, dan tekanan sosial. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa makna konotatif berperan penting dalam mengekspresikan dan membentuk identitas dalam konteks sosial yang lebih luas.
***Kata kunci**: identitas muslim, konstruksi identitas, makna konotatif, pidato politik, semantik leksikal*

Introduction

Linguistics is the scientific study of language, including its structure, meaning, and use in society (Fasold & Connor-Linton, 2010). One important branch of linguistics is semantics, which focuses on the study of meaning in language. According to Saeed (2016), semantics examines how meaning is communicated through words, phrases, and discourse, making it essential in understanding how language functions in communication. Within this field, lexical semantics specifically focuses on the meaning of individual words and how these meanings contribute to the interpretation of messages in different contexts.

A key distinction in lexical semantics is between denotative and connotative meaning. Denotative meaning refers to the literal or conceptual meaning of a word, while connotative meaning refers to the associative, emotional, and cultural meanings attached to it. As Leech (1981) explains, connotative meaning is open-ended and closely related to experience, belief, and evaluative attitudes. Because of this, words do not only convey information, but also carry values and judgments, which can be interpreted as positive or negative depending on the context in which they are used. This makes connotative meaning particularly important in analyzing how language expresses not only ideas but also perspectives and social meanings.

The role of connotative meaning becomes more significant in speech, especially in public and political communication. Speech is not merely the production of language, but a form of communication delivered to an audience with a specific purpose (O'Hair, 2015). In this context, speakers carefully select their words to influence how messages are understood and received. This is especially relevant in political speeches, where language is often used strategically not only to convey information but also to influence how messages are understood. In line with this, Butarbutar & Tampubolon, (2023) show that political speeches contain lexical choices that carry meanings beyond their literal definitions. This indicates that political

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speech can be analyzed not only at the surface level, but also through its connotative meanings.

Language also plays a central role in the construction of identity. According to Joseph (2004), identity is not fixed, but socially constructed and continuously negotiated through language. This means that the way individuals use language reflects how they position themselves and are positioned by others in society. In political contexts, this becomes particularly important, as public figures often use language to represent themselves, express their values, and connect with specific groups. Through lexical choices, speakers can highlight certain aspects of their identity while also responding to social expectations and challenges.

A relevant case for this study is Zohran Mamdani, a Muslim political figure in New York City. His political position is significant, as he has been described in media reports as one of the first Muslim and Indian-American mayors in the city (NDTV World News, 2025). His background is important not only because of his identity, but also because it exists within a social context where Muslim identity is often contested in Western societies. In his public speeches, particularly during his 2025 mayoral campaign and his early period in office, Mamdani uses several lexical items that carry strong connotative meanings, such as belong, pride, dignity, shadows, and faith. These words do not only refer to their literal meanings, but also contain emotional, cultural, and social associations. Through these lexical choices, Mamdani presents Muslim identity as something connected to belonging, visibility, dignity, and lived experience. This shows that language in political speech is not only used to deliver messages, but also to represent and construct identity within a broader social and political context.

This study focuses on two of Mamdani's speeches that explicitly highlight Muslim identity: his campaign speech titled *"My Message to Muslim New Yorkers — and Everyone Who Calls This City Home"* and his official address *"Mayor Zohran Mamdani Addresses the Muslim Community at MAS Staten Island."* These two speeches are selected because they represent different political contexts, namely the campaign phase and the governance phase. By comparing these contexts, this study aims to explore how lexical choices and connotative meanings may vary depending on communicative goals and audience expectations.

Several previous studies have examined connotative meaning in various

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forms of discourse, including song lyrics, everyday communication, and political speeches. These studies show that connotative meaning is important because words do not only carry literal meanings, but also express emotional, contextual, and social meanings. However, the use of connotative meaning to represent Muslim identity in political speeches remains underexplored. This research addresses that gap by analyzing Zohran Mamdani's speeches through the concept of connotative meaning, positioning political speeches not merely as political communication but also as linguistic texts that construct identity, belonging, and social experience within a specific socio-political context.

First, Putra et al. (2024) analyzed connotative meaning in song lyrics and found that words in songs can express emotional and contextual messages beyond their literal meanings. This study shows that connotative meaning is useful for understanding deeper meanings in literary or artistic texts. Second, Rohmah and Latifah (2022) examined connotative meaning in everyday communication. The study showed that connotative meaning helps speakers convey implied meanings and influence how messages are understood by listeners. This indicates that context plays an important role in interpreting meaning. Third, Sinambela et al. (2025)discussed connotative meaning in advertisements. The study found that lexical choices with connotative meanings are used to create emotional appeal and persuade audiences. However, the study focuses on commercial discourse rather than political discourse. Fourth, Bura Kaka et al. (2026)analyzed connotative meaning in Donald Trump's political speeches. The study showed that connotative expressions contribute to persuasive political messages and public perception. This study is relevant because it examines connotative meaning in political speech. Fifth, Butarbutar and Tampubolon (2023) examined connotative meaning in Jokowi's speech about RAPBN 2022. The study found that political speeches contain lexical choices that carry meanings beyond their literal sense. However, these previous studies have not specifically discussed how connotative meaning functions in relation to Muslim identity. Therefore, the present study focuses on Zohran Mamdani's speeches to examine how connotative meanings are related to the expression of Muslim identity in political discourse.

While studies in political discourse analysis and critical discourse studies have examined how language constructs power

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and identity in political contexts (Fairclough, 2001), and research on political rhetoric has shown how public figures use language strategically to persuade and connect with audiences (Charteris-Black, 2018), this study takes a more focused approach by examining connotative meaning at the lexical level as a means of identity construction. This study is also situated within broader discussions on language and identity, particularly in relation to minority groups. Scholars have noted that minority speakers often use language strategically to assert, negotiate, and redefine their identities within social contexts that marginalize them (Joseph, 2004). In the case of Muslim communities in Western societies, identity is frequently constructed in response to external pressures such as stigmatization and stereotyping, suggesting that lexical choices made by Muslim public figures carry significance beyond their semantic content.

Based on these previous studies, connotative meaning has been used to analyze song lyrics, everyday communication, and political speeches. These studies show that language can carry emotional, contextual, and persuasive meanings. However, the studies have not specifically discussed how connotative meaning is used to construct Muslim identity in political speeches. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by analyzing positive and negative connotative meanings in Mamdani's speeches and explaining how the meanings relate to identity, belonging, marginalization, and social experience.

Furthermore, this study argues that the two speeches selected represent distinct rhetorical contexts, a campaign phase and a governance phase which allows for a comparative perspective on how connotative meanings shift in function depending on communicative purpose. The first was delivered during Mamdani's mayoral campaign, while the second was delivered at a Muslim community event after he took office. This difference in context matters because it shapes how connotative meanings function in each speech. In the campaign speech, negative connotations appear more frequently, suggesting a strategy of first acknowledging the painful experiences of Muslim communities before moving toward affirmation. In the governance speech, positive connotations dominate, reflecting a shift toward solidarity and communal celebration. This comparative dimension adds a layer of analysis beyond simply identifying whether words are positive or negative.

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Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design. Qualitative research focuses on understanding meaning as constructed in language and social contexts, particularly through the analysis of textual data (Creswell, 2014). This design was considered appropriate for examining how connotative meanings appear in lexical items and how these meanings relate to identity.

The data of this study consisted of lexical items in the form of content words, including nouns, verbs, and adjectives, that carry connotative meanings. These lexical items were taken from two speeches by Zohran Mamdani: “My Message to Muslim New Yorkers — and Everyone Who Calls This City Home” (Zohran Mamdani for NYC, 2025) and “Mayor Zohran Mamdani Addresses the Muslim Community at MAS Staten Island” (MAS Staten Island, 2026). The data sources were selected purposively because they explicitly present Mamdani’s expression of Muslim identity in different contexts.

Lexical items were selected purposively through close reading of both speeches. Rather than identifying words based on surface-level markers, the selection was guided by contextual reading - a word was included when, within its immediate context, it appeared to carry connotative meaning related to Muslim identity, religious experience, social belonging, or lived experience as a minority. The unit of analysis remains the individual word, but the decision to include it always took into account the surrounding context. Words that appeared in transitional or purely informational sentences, where no identity-relevant connotation could be reasonably identified, were excluded. This approach follows qualitative text analysis practices that emphasize criteria-based and contextually sensitive selection of linguistic units (Miles & Huberman, 2014).

The analysis yielded 13 lexical items in total. This number reflects the purposive nature of the selection process the researcher first read each utterance in context, and a word was selected for analysis when its surrounding context indicated a connection to Muslim identity,whether through religious expression, social experience, or public perception. Not every potentially connotative word was included; those appearing in contexts without clear relevance to Muslim identity were excluded. The classification of connotative meanings as positive or negative was based on Leech's (1981) framework, where positive

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connotations carry affirming, empowering, or inclusive associations, and negative connotations carry stigmatizing, marginalizing, or exclusionary associations. This classification was applied consistently across all selected lexical items within their immediate contextual use.

Result and Discussion

The data in this study are taken from two video speeches delivered by Zohran Mamdani, which explicitly highlight Muslim identity in different contexts. The first speech, titled *"My Message to Muslim New Yorkers — and Everyone Who Calls This City Home,"* was uploaded on October 25, 2025, on the YouTube channel *Zohran Mamdani for NYC*. This speech represents the campaign phase, where Mamdani addresses Muslim communities and responds to issues related to Islamophobia and political representation. The second speech, titled *"Mayor Zohran Mamdani Addresses the Muslim Community at MAS Staten Island,"* was uploaded on March 5, 2026, on the *MAS Staten Island Center* YouTube channel. This speech represents the governance phase, where Mamdani speaks as mayor and reflects on Muslim identity within a broader civic and communal context.

To organize the data systematically, each lexical item is coded based on the title of the speech from which it was taken. The code "MTM" refers to the speech "My Message to Muslim New Yorkers — and Everyone Who Calls This City Home," while the code "MAS" refers to the speech "Mayor Zohran Mamdani Addresses the Muslim Community at MAS Staten Island." The number following each code indicates the order of the lexical items identified in each speech.

The data presented in Table 1 consist of 13 lexical items drawn from two speeches. Of these, 6 lexical items carry positive connotations and 7 carry negative connotations. The positive connotations include faith, belong, light, Muslim, pride, and solidarity, while the negative connotations include indignity, shadows, stain, suspicion, disdain, hate, and hardship.

In addition to positive and negative connotative meanings, the lexical items can also be interpreted through identity dimensions based on Joseph's (2004) view of language and identity. The following table presents the lexical items based on the identity dimensions used this study.

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Table 1. Lexical Items and Connotative Meanings

Code	Lexical Items	Utterance	Word Class	Connotation	Connotative Meaning
MTM-01	Faith	"I will not change the faith that I'm proud to belong to."	Noun	Commitment	Positive
MTM-02	Belong	"I will not change the faith that I'm proud to belong to."	Verb	Belonging	Positive
MTM-03	Light	"Will we remain in the shadows, or will we together step into the light?"	Noun	Visibility	Positive
MTM-04	Indignity	"To be Muslim in New York is to expect indignity."	Noun	Humiliation	Negative
MTM-05	Shadows	"It is the lesson that safety could only be found in the shadows of our city."	Noun	Invisibility	Negative
MTM-06	Stain	"I want to speak to ... who feels that they carry a stain that can never quite be cleaned. "	Noun	Stigma	Negative
MTM-07	Suspicion	"I have known what it means to live with an undercurrent of suspicion."	Noun	Prejudice	Negative
MTM-08	Disdain	"I will always remember the disdain I faced …."	Noun	Discrimination	Negative
MTM-09	Hate	"For as long as we have lived … there are still certain forms of hate acceptable in this city today."	Noun	Hostility	Negative
MTM-10	Muslim	"I will be a Muslim man in New York City …."	Adj	Identity affirmation	Positive
MAS-01	Hardship	"To be Muslim in New York City is to know hardship."	Noun	Struggle	Negative
MAS-02	Pride	"There is no shame … there is a pride instead."	Noun	Dignity	Positive
MAS-03	Solidarity	"It's also a month of reflection …, a month of solidarity and of community. "	Noun	Unity	Positive

Table 2. Identity Dimensions of Lexical Items

Identity Dimension	Lexical Items
Religious Identity	Muslim, Faith
Group Identity	Belong, Solidarity
Cultural Identity	Pride, Light
Externally Constructed Identity	Shadows, Stain, Suspicion, Disdain, Hate
Experiential Identity	Indignity, Hardship

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These five dimensions are developed inductively from the data, grounded in Joseph's (2004) view that identity is constructed through language and social interaction. Religious Identity refers to expressions directly connected to faith and Islamic belief. Group Identity reflects a sense of belonging and solidarity within a social group. Cultural Identity captures values such as dignity and visibility that define how a community presents itself. Externally Constructed Identity refers to how Muslim identity is shaped by outside perceptions, stereotypes, and social pressure. Experiential Identity reflects identity as formed through lived experiences of hardship and marginalization.

Based on the findings, it is evident that Zohran Mamdani employs various lexical items that carry both positive and negative connotative meanings in his speeches. These connotations are not only used to convey meaning, but also to construct and express his Muslim identity within different social contexts.

Looking more closely at the two speeches, it becomes clear that the distribution of connotative meanings reflects the different communicative purposes of each rhetorical context. In the campaign speech (*MTM*), 8 out of 10 lexical items carry negative connotations words such as *shadows*, *stain*, *suspicion*, *hate*, and *disdain*, while only *faith*, *belong*, *light*, and *Muslim* carry positive ones. This predominance of negative connotations is not incidental. In the campaign context, Mamdani first names and validates the painful experiences of Muslim New Yorkers before moving toward affirmation, a rhetorical strategy of acknowledgment preceding empowerment. By doing so, he builds credibility and emotional connection with his audience, positioning himself as someone who has shared those experiences rather than merely speaking about them.

In the governance speech (*MAS*), the pattern shifts markedly. All three lexical items — *pride*, *solidarity*, and *hardship* function within a communal rather than adversarial frame. Even *hardship*, which carries a negative connotation, is contextualized through the Quranic reference "for indeed with hardship will be ease," reframing difficulty as a shared spiritual experience rather than an injustice to be named. This shift reflects Mamdani's changed rhetorical position: no longer a candidate seeking legitimacy, but a mayor affirming collective identity to his own community.

This comparative pattern supports Joseph's (2004) argument that identity is not

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fixed but continuously negotiated through language depending on social context. The same speaker constructs Muslim identity differently across the two speeches, first through resistance and reclamation, then through solidarity and affirmation demonstrating that connotative meaning is not merely a reflection of identity, but an active instrument of its construction.

Furthermore, several lexical items are realized through metaphorical expressions, allowing abstract experiences such as stigma, invisibility, and recognition to be communicated more effectively. In this way, connotative meanings function not only at the level of semantics, but also as a tool for representing identity in discourse.

Joseph (2004) does not prescribe fixed categories of identity; rather, he argues that identity is constructed through language and social interaction across multiple dimensions including religion, group membership, and lived experience. Drawing on this view, the present study develops five analytical dimensions inductively from the data: Religious Identity, Group Identity, Cultural Identity, Externally Constructed Identity, and Experiential Identity. These categories are not derived directly from Joseph's framework, but are grounded in it each dimension reflects an aspect of identity that Joseph identifies as socially constructed and linguistically expressed.

In this study, these dimensions can be seen in the lexical items found in Mamdani's speeches. First, Religious Identity appears through words such as *Muslim* and *faith*, which directly relate to Islamic belief and practice. Second, Group Identity can be seen in lexical items such as *belong* and *solidarity*, which show a sense of group membership and collective belonging. Third, Cultural Identity is reflected through values such as dignity and visibility, as shown in words like *pride* and *light*. In addition, Externally Constructed Identity can be seen in negative lexical items such as *suspicion*, *stain*, *hate*, *disdain*, and *shadows*, which reflect how Muslim identity is often shaped by outside perceptions and social pressure. Finally, Experiential Identity is constructed through words such as *hardship* and *indignity*, which represent lived experiences of marginalization.

Therefore, identity in this study is not viewed as a single fixed concept, but as something constructed through multiple dimensions religion, communal belonging, cultural values, external perception, and lived experience each of which is linguistically expressed through Mamdani's lexical choices.

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Positive Meaning

MTM-01 "I will not change the faith that I'm proud to belong to."

In MTM-01, the word *faith* denotatively refers to "strong religious belief" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2026). In the utterance "I will not change the faith that I'm proud to belong to," the meaning develops beyond its literal definition. The phrase "I will not change" gives faith a positive connotation of commitment, firmness, and resistance. It suggests that faith is not temporary or negotiable, but something central to the speaker's identity.

This lexical item reflects religious identity because it directly relates to Mamdani's Muslim belief. It also shows identity assertion, as the speaker openly maintains and affirms his faith through language.

In this case, saying "I will not change the faith" can be seen as a response to external pressures that often expect minority identities to adapt or become less visible.

Instead of adjusting to those expectations, the speaker presents faith as something that remains constant regardless of context. This suggests that Muslim identity is constructed as something non-negotiable and firmly rooted in the self.

MTM-02 "I will not change the faith that I'm proud to belong to."

A similar pattern can be seen in MTM-02, which uses the word *belong*. Denotatively, *belong* means "to be a member of a group or organization" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2026), which again appears neutral. However, in the phrase "proud to belong," the meaning expands beyond simple membership. The presence of the word "proud" introduces an emotional and evaluative dimension, transforming the expression into one that reflects acceptance, pride, and legitimacy.

In this context, Muslim identity is not only acknowledged, but also positively valued and publicly affirmed. The phrase suggests that identity is something that can be openly claimed, rather than hidden or downplayed. This is particularly significant in a social environment where minority identities are often marginalized.

MTM-03 "Will we remain in the shadows, or will we together step into the light?"

In MTM-03, the word *light* denotatively refers to something that makes it possible to see or makes things visible (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2026). In the utterance "Will we remain in the shadows, or

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will we together step into the light?", the word is used metaphorically to represent openness, recognition, and public visibility. This creates a positive connotative meaning because light is commonly associated with clarity, acceptance, and visibility.

In this context, "step into the light" suggests a movement from being hidden to being seen. This meaning becomes important because it is contrasted with shadows, which represents invisibility and social pressure. The phrase shows that identity is not only shaped by external conditions, but can also be actively redefined by the speaker and the community. This lexical item can be categorized as cultural identity because it reflects values such as visibility, recognition, and dignity. It also shows identity negotiation, as Mamdani presents Muslim identity as something that should not remain hidden, but can be openly expressed in public space. This reflects how visibility and recognition function as central values in the construction of Muslim identity.

MTM-10 "I will be a <u>Muslim</u> man in New York City…."

In MTM-10, the word Muslim basically refers to a person who believes in and practices Islam. Oxford Learner's Dictionary (2026) defines it as "believing in and practising Islam; connected with the religion of Islam." In the utterance "I will be a Muslim man in New York City," however, the word is not used merely as a religious label.

The statement gives Muslim a positive connotation because it presents the identity with confidence and determination. The phrase "I will be" makes the utterance sound firm and intentional, showing that the speaker is not distancing himself from his identity. Instead, he places Muslim identity openly in the public context of New York City. This is important because the speech also refers to Islamophobia and negative perceptions toward Muslims. In that context, saying "I will be a Muslim man" becomes more than a personal statement; it becomes a way of affirming identity against social pressure. Therefore, Muslim belongs to religious identity, since it directly points to Mamdani's connection with Islam.

MAS-02 "There is no shame … there is a <u>pride</u> instead"

In MAS-02, the word pride denotatively refers to a feeling of pleasure or satisfaction when someone or something connected to a person is valued or admired. According to Oxford Learner's Dictionary (2026), pride is

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defined as "a feeling of being pleased or satisfied that you get when you or people who are connected with you have done something well or own something that other people admire."

In the utterance "There is no shame… There is a pride instead," the meaning goes beyond this basic definition. The contrast between shame and pride highlights a shift from negative to positive evaluation. In this context, pride carries a positive connotation related to dignity, acceptance, and self-worth. Rather than simply expressing satisfaction, the word signals a revaluation of identity that is often associated with social pressure, particularly within the context of Islamophobia.

By replacing shame with pride, the speaker challenges negative assumptions and presents identity in a more affirming way. This lexical item can be categorized as cultural identity because it reflects values such as dignity and recognition. It also shows identity negotiation, as the speaker reinterprets identity from something potentially stigmatized into something meaningful and worthy of recognition.

MAS-03 "It's also a month of reflection…, a month of solidarity and of community."

In MAS-03, the word solidarity denotatively refers to support shared by people with similar feelings or goals (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2026). In the utterance "It's also a month of reflection, a month of commitment, a month of solidarity and of community," the repetition of "a month of…" highlights that these values are central to the experience.

In this context, solidarity carries a positive connotation of unity and togetherness. When linked to Ramadan, it reflects shared experiences and mutual support within the Muslim community. This lexical item can be categorized as group identity, as it shows identity formed through group membership and collective belonging.

Negative Meaning

MTM-04 "To be Muslim in New York is to expect indignity."

In MTM-04, the word indignity denotatively refers to "a situation that makes you feel embarrassed or ashamed because you are not treated with respect" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2026). In the utterance "To be Muslim in New York is to expect indignity," the phrase "to expect" shows that this experience is seen as recurring rather than accidental.

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In this context, indignity carries a negative connotation of humiliation, disrespect, and unequal treatment. The following statement, "There are many New Yorkers who face it," also shows that this experience is connected to a wider social condition. This lexical item can be categorized as experiential identity because it reflects identity shaped through lived experiences of marginalization and social pressure.

MTM-05 "It is the lesson that safety could only be found in the shadows of our city."

In MTM-05, the word shadows denotatively refers to "a dark shape produced when something blocks light" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2026). In the utterance "It is the lesson that safety could only be found in the shadows of our city," the word is used metaphorically to represent invisibility, concealment, and social limitation.

The phrase suggests that Muslim identity cannot always be expressed openly, especially when visibility may lead to judgment or pressure. In this context, shadows carries a negative connotation because it reflects a condition where identity is hidden for the sake of safety. This lexical item can be categorized as externally constructed identity, as it shows how Muslim identity is shaped by external judgment and social pressure.

Therefore, shadows does not only describe physical darkness, but also represents a social condition in which identity becomes restricted, less visible, and dependent on the surrounding environment.

MTM-06 "I want to speak to… who feels that they carry a stain that can never quite be cleaned. "

A stronger negative connotation can be seen in MTM-06, which uses the word *stain*. Denotatively, *stain* refers to "a mark that is difficult to remove" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2026). However, in the phrase "carry a stain that can never quite be cleaned," the meaning shifts to represent stigma attached to identity. The phrase suggests that this stigma is continuous and difficult to remove, emphasizing its permanence rather than something temporary.

In this context, stain does not only describe a mark, but functions as a symbol of how identity is socially labeled and perceived. The phrase "carry a stain that can never quite be cleaned" suggests that the stigma attached to Muslim identity is continuous

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and difficult to remove. This can be categorized as externally constructed identity because it reflects how Muslim identity is shaped by negative labeling and external judgment. As Joseph (2004) argues, identity is shaped through interaction, and in this case, stigma becomes part of how identity is experienced and understood.

Unlike *shadows*, which imply concealment, *stain* reflects something more permanent and deeply embedded. This indicates that identity is not only hidden, but also judged and categorized through external perception. In this sense, Muslim identity is constructed not only internally, but also through social labeling and collective assumptions.

MTM-07 "I have known what it means to live with an undercurrent of suspicion."

In MTM-07, the word suspicion denotatively refers to "a feeling that someone has done something wrong without proof" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2026). In the utterance "I have known what it means to live with an undercurrent of suspicion," the phrase "undercurrent of suspicion" suggests that distrust is not always visible, but constantly present in social life.

In this context, suspicion carries a negative connotation of prejudice and social distrust. When connected to the reference "in the shadow of 9/11," the word reflects how Muslim identity is often perceived through fear and negative assumptions. This lexical item can be categorized as externally constructed identity because it shows how identity is shaped by external judgment and prejudice.

MTM-08 "I will always remember the <u>disdain</u> I faced …."

In MTM-08, the word disdain denotatively refers to "the feeling that somebody/something is not good enough to deserve your respect or attention" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2026). In the utterance "I will always remember the disdain I faced, the way my name could immediately become Muhammad," the word already carries a negative meaning because it is related to disrespect and rejection.

In the context of the speech, disdain does not only refer to a feeling of dislike, but also to a degrading attitude shown through social treatment. This can be seen in the example of Mamdani's name being changed into the stereotype "Muhammad," which suggests that Muslim identity is often

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reduced to a fixed and prejudiced image. The following references to airport interrogation, the label "terrorist," and attacks against places of worship further show that this disdain can develop into discriminatory practices.

This lexical item can be categorized as externally constructed identity because it reflects how Muslim identity is shaped by the way others view and treat the group. Through the word disdain, Mamdani shows that Muslim identity is not only personally claimed, but also socially judged. Therefore, the word represents an unequal social relation in which Muslim identity is positioned as less respected and less accepted.

MTM-09 "For as long as we have lived… there are still certain forms of hate acceptable in this city today."

In MTM-09, the word hate denotatively means "a very strong feeling of dislike for somebody" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2026). In the utterance "there are still certain forms of hate acceptable in this city today," the word appears in a statement that criticizes public attitudes toward Muslims.

In this context, hate carries a negative connotation of hostility, rejection, and discrimination. The word acceptable is especially important because it implies that such hostility is not only present, but also socially tolerated. This idea is reinforced by the following statements, "Islamophobia is not seen as inexcusable" and "One can incite violence against our mosques and know that condemnation will never come," which suggest that anti-Muslim hostility may exist without serious public response. This lexical item belongs to externally constructed identity because it shows how Muslim identity is affected by outside views and social attitudes. Here, hate is not merely an individual emotion, but a sign of a wider social condition in which Muslim identity is exposed to prejudice, rejection, and unequal treatment.

MAS-01 "To be Muslim in New York City is to know hardship."

In the utterance "To be Muslim in New York City is to know hardship," the lexical item hardship can first be understood from its denotative meaning. According to Oxford Learner's Dictionaries (2026), hardship is defined as "a situation that is difficult and unpleasant because you do not have enough money, food, clothes, etc." At this level, the word refers to difficult conditions or

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challenges that individuals may experience in their lives.

However, within the context of the speech, the meaning of hardship extends beyond material or economic difficulty. It develops into a negative connotative meaning that reflects struggle, pressure, and challenging social experiences faced by Muslims (Leech, 1981). This is reinforced by the reference to the Quranic verse, "For indeed with hardship will be ease," which frames hardship not only as difficulty, but also as part of a meaningful and enduring experience. The statement "to be Muslim in New York City is to know hardship" suggests that such experiences are not occasional, but expected and familiar. This indicates that hardship is linked to social conditions rather than individual circumstances alone. In this sense, the word reflects how identity is connected to repeated experiences of difficulty within a specific social context.

The use of hardship can be categorized as experiential identity, as it represents how identity is formed through lived experience, particularly experiences of struggle and limitation. As Joseph (2004) explains, identity is constructed through social interaction, and in this case, the speaker highlights how being Muslim is associated with certain shared experiences. Therefore, the word hardship does not only describe difficulty, but also reflects how identity is shaped through ongoing social experiences. It shows that identity is not only expressed through language, but also developed through the conditions individuals face in their everyday lives.

The findings of this study are in line with previous studies showing that connotative meaning depends strongly on context. Rohmah and Latifah (2022) explain that connotative meaning helps speakers convey implied meanings and affects how listeners understand a message. Similarly, the lexical items in Mamdani's speeches cannot be understood only through their dictionary meanings, because words such as pride, shadows, suspicion, and hardship carry meanings shaped by social and political contexts.

This study also supports Butarbutar and Tampubolon's (2023) finding that political speeches contain lexical choices with meanings beyond their literal sense. However, while their study focused on connotative meaning in a national political speech, the present study shows how connotative meaning is also related to Muslim identity. In addition, the finding is relevant to Kaka's

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(2026) study on Donald Trump's political speeches, which showed that connotative expressions contribute to persuasive political messages and public perception. Different from those studies, this research emphasizes how positive and negative connotations are connected to religious identity, social belonging, stigma, and lived experience.

Relationship Between Connotative Meaning and Identity Construction

Based on the analysis of all lexical items, a broader pattern can be identified in how connotative meaning relates to identity construction. The analysis shows that connotative meaning is closely related to how identity is constructed in Mamdani's speeches. However, the relationship between connotation and identity is not fixed or absolute. Instead, it shows certain tendencies depending on the context in which the lexical items are used. Positive connotations tend to function as forms of identity assertion and affirmation. Lexical items such as Muslim, faith, pride, and solidarity show how identity is presented as meaningful, valuable, and worthy of recognition. These words are often used to express confidence, belonging, and dignity, indicating that identity is actively claimed by the speaker. However, positive connotation does not always function solely as assertion. In some cases, it also reflects identity negotiation. For example, the use of the word pride shows how identity is redefined from something previously associated with shame into something positive. This suggests that even positive meanings can emerge from social pressure and the need to reinterpret identity.

On the other hand, negative connotations generally reflect identity as lived experience and social condition. Lexical items such as indignity, hardship, disdain, and hate show how identity is shaped by discrimination, inequality, and social challenges. These words highlight that identity is not only something expressed by the speaker, but also something experienced through interaction with society. In addition, some negative lexical items, such as suspicion, stain, and shadows, reflect identity as shaped by external perception and judgment. These words indicate how Muslim identity is often constructed through external judgments, stereotypes, and prejudice.

Therefore, the findings suggest that identity is constructed through a dynamic interaction between assertion, negotiation, lived experience, and external construction. Positive connotations tend to highlight

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agency and self-definition, while negative connotations reveal constraints and external influences. This supports Joseph's (2004) view that identity is not fixed, but continuously constructed through language and social interaction.

Conclusion

This study shows that connotative meaning plays an important role in constructing Muslim identity in Zohran Mamdani's speeches. The findings identify 13 lexical items with connotative meanings, consisting of 6 positive connotations and 7 negative connotations. Positive connotations emphasize identity affirmation, dignity, belonging, and solidarity, while negative connotations reflect marginalization, stigma, discrimination, and social pressure. The analysis shows that the relationship between connotation and identity is not fixed.

Positive meanings generally function to assert or negotiate identity, while negative meanings tend to represent lived experience and externally constructed identity. Through these meanings, Muslim identity is constructed through several dimensions, including religious identity, group identity, cultural identity, externally constructed identity, and experiential identity. This study acknowledges several limitations. The analysis is based on 13 lexical items drawn from two speeches, which reflects the purposive and qualitative nature of the study rather than a claim to comprehensiveness. As such, the findings should not be generalized to represent the entirety of Muslim identity construction in political discourse. Future studies may consider expanding the corpus to include a wider range of speeches, speakers, or political contexts to allow for broader comparative analysis. Overall, the study supports Leech's (1981) view that connotative meaning carries emotional and associative values, as well as Joseph's (2004) view that identity is constructed through language. Mamdani's speeches show that political language does not only deliver messages, but also represents and shapes identity within a broader social context.

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