

Keir Starmer and the triumph of syntax over semantics

Published: January 13, 2026, 5:40 am

There is every chance that Keir Starmer's speech today will be hailed by those in the Labour Party's leadership as a model of statesmanship.

It will be carefully drafted, each sentence polished to scan well. The syntax will be faultless. But the semantics — the meaning, content, substance — will be almost entirely absent. That, in fact, is the point.

First, syntax matters in politics. Syntax is the structure of language: subject, verb, object, the rhythm of a phrase, the rise and fall of a period. Syntax reassures. If the sentences line up neatly, we are invited to believe that the ideas they convey must also line up neatly. Style becomes a substitute for substance.

Second, semantics is what we should actually care about. It is meaning: the content of what is being said. A sentence may be grammatically perfect, but if the words add up to "growth, renewal, ambition, discipline, fairness," it communicates nothing but mood music. That is what we will hear today — words that sound good together, but never resolve into a commitment that can be tested or challenged.

Third, this is politics by evasion. Syntax without semantics lets a politician appear bold without risking specificity. The speech becomes a hall of mirrors: every phrase reflecting back what the listener wants to hear. If you want reassurance, you hear reassurance. If you want toughness, you hear toughness. If you want hope, you hear hope. The words are sufficiently hollow to carry any load.

Finally, the problem is that any government, and this government in particular, requires a clear understanding of the semantics of its messaging. Policies must be chosen, budgets must be appropriately written, and decisions must be made. Syntax does not fund hospitals. Syntax does not decarbonise the economy. Syntax does not tackle inequality. Without meaning, syntax is nothing more than noise.

So when you hear the applause today, notice what it is really for. It will not be for the substance of what has been said, because there will be almost none. It will be for the

reassuring rhythm of language, for the syntax that keeps uncomfortable truths at bay. And we will all be poorer for it, which summarises everything about Starmer.