

Mass Political Discourse During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Critical Discourse Analysis Approach

TS Mudau

Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University, South Africa

R Sybing

Doshisha University, Japan

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated already growing trends in authoritarian-directed disinformation in mass media and social media, specifically complicating public health initiatives to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus and generally affirming the potentially toxic "post-truth" paradigms of the social media era. This pandemic provides an opportunity for observing counterproductive discourses from governing leaders to explore how to address the use of weaponised language by authoritarian and populist figures. As a result, this paper presents a critical discourse analysis of statements made by governing leaders regarding the COVID-19 pandemic using the framework of weaponized language by Pascale (2019). An analysis of counterproductive and productive discourses indicates that resonating statements by leaders are generally rooted in mundane discourses, or that which is assumed as common sense or taken for granted by audiences, suggesting that productive public health discourse must assume a similar footing to combat disinformation and ensure public health.

Keywords: COVID-19, Critical discourse analysis, Political discourse, Public health policy, Weaponised language

1. Introduction

As observed in the contemporary trends of misinformation in mass media, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a novel opportunity for researchers to observe the use of power and its consequent influence on cultures through communication. Examining how leaders use the tools of mass media to convey information, beliefs, and values with regards to the ongoing pandemic to large populations holds potential for discussions on critiquing power and creating spaces for equity and empowerment within cultures.

As a result, this paper presents a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of mass political discourse employed by governing leaders and institutions of mass media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Statements made by governing leaders in response to the pandemic and to measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 were collected to capture a sense of political discourse as disseminated through mass media and social media. Pascale's (2019) conceptualization of weaponized language serves as the theoretical lens for identifying features of authoritarian and counterproductive discourse by governing leaders to recognize challenges to public health policy in mitigating the effects of the ongoing pandemic. Discussion of this analysis aims

to identify how public health discourse rooted in language that resonates with audiences can prove more productive than a mere presentation of objective facts about the science of COVID-19 and effective public health policies.

2. Background

Critical discourse analysis is useful to understanding the perpetuation of power instilled in individuals and institutions. Scholars like Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu are responsible for contributing to CDA's philosophical underpinnings that inform inquiry into ideologies and power. That said, a great deal of methodological discussion revolving around CDA can be credited to Norman Fairclough (1989), who originally envisioned CDA as a tool to critique the use of language in capitalist societies (Fairclough, 2010), owing to the likelihood for inequity and social injustice in neoliberal ideologies common in societies that emphasize capitalist systems. Later discussions of the dialectical-relational approach (Fairclough, 2013; O'Regan & Betzel, 2016) have since expanded applications of CDA to broader research inquiries where social justice is discussed.

Outside of critiques of neoliberal ideology, research inquiry that employs CDA typically aims to critique

power structures that arguably facilitate or exacerbate inequities through language and communication. Anderson's (1983) treatise provides a useful foundation for understanding that cultures are informed by the discursive practices they employ. Given the notion that discursive practices can be disseminated via mass mediation (Spitulnik, 1997), those who have access to the functions of mass media invariably hold power over the cultures they reach.

This discussion resists traditional notions of language as a value-neutral phenomenon in which speakers and listeners are merely conduits of knowledge without judgment. Indeed, CDA observes the extent to which speakers influence others, either explicitly or subversively, by encoding the language they employ with their values and the underlying assumptions around those values. Jäger (2001) justifies the importance of CDA in asserting that "discourses are not interesting as mere expressions of social practice, but because they serve certain ends, namely to exercise power with all its effects" (p. 34). Relevant to this paper, research through CDA, in its assumption that discourse is a tool for wielding power, problematizes simple analysis of discourse by any particular, objective truth value given the possibility for inaccuracies in meaning or even deliberate efforts at misinformation. Various scholarly discussions on the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Barua et al., 2020; Krause et al., 2020; Roozenbeek et al., 2020) have focused on misinformation and its effects on the dissemination of scientific knowledge to the public, emphasizing the importance of deliberately shaping discourse in a way that effectively facilitates implementation of public health policy. Even prior to the pandemic, the rise of the "post-truth" era, described by Corner (2017) as raising "questions about the contingency and precariousness of what is publicly circulated as the 'truth'" (p. 1100), affirms the notion that those who wield political power or have access to the tools of mass mediation can do so without full accountability to any positivist notions of truth or facts. Put another way, while it is certainly possible than an objective truth may hold sway in public discourse, the presence of authoritarian or populist figures disputes any assumptions as to its overriding, unconditional power of persuasion.

As these post-truth discourses have dominated overall scholarly inquiry, analysis of mass political discourse is thus required where the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity for such analysis. In

the immediate timeframe, CDA can benefit public health policy discourse in providing guidance for effectively disseminating information about medical science and research to mass, lay populations. Further afield, this inquiry can yield useful insight in addressing disinformation and authoritarianism in a globalized world with mass media and social media in ascendancy.

3. The Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic

While first detected in late 2019, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) did not have a significant worldwide impact until March 2020, at which point the World Health Organization (WHO) acknowledged the growing global pandemic. The disease and its deadly consequences prompted nations around the world to consider society-wide measures to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus in advance of medical breakthroughs that had the potential to eventually cure the disease and/or prevent transmission. Under assumptions of the transmissibility of a highly contagious disease, such measures included masking policies in public areas and social distancing between people to minimize infection stemming from close contact.

There was no singular, unified response even among developed nations to address the COVID-19 pandemic. As public health officials urged the importance of limiting social and economic activities requiring close contact between people and, in activities where close contact is necessary, promoting customs of mask wearing and social distancing, response among world leaders ranged from strict adherence to outright skepticism. During the course of 2020 and 2021, growing impatience over mitigation measures only fostered greater resentment and resistance among governing leaders and, whether as a result or by coincidence, their constituencies. Despite the constant recommendations from public health officials, the prevalence of mask wearing and social distancing fluctuated during the pandemic (Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation, n.d.) particularly in Brazil, the United Kingdom, and the United States, countries this paper considers as having counterproductive discourses regarding COVID-19.

4. The Study

The overall goal of this study is to define the aspects of counterproductive discourses that serve as

challenges specific to the COVID-19 pandemic with the aim of (1) providing guidance for similar events involving authoritarian or populist discourses and (2) specifically identifying how such discourses can be addressed or mitigated. In the context of this study, a discourse is characterized as counterproductive if it seeks to deliberately misinform or otherwise hinder consensus-making. Additionally, a secondary, parallel analysis of the characteristics of productive discourses can also provide a useful contrast to discourses that create obstacles to public health policy.

Given these considerations, the study adopts CDA in order to establish an understanding of the public statements of governing leaders with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic. Polyakova, Yuzhakova, Zalavina, and Dyorina, (2020) characterize language as, among other things, a tool speakers employ to manipulate others. Thus, under the assumption that governing leaders seek to manipulate (or at least influence) those they govern, CDA aligns with the goals of this study in that it "does not simply describe existing realities but also evaluates them, [and] assesses the extent to which they match up to various values" (Fairclough, 2013:9).

The analysis in this paper focuses on the second phase of O'Regan and Betzel's (2015) discussion of the dialectical-relational approach to CDA, which includes the following process:

1. Focus upon a social phenomenon in its semiotic aspect.
2. Identify the causes of the phenomenon and (if relevant) the obstacles to changing it.
3. Does the social order require the phenomenon to be the way that it is? Who benefits most from the phenomenon remaining unchanged?
4. Identify ways past the obstacles. Can the dominant discourse be contested?

Thus far, counterproductive discourses are identified as a confounding obstacle to mitigating the spread of COVID-19. The first two steps of this approach are represented by analysis of counterproductive discourses, while conceptualization of such discourses in tandem with identifying the features of productive discourses facilitates discussion for overcoming or mitigating the obstacles provided

by counterproductive discourses. Such discourses require conceptual development before they can, in fact, be critiqued and contested.

4.1 Data Collection

The discourses under analysis are drawn from a collection of public speeches and statements by political leaders, health authorities, and social media information related to management of the COVID-19 pandemic. These include public discourses by the governing leaders and public officials in Brazil, the Philippines, Tanzania, Rwanda, and the United Kingdom. The countries selected for this study were based on discussions between the two authors of this paper about which countries either experienced a significant prevalence of COVID-19 or had political discourses that ran counter to the prevailing consensus among public health experts with respect to combating COVID-19. Google searches and searches on social media platforms (e.g. Twitter, Facebook) formed the basis for the collection of this data, which were then compiled in the online database service Airtable for later reference and analysis.

4.2 Data Analysis

The researchers in this study examined and highlighted political statements within the collection of articles for data organization leading to theoretical analysis. The study focused primarily on direct quotations of governing leaders with or indirect quotations with minimal paraphrasing (particularly in cases where English is not the language of the contexts being examined). This approach allows for an analysis of data that is as close as possible to the original political statements when they were made. For the analytical lens, Pascale (2019) provides a comprehensive overview of authoritarian discourses that weaponize language to advance political agendas and, more relevant to this paper, impede progress. Pascale's treatise identifies four components of weaponized language: propaganda, disinformation, censorship, and mundane discourse. Table 1 provides brief definitions of each component as excerpted from Pascale (2019). The definitions are directly quoted from Pascale's treatise so that the authors of this study practice close adherence to the understanding of weaponized language as originally conceptualised.

Analyzing the data through this framework allows for both the conceptual development of existing

Table 1: Components of Weaponised Language

Component of Weaponized Language	Description
censorship	"Fundamentally, censorship prohibits language that limits hegemonic power" (p. 901)
propaganda	"Propaganda, even at its most basic level, is more than the rhetoric of persuasion. It is a strategic mix of selective facts and fiction blended to promote a particular point of view; and, in this sense, it is always a persuasive project based on deception" (p. 903)
disinformation	"Practices of disinformation are systematic productions and disseminations of false and misleading information" (p. 905)
mundane discourses	"Mundane discourse might be best understood as the linguistic delivery device through which weaponized language enters the mainstream" (pp. 908-909)

Source: Pascale (2019)

theory and the identification of aspects of discourse that can facilitate productive mitigation of the challenges this study aims to resolve. The excerpts collected for this study were thus coded for these components in order to narrow the lens of analysis to excerpts of discourse considered problematic for analysis to critique and mitigate. Specifically, collected statements are first coded for these aspects of weaponized language, then coded for any identifying features per Adu's (2019) guidance for coding qualitative data. These secondary features arise from discussion between the researchers employing an initial coding process (Saldaña, 2013) to name such aspects in plain terms with the aim of connecting these features to existing theory. This approach provides the potential for theoretical expansions of concepts identified by Pascale (2019) as well as for conceptualization of productive discourses as a means to mitigate challenges provided by counterproductive discourses. Themes that lead to theoretical expansions are developed through this analysis until the scope of data collection satisfies the precepts of theoretical saturation (Guest, Namey, Chen, 2020), which is the circumstance in which further data analysis yields no additional theoretical insights, in which case the current theoretical understanding is fully developed.

5. Results

An analysis of the collected statements echoes three of the four components of weaponized language with censorship being the exception. Propaganda, disinformation, and mundane discourses were found in abundance within counterproductive

discourses where medical research and public health policy related to COVID-19 was the target of governing leaders' statements. Further analysis yields development of Pascale's (2019) components, as highlighted in the following subsections. Each subsection employs statements by governing leaders as data exemplars for each theme developed in this study.

5.1 Misdirection (Disinformation)

Misdirection appears to be one of the strategies employed by governing leaders engaging in counterproductive discourses. In our view, misdirection aims to draw attention toward other actors or entities in order to critique the object on which focus is originally devoted. Brazil President Jair Bolsonaro, in attacking policies promoting the use of masks in public, said that "Whoever is against this proposal is because they don't believe in science, because if they are vaccinated, there is no way the virus can be transmitted" ("Brazil's Bolsonaro fined for not wearing mask at motorcycle rally amid COVID-19", 2021). By drawing attention away from the efficacy of wearing masks and toward the efficacy of vaccines, President Bolsonaro's statement is intended to cast doubt on the importance of pursuing multiple measures intended to mitigate the pandemic. President Bolsonaro went on to down play the coronavirus as "a little flu" (Savarese & Pollastri, 2021), in keeping with the narrative that a less threatening health crisis may not need multiple strategies in preventing the spread of COVID-19.

Tanzania President John Magufuli also employed misdirection by expressing doubt about vaccines

sourced abroad. He said the health ministry would only adopt vaccinations after they have been certified by Tanzania's own experts, saying "you should stand firm. Vaccinations are dangerous. If the White man was able to come up with vaccinations, he should have found a vaccination for AIDS [and other diseases]" (Makoni, 2021:566). In this case, the target of President Magufuli's statement is "the White man" as a means to cast doubt on vaccinations through disinformation.

5.2 Religious Conviction (Mundane Discourses)

References to God or a higher spiritual authority appear intended to ground political discourses in the more spiritual aspects of culture in order to align people's sense of religious faith with the courses of action recommended by governing leaders, in this case in conflict with suggested public health policies. A statement from Tanzania President John Magufuli exemplifies this sort of religious conviction: "We Tanzanians haven't locked ourselves in and we don't expect to lock ourselves down. I don't expect to announce any lockdown because our God is living and He will continue to protect Tanzanians" ("Decrying vaccines, Tanzania leader says 'God will protect' from COVID-19", 2021). In this excerpt, President Magufuli positions God as the protection that Tanzanians need against COVID-19, thus rendering any lockdowns or pauses in economic activity unnecessary. This is further reflected in statements Magufuli made when he declared the country "free from COVID-19 because of God's intervention. He went on to order schools to reopen" (Makoni, 2021:566).

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro similarly references religion, saying, "With the pastors and religious leaders, we will call for a day of fasting by Brazilians so that Brazil can free itself from this evil as soon as possible" (Paraguassu, 2020). While this statement does not explicitly stand in opposition to mitigation efforts, it is made after criticism of the president's efforts in addressing the pandemic, and during a time when Brazil saw a sharp rise in new cases of infections and deaths.

5.3 Ambiguity (Disinformation)

In a number of instances, counterproductive political discourses appear to cast doubt and uncertainty on medical research and public health policy as a means to recommend inaction or reversal of

measures intended to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. In perpetuating this ambiguity, the late Tanzania President John Magufuli (Makoni, 2021) said, "We are not yet satisfied that those vaccines have been clinically proven safe" (p. 566). This statement was made despite completed clinical trials highlighting the safety and efficacy of coronavirus vaccines.

United Kingdom Prime Minister Boris Johnson cast similar doubt on the efficacy of lockdowns, saying, "We must be honest with ourselves that if we can't reopen our society in the next few weeks, when we will be helped by the arrival of summer and by the school holidays, then we must ask ourselves when will we be able to return to normal?" (Hawke, 2021). Both governing leaders highlighted above appear to employ ambiguity as a means to question whether there is evidence that mitigation measures would be effective in combating COVID-19, despite the growing preponderance of evidence of such efficacy. This professed doubt serves to inject public discourse with disinformation, whether intentionally or otherwise.

5.3.1 Productive Discourses

While there were counterproductive discourses from some political leaders, the authors also noted some productive discourses aligned with promoting mitigation measures. For example, Rwanda President Paul Kagame used his political position to lead not only his citizens but the global community towards stopping the spread of the virus. Such productive discourses from the president received cohesive enforcement from other political leaders within the country. For example, the Rwandan Minister of Local Government Anastase Shyaka publicly said, "What we ask Rwandans is that they should fear COVID-19 more than they fear hunger. Covid is not afraid of anyone, it is not a disease for the rich people, so we need to all be on the lookout" ("Rwandan capital back under full coronavirus lockdown", 2021).

Another example of productive discourse in our view comes from the successor to Tanzania President John Magufuli, Samia Suluhu Hassan, who said:

"I'm a mother of four, a grandmother of several grandchildren, and a wife, but most of all I'm the President and Commander in Chief. I wouldn't put myself in danger knowing that I have all these responsibilities as the shepherd of the nation" (Madowo, 2021)

Both statements seem to appeal to people in more accessible terms that transcend understanding of medical research and public health policy. The former statement is indexed against everyday fears (i.e. fear of hunger) while the latter is grounded in personal terms (i.e. one's role in the family). Such grounding in both statements appears intended to find resonance with lay audiences not requiring expertise in science or medicine. Nonetheless, these discourses align with efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 despite the absence of grounding in medical research.

6. Discussion

The findings are that the texts from political leaders were given to serve a particular purpose. For instance, the political speech by President Magafuli was meant to serve some political positions that conflicted with appropriate public health policies intended to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. It is known that Tanzania did not rely on scientific findings provided by the WHO, but instead publicly emphasized local means to fight the pandemic (Makoni, 2021). This is unlike advocating for both locally and externally produced measures.

Conversely, the use of the political power and position by the President of Rwanda to spread trust and enforce public health intervention and authority affirms that people derive "knowledge" from the respective discursive contexts they live in (Meyer, 2001). The health interventions endorsed and communicated by WHO health leaders gained popular support to influence positive public trust and acceptance of non-medical interventions and vaccinations. In Tanzania, the emergence of the new president, Samia Suluhu Hassan, on March 19, 2021, saw a shift away from counterproductive discourses employed by the late president Magafuli. The country noticed a positive demonstration of trust with respect to international public health interventions advocated by the WHO (Madowo, 2021). President Hassan went public to be vaccinated with other ministers as well as prominent religious leaders. Such public and productive discourses from the president and religious leaders seem intended to demystify previously communicated information and acts of skewed focus and unilateral focus on home remedies and religious interventions. The inclusion of the religious leaders further seems intended to convey trust in vaccines.

In the process, public disinformation and misinformation was corrected through sending health interventions on public spaces, bulletin boards, social media and lifting off media reporting bans; with emphasis on responsible journalism (Madowo, 2021). Meanwhile, the president further committed to fund the vaccine manufacturing programme in Tanzania, seeming to aim to create positive political legitimacy and confidence on scientific intervention (Rampal et al., 2020; WHO, 2021).

Both past and current discussions of research and policy have sought to emphasize that misinformation and dissemination of unscientific information undermine public health and put the lives of people at risk. In 2003, WHO coined the term infodemic to manage and centralize pandemic-related information (WHO, 2021). Infodemic is too much information on the pandemic, whether accurate or not, disseminated through communities digitally or physically resulting in doubts and mistrust on public health authorities and interventions (WHO, 2021). Misinformation leads to public distrust of public health intervention strategies and related management (WHO, 2021). Scientific evidence concludes that the socially marginalized and vulnerable communities have difficulties in accessing health services and are severely affected by misinformation when their trust on public health interventions is challenged. As a result, health authorities are expected to collaborate with various political leaders to curb the pandemic. Like in other previous pandemics, the novel coronavirus required constant updates from reliable scientific sources to assist the public in adjusting their behavior to curb the spread of the virus and save lives. Various authorities such as governments and local leaders are to join hands in saving lives.

Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, the broader phenomenon of disinformation has long been a research interest taken up by scholars employing critical discourse analysis, but only recently have concrete examples pointing to the delegitimization of disinformation been discussed (e.g. Lischka, 2019). Critical discourse analysis in the United States context (e.g. Green, 2021) has advanced the assertion that a key remedy to disinformation is a unified response to that which is poisonous in the social discourse. Particularly as the infodemic phenomenon remains a persistent force within the COVID-19 discourse, a widely unified movement to counter equally broad disinformation appears to be difficult

to achieve but nonetheless essential to preserving public health. For example, in Rwanda, the political leadership employed strategies such as constant dissemination of accurate information to the public on health interventions and COVID 19 related status reports through various strategies such as daily media reports review, coordinated multi-media response, and ensuring communication through social media platforms and aerodromes to manage misinformation and establish mass mobilization to curb the spread of the virus (Karim et al., 2021). On the contrary, the approach in Tanzania was that COVID 19 statistics were kept a secret, and the peddling of mistrust on health interventions was highly communicated (Makoni, 2021). A study conducted among six East Asian countries (Rampal et al., 2020) confirmed that decisive communication from political leaders as well as a widespread, unified public response saves lives since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Conversely, as Brazil President Bolsonaro downplayed coronavirus as "a little flu" on September 4, 2021, the prevalence rate in Brazil was soaring at more than 4 million confirmed cases with 178,000 deaths in a week with 128,000 deaths (Savarese & Pollastri, 2021). In our view, this highlights that an absence of a unified public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic has only proven harmful and, in many cases, fatal.

7. Conclusion

It is perhaps a basic instinct to counter disinformation with "truth" or fact-checking, with the positivist assumption that well-supported assertions based on evidence can effectively counter any mistruth or weaponization of language. This is the case to some extent, but only contingent on the recipients of such weaponization being educated and engaged within the discourse (Fridkin et al., 2015). Where public health policy and messaging aims to reach an even broader audience, however, simply relying on the truth value of a given discourse to resonate with the public seems an untenable prospect. The critical discourse analysis presented in this paper suggests a different approach to countering disinformation predicated on shaping discourse in a manner that resonates with the audience. While much of Pascale's (2019) framework for understanding weaponized language (e.g. censorship, disinformation, propaganda) ought not to align with more well-intentioned governing leaders oriented toward promoting public health, this analysis emphasizes the importance of mundane discourses

in mass mediation. Indeed, across all contexts that this study analyzes, language that is grounded in what audiences find familiar has greater potential for being effective and persuasive.

Some important limitations color the analysis presented here. Mainly, statements by governing leaders were taken from English-language sources, which may influence the extent to which this study grasps the context in which those statements are placed if such statements were translated into English beforehand. In addition, objectively indexing "productive" discourses to mitigation measures such as lockdowns and vaccines suggests a static normativity regarding what is good and bad, when the goal of this study is merely to highlight how mass political discourse can confound efforts by the public health community. Scholars pursuing similar research inquiries should take care not to pursue such objectivism, focusing more on the act of weaponizing language in critical discourse analysis.

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