Original Paper

Decoding Manipulative Strategies and Ideological Features in Trump's Speech on the Coronavirus Pandemic: A Critical Political Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

The novel coronavirus is one of the most tragic epidemic diseases the world has ever faced thus far. Therefore, the governments of all countries have taken a range of measures against it. This article preforms a critical analysis on a political discourse, notably president Trump's March 11, 2020 speech about the global pandemic. Using a multi- disciplinary approach as suggested by representatives of critical discourse analysis, it attempts to unpack or decipher the ideologies behind the discourse on the one hand, and to reveal how the discourse contributes to manipulating the public opinion through structural and contextual features of power and control, on the other hand.

Keywords

coronavirus, ideology, manipulation, political critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Coronavirus affliction is a fatal and unprecedented tragic disease that hit humanity with an incommensurable loss of human lives. In this sense, it leaves everybody, in all nations worldwide, restless: authorities and mere citizens, believers and atheists, scientists and non-scholars, artists and thinkers, Blacks and Whites, everyone has been concerned with that astonishing pandemic of the twenty-first century. While some people focus on pondering over curative and sustainable remedy against the evil, others are committed to imploring or entreating God/gods to conjure that tragedy. Meanwhile, everywhere governments take suitable measures to prevent their citizens from getting the disease on the one hand, and to seek to find out appropriate cure for the victims, on the other hand. Of

them, America is among the countries to take concrete actions to combat the spread of the emergency. Its president, Donald Trump, has delivered a speech for this purpose on March 11, 2020. We set out in this study to submit his speech to a critical investigation. More concretely, we aim here at deciphering, in his text or talk, the (transparent or hidden) ideologies it encodes or obfuscates, as well as pinpointing how Trump has ingeniously used the English language to manipulate the public opinion in order to "emphasize our good actions" (van Dijk, 2006a, 2006b, 2008).

Adopting an integrated transdisciplinary approach as recommended by apologists of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1995, 2001, 2003, 2012; Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; van Dijk, 1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2001; Weiss & Wodak, 2003), the study endorses Weiss and Wodak's claim that "language is not powerful on its own- it gains power by the use powerful people make of it" (2003, p. 14). Before proving this through discursive practices, it is important to shed light on the conceptual and theoretical frameworks referred to in the course of the present endeavor.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

Without a firm understanding of the meanings of the terms used by the analyst, it will be hard to follow his/her reasoning later on. In the same way, "any analysis of texts which aims to be significant in social scientific terms has to connect with theoretical questions about discourse" (Fairclough, 2003). Given these two evidences, we deem it expedient to delineate the meaning of some concepts on the one hand, and the theories that underpin the current research work, on the other hand.

2.1 Politics, Political Discourse and Ideology

Among the fields which arouse attention in terms of empirical research lies politics. Regarded "as a struggle for power, between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist it" (Wilson, 2015, p. 777), politics is a science devoted to particular people commonly called "politicians". In that regard, Fairclough and Fairclough (2012, p. 1) claim that politics is most fundamentally about making choices about how to act in response to circumstances and goals, it is about choosing *policies*, and such choices and the actions which follow from them are based upon practical argumentation. It stands to reason that one of the tasks politicians are indulged in is to get people aware of their deeds, their actions on their behalf, through (argumentative) speech or political discourse.

Merely thought of as "the discourse of politicians" (van Djik, 2001b), political discourse (or simply political speech) has been for ages [and is still] the main vehicle whereby political actors have made their actions, their ideas, their stance known to the public. Subscribing to this contention, Wodak (2009) soundly sustains that "It used to be the case, when thinking about politics and political discourse, that political speeches were considered to be the most salient genre" (p. 2). Although other (political discourse) genres such as televised press conferences, political debates on radio and TV, snippets on You Tube, or reports on political events in the press, are also widely referred to nowadays, the study of

political speeches (and more particularly of presidential addresses) "has not only attracted the interests of political scientists and historians, but also attained the attention of linguists" (Wang, p. 254).

Viewing political discourse in terms of its function, van Dijk (1997, p. 20) lucidly claims that it is primarily seen as a form of political action, as a pan of the political process. In that perspective, he proceeds to stress that most political actions (such as passing laws, decision-making, meeting, campaigning, etc.) are largely *discursive*. It follows thus that to better decode the ideologies of a political actor, one needs to decipher his (political) discourse.

In a neutral way, ideologies are seen as some kinds of 'ideas', that is, belief systems, worldviews, or mind-sets (Eggins, 1994, 2004; van Dijk, 2006a, p. 116; Fowler, 1986, Fairclough, 1995, p. 17). However, as Fairclough (1995, p. 17) put it, if the concept of ideology is to be used [at all], it should be used critically since "no use of language is considered truly neutral, objective and value-free" (Simpson, 1993, p. 6). In that regard, it should be underscored that in the critical discourse perspective, there are primarily three focal approaches which gloss ideology in three different, but complementary ways. These are the discourse-historical, the socio-cognitive, and the socio-cultural approaches.

From the point of view of the discourse historical approach, ideology is defined as an (often) one sided perspective or worldview, composed of related mutual representations, convictions, opinions, attitudes, and evaluations. Ideologies are shared by members of specific social groups. They serve as an important means of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations through discourse (Wodak, 2015a, p. 4). Submitting to that view, Reisigl (2017, p. 50) maintains that ideologies are suspected of justifying particular interests and social inequalities under the guise of common public interest. As for van Dijk (2006a), "ideologies are sociocognitively defined as shared representations of social groups, and more specifically as the 'axiomatic' principles of such representations". Turning to the domain of politics, van Dijk (2001b) notes that political discourse is the site where politicians' multiple ideological identities are enacted. However, Allagbe and Amoussou (2020a, p. 15) explain that in contemporary political science, the term is used in a more neutral descriptive sense to refer to political belief systems. Van Dijk (2006a) attempts to set up a close nexus between ideology and discourse, and cogently opines that ideologies are expressed and generally reproduced in the social practices of their members, and more particularly acquired, confirmed, changed and perpetuated through discourse. This stance is actually in line with Fairclough's (1989, p. 4) contention that "ideology is the prime means of manufacturing consent".

According to this scholar, ideologies are representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation (Fairclough, 2003). It logically ensues from this that ideologies are closely linked to power. The exercise of power, in modern society, Fairclough (2001, p. 2) outlines, is increasingly achieved through ideology, and more particularly through the ideological workings of language. This suggests that the ideology of a given social group is better understood through discursive events of members of that group. Hence, exploring the ideological patterns of/in a political discourse undoubtedly leads to

untangling the discourse to bring to limelight its overt meaning, viz., to make its hidden and latent meaning transparent. However, before actually undertaking this analytical task, let us examine how discourse can be manipulated to suit the speaker's interests.

2.2 Discourse, Mental/Context Models, and Manipulation

So far we have been talking of discourse without circumcising its meaning in the frame of our research enterprise. This is what we first and foremost set out to do at this stage, before saying a few words about mental/context models, and ultimately accounting for how the manipulation of discourse impacts on recipients. It should be emphasized that the term *discourse* is usually used with different senses, even by activists of critical discourse analysis. Van Dijk provides a more or less literal definition of the concept. As a matter of fact, van Dijk (2000; as cited in Jahedi, Abdullah, & Mukundan 2014, p. 33) perceives "discourse" as "communicative event" including conversation, written text, and any "semiotic" or multimedia dimension of signification. As for Wodak (2001, pp. 2-3), discourse means anything from a historical monument, a lieu de ménoire, a policy, a political strategy, narratives in a restricted or broad sense of the term, text, talk, a speech, topic-related conversations, a language per se. For their part, van Leeuwen (2008, p. 6) and Fairclough (1992) focus their definitions on the social use of language. Indeed, while the former views "discourse" as social cognition of a "socially constructed knowledge of some social practice, the latter explains that discourse is itself 'constitutive' or 'constructive' of social structure (and not simply constrained by it)". Building on the foregoing clarifications, discourse can be thought of in the current researchers' opinion as language use in speech and writing delivered for a specific purpose in a given context.

Whatever the definition, it is however agreed upon that discourse is likely to have an impact on people's mind. That's why, van Dijk (2001b, p. 17) believes that there is no direct link between discourse and society. For him, between social beliefs and discourse we need a cognitive interface that represent personal beliefs, opinions or experiences: mental model. It is this mental model of events talked or written about that forms the basis for the production and understanding of a discourse, especially of its meaning. It is however important to stress that language users not only form mental models of the situation they interact in, but also of the events or situations they speak or write about. Therefore, van Dijk introduces the concept of context models referred to as "mental representations of the structures of the communicative situation that are discursively relevant for a participant" (Meyer, 2001, p. 21). Van Dijk (2001a, p. 112) emphasizes that context models and event models are mental representations in episodic memory, that is, the part of long term memory in which people store their knowledge and opinions about episodes they experience or read/hear about. It can thus be inferred from the foregoing that speakers or writers may willingly decide to act upon or manipulate discourse receivers' mental models to achieve specific aims.

Manipulation is one of the discursive social practices of dominant groups geared toward the reproduction of their power (van Dijk, 2006b, p. 363). Manipulating people involves, as stressed by the aforementioned scholar, manipulating their minds, that is, people's beliefs, such as knowledge,

opinions and ideologies which in turn control their actions. However, the most influential form of manipulation, as underscored, does not focus on the creation of specific preferred mental models but on more general and abstract knowledge and abstract beliefs such as knowledge, attitudes and ideologies, because a general socially shared attitude is far more suitable than the specific mental models (and opinions) of individual language users. In this research work, we shall be demonstrating how president Trump ingeniously and strategically attempts to exert influence on his compatriots' beliefs. For the time being, let us lay bare the analytical and methodological approaches adopted.

2.3 Integrated Multidisciplinary Approach and Methodology

The current research work is multifarious in nature, viz., it subsumes quite different theoretical backgrounds and methodologies. In other words, it develops an integrated theoretical framework capable of reconciling different perspective without reducing them to one another since "Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) does not constitute a well-defined empirical method but rather a cluster of approaches" (Meyer, 2001). In concrete terms, this study draws on an integrative interdisciplinary theory as well as methodology combining CDA, Socio-Cognition, History, Socio-Psychology, Pragmatics, Political Science, and so forth. The discourse analytical approaches prominently recourse to here are those of the main representatives of CDA, that is, van Dijk's Socio-cognitive approach, Fairclough's Socio-cultural approach, and Wodak's Discourse-Historical approach.

As for the methodological procedure, it draws upon van Dijk (2001b), Amoussou and Djimet (in press) where fragments of Mrs. Teresa Gorman's parliamentary discourse on "asylum seekers" and selected snippets about gendered discourses in *Purple Hibiscus* and *Everything Good Will Come* are respectively investigated into. In this study however, a concrete product of interaction or text, namely the transcript of the American President Donald Trump's 11 March speech on Coronavirus pandemic, is inquired into. More precisely, the analysis is focused on fragments or snippets from the discourse which better disclose the context of language use and decipher the ideological discursive devices in the speech to, in fine, exude how Trump has attempted to manipulate recipients' models.

3. A Critical Analysis of the Discursive Event/Speech

Trump begins his speech by stating the rationale behind his address, viz., America's extraordinary response to covid-19 outbreak:

(1) My fellow Americans, tonight I want to speak with you about our nation's unprecedented response to the coronavirus outbreak that started in China and is now spreading throughout the world.

The use of the in-group possessive "our nation" followed by the noun phrase "unprecedented response" connotes two *implicatures*. First, the response or reaction (as will be shortly revealed) is not to be regarded as emanating from the president or the executive, but a decision which involves all the Americans' responsibility. Second, by preceding "response" by the adjective "unprecedented", the American president decides, through the explicit performative verb "want", to arouse his hearers' attention to the fact that the so called "response" (or reaction, or measures) is of an utmost importance,

or better, it is a serious one that is in the best interest of the citizens. It can be assumed from this that these are discursive strategies deployed by the speaker to manipulate his listeners' minds, that is, their beliefs, opinions, ideologies, to consider the response as theirs. In a bid to reinforce that manipulative social practice, he proceeds on via the following speech acts:

(2) This is the most aggressive and comprehensive effort to confront a foreign virus in modern history. I am confident that by counting and continuing to take these tough measures, we will significantly reduce the threat to our citizens and we will ultimately and expeditiously defeat the virus.

From the above, the president rhetorically enhances the seriousness of the "*nation's response*" through the use of two hyperbolic expressions: "the most aggressive and comprehensive effort" and "tough measures". The goals pursued here are: (i) to act on the credulity of the hearers, and (ii) to eschew any probable counter-discourse, as these 'best' measures will outstandingly "reduce the threat" to everybody and eventually "defeat the virus".

And to support the decision (i.e., the suspension of travel from Europe for 30 days), he reminds his compatriots of a similar action taken against China and its effects at the very beginning of the outbreak. This is a discourse strategy termed "*generalization*" where a concrete example that has made an impact on people's mental models, is generalized to more general knowledge or attitudes, or even fundamental ideologies (van Dijk, 2006b, p. 370). He hence makes a strategic move to ideological square of discursive group *polarization* in successive sequences:

(3) Our team is the best anywhere in the world.

(4) ... we have the greatest economy anywhere in the world, by far.

Our banks and financial institutions are fully capitalized and incredibly strong. Our unemployment is at a historic low. This vast economic prosperity gives us flexibility, reserves, and reserves to handle any threat that comes our way.

(5) No nation is more prepared or more resilient than the United Nations. We have the best economy, the most advanced health care, and the most talented doctors, scientists and researchers anywhere in the world.

As is obviously perceptible, all those three fragments emphasize Our Good Properties, or *positive self-presentation*, or boasting. They all consist of what van Dijk (2008, p. 177) calls "the most typical political pronouns", viz, the first personal pronoun "we" with its derivatives "our", "us". Such lexemes denote a *nationalist ideology* aiming at arousing the participants' pride at being Americans. As a matter of fact, the in-group possessive adjective noticed in (3) and (4) ("<u>our</u> nation", "<u>our</u> banks and financial institutions, "<u>our</u> unemployment", "<u>our</u>" way) is actually a *membership categorization device* (Wodak, 2007, p. 218) to discursively construct a feeling of social group, a social group which is "the best anywhere in the world". By the same token, "<u>we</u>" are described in (4) and (5) as one people with "the greatest economy anywhere in the world", "the best economy, the most advanced health care", and the most competent human resources on the planet.

With those assets, and taking account of the early strenuous measure taken, it comes out that:

(6) ...we have seen dramatically fewer cases of the virus in the United States than are now present in Europe.

The modifier "dramatically" added to the aggregate "fewer", all preceding the noun "cases", logically imply that the number of infected people, so far registered in the United States, is tiny or negligible. This also presupposes that the "early intense reaction" as implemented by the American government has yielded significant good results. Therefore, comparing such results to those of the European Union, the president switches on the other ideological group polarization, viz., *negative other-presentation*, or Emphasizing Their bad properties, or derogation. In actual fact, he vehemently accuses the others in the following terms:

(7) The European Union failed to take the same precautions and restricted travel from China and other hot spots. As a result, a large number of new clusters in the United States were seeded by travelers from Europe.

It can be inferred from the foregoing statement that contrary to the U.S., the European countries did not anticipate on closing their borders to China. This failure has accordingly resulted in new cases of infected travelers coming from Europe. That is why "suspending all travel from Europe to the United States" becomes an urgent imperative. Here, the American president discursively de-emphasizes those properties that are inconsistent with our interests to seek to influence the mental models of the listeners. This strategy is known as *blaming the victim* (see van Dijk, 2006b, p. 368).

What is interesting in the analysis so far carried out is the skillful discursive strategies deployed by president Trump in attempting to control the socially shared beliefs of the recipients on the one hand, and the persuasive moves he lucidly refers to in order to convince his compatriots of the right behind his decision, on the other hand. After succeeding in his "explicit plan to impair or bias understanding" (van Dijk, ibid, p. 366), the orator announces a series of measures taken on behalf of his citizens.

(8) Earlier this week, I met with the leaders of health insurance industry who have agreed to waive all co-payments for coronavirus treatments, extend insurance coverage to these treatments, and to prevent surprise medical billing.

(9) We are cutting amounts of red tape to make antiviral therapies available in record time. These treatments will significantly reduce the impact and reach of the virus.

(10) Additionally, last week, I signed into law an \$8.3 billion funding bill to help C.D.C. and other government agencies fight the virus and support vaccines, treatments and distribution of medical supplies. Testing and testing capabilities are expanding rapidly day by day. We are moving quickly.

(11) Effective immediately, the S.B.A. will begin providing economic loans in affected states and territories. These low-interest loans will help small businesses overcome temporary economic disruptions caused by the virus. To this end, I am asking the Congress to increase funding for this program by an additional \$50 billion.

From these four main actions, it is crystal clear that the American government has taken concrete actions to alleviate the populace's sufferings as regards the coronavirus impacts. While the first three

measures intend to facilitate easy access to treatments to "significantly reduce the impact and reach of the virus", the last one, viz., (11) is destined to providing financial support to all "affected states and territories" to boost the social and economic life of citizens. Though such actions should, a priori, be viewed as an act of solidarity from the government (suggesting hence a *humanistic ideology*), they could also be regarded as a means to keep control of the hearers' episodic memory to comply with any necessary measures to avert the virus. This assumption is really endorsed in the following sequence:

(12) For all Americans, it is essential that everyone take extra precautions and practice good hygiene. Each of us has a role to play in defeating this virus. Wash your hands, clean often-used surface, cover your face and mouth if you sneeze or cough, and most of all, if you are sick or not feeling well, stay home.

From the above, it is obvious that everyone is abide by the strict observance of some stated rules. The presence of the strong modaliser/estranger or metaphor of modality "*it is essential that*" attests to this, and unravels the power relations embedded in the statement. Hence, every American is required to "take precautions and practice good hygiene". In concrete terms, everyone must "wash" their "hands, "clean often-used surface, cover [their] face and mouth" whenever they "sneeze or cough", and above all, they have to "stay home" once ill.

At last, reliant on his measures, Trump remains quite convinced that if such rules or guidelines are effectively respected in a strict way as required, there is hope that the virus be defeated. According to him, "this is just a temporary moment of time that we will overcome together as a nation and as a world". That assurance aims at creating confidence in all the Americans who are desperately losing hope because, as he proceeds to aver, "I will always put the well being of America first". Having created such a context model, he pragmatically claims:

(13) Our future remains brighter than anyone can imagine. Acting with compassion and love, we will heal the sick, care for those in need, help our fellow citizens and emerge from this challenge stronger and more unified than ever before.

That conclusive utterance enhances once again the quietude Trump is striving to set in each American's mind. It is a clarion call that the coronavirus pandemic should be survived with hope intact. In that regard, "our future remains brighter than" ever. So, it is pretty sure that we get out of this epidemic "stronger and more unified than ever before". This contention is perfectly in accordance with the WHO Director General's opening remarks on COVID-19 when he declares: "…we share the hope that we will overcome this pandemic together. […] And we will not give up. […]. But the choice is ours, and the choice should be unity at the national level".

4. Final Remarks

To sum up, this study has applied an integrated transdisciplinary approach to Trump's March 11, 2020 discourse on the coronavirus emergency to unearth the ideologies behind that discourse on the one hand, and to unveil how the US president has resorted to manipulation to control the socially shared beliefs of

his compatriots, on the other hand. As a matter of fact, Donald Trump has referred to such discursive strategies as implicature, generalization, positive self-presentation, negative other-presentation, membership categorization device, blaming the victims, humanistic strategy, etc. to make his language powerful. In other words, those strategies have helped him act on his recipients' minds so as to make them accept, appreciate and endorse his worldviews or ideologies.

Although this critical discourse study has moved out of the text and processes of text production and interpretation, to address their social conditions, it could have been catchier if what Fairclough terms "the more remote conditions of institutional and social structures" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 21) has been more explicitly focused on. For instance, it would have been more interesting to seek to disentangle, besides the overt reason of the suspension of travel from Europe as stated by Trump, the likely effective motivations of such a decision, with regards to the then collaborative relationship between America and the European Union.

Moreover, with respect to the discursive strategies and the discourse structures the U.S. president deploys to contrive to permeate the recipients' cognitive models or perceptions, we do agree with Caldas Coulthard and Coulthard (1996, p. xi) that discourse is a major instrument of power and control. Furthermore, the parsing of the discourse into sequential parts and their cautious methodical scrutiny have helped "demystify discourse by deciphering ideologies" (Weiss & Wodak, 2003, p. 14). This, in our view, has ultimately contributed to creating awareness in agents of their own interests. At last, it could be claimed that the series of events that occurred in Am érica, following the speech (the rise of the number of people tested positive, the increasing rates of death, and the contamination of Trump himself who tested positive to covid-19, etc.) actually does corroborate the manipulative nature of the speech. However, it is our wish that this study proffers insights into other research on Trump's subsequent

speeches on the novel coronavirus pandemic to corroborate or refute how the manipulative role of the president leaks out or not, in the course of the time; and this, in the light of the rhythm of progress of the disease in the United States.

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