

Selected speeches from three world leaders in reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic: A comparative linguistic analysis

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Abstract

Our presentation contributes to a growing body of critical political-discourse analysis (Chilton and Schaffner 1997, Chilton 2004, 2017, Jeftić 2020, Van Dijk 1997, Wodak 2015). We analyse six speeches from three world leaders, i.e., Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern (New Zealand), President Cyril Ramaphosa (South Africa) and former President Donald Trump (USA). The world leaders delivered the speeches to their respective nations at two different points during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The first three speeches react to the respective national outbreak of the pandemic; the second set of speeches were delivered after the “first wave” of COVID-19 had passed in each country.

Using the critical discourse analysis framework (Van Dijk 1997, Wodak 2015), our presentation focuses on discursive structures that make up meanings in a genre of political discourse. We show how linguistic analysis can highlight vastly different ways of engaging with the respective populaces.

Our analyses of the types of illocutionary acts and the use of pronouns substantiate that former president Donald Trump predominantly self-represents as a powerful and competent protector who is in control of the situation. He consistently accentuates his administration’s authority in his speeches which can be characterised as coercive monologues about the “greatness” of his administration’s actions. The latter is corroborated by the analysis of modal verb usage. In stark contrast, Prime Minister Ardern and President Ramaphosa focus on the encouragement of solidarity. Both politicians emphasise knowledge-based joint actions and behaviour of the general population and the government alike, by promoting the observance of guidelines issued by expert entities. In their respective speeches, they enable their nations to conceptualise the COVID-19 reality as one of enablement and encourage their audiences to act out of moral duty and concern for others. Notably, President Ramaphosa stands out in emphasising shared feelings and knowledge to a greater extent than either of the other world leaders.

Keywords: Pragmatics; political discourse; speech acts; pronouns; modal verbs; presidential speeches; Covid-19

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