



# **A Critical and Textual Discourse Analysis of Donald Trump's Speech on Coronavirus**

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This paper critically examines a delivered speech by the American President Donald Trump in 2020 on the occasion of coronavirus spread (health Crisis or pandemic). In the light of Critical Discourse Analysis, we mainly aim to reveal the concepts and ideologies implied in Trump's speech which amounted to 1281 words. Fairclough's critical discourse analysis approach and Van Dijk framework are adopted to depict and unmask the concepts and ideologies implied. The results show that national identity, directness, , over-wording, repetition, solidarity, negative evaluation for others, positive evaluation for himself have been dominated in the speech. The most interesting result in this article is that Trump avoids being politician "*We must put politics aside, stop the partisanship and unify together as one nation and one family*" as an attempt to emphasize his collectivity in facing severe crisis such as Coronavirus spread.

**Keywords:** Critical/Textual Discourse Analysis, Crisis Discourse, Discourse Ideologies, Coronavirus

## 1. Introduction

There is a robust relationship between language, politics and crisis when we observe politicians whose main aim is to persuade their immediate audience or convince the public. Politics is a strategy for power through which certain political as well as social ideas are put into practice. However, this is usually accomplished by using successful and effective language. Politics is not limited to the rules and laws governing a country, but it is an intelligent procedure to persuade and affect the intended audience or the public. Therefore, persuasive political speech is a very significant technique. However, the main concern of this paper is Critical discourse analysis as it deals with the interaction, whether spoken or written, between language and society reflecting certain elements such as power, inequality, and superiority and so on.

However, this article offers a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the American President Donald Trump's speech about Coronavirus threat that spread over many countries. We aim to offer conceptual and ideological discursive analysis and to underline the linguistic features that determined the nature of Trump's speech within a political discourse in the time of crisis exercising power and authority which impact the realizations of speakers' political intention.

It is significant to interpret the ideological traits and textual devices used in Trump's political speech in this time for three reasons: (a) the massive impact of Trump's speech in times of USA and other countries disability to stop the threat of coronavirus, (b) the time of electoral campaigns in the US, that may affect his campaign and (c) the last economic rigidity between USA and China as well as the current political debate about the source of coronavirus.

This analysis of this paper targets the way in which the discursive practices are formed and offered in Trump's speeches and the large context that formed the discourse (s). Based on this, we critically aim at analyzing Trump's political speech on the occasion of the latest threat of coronavirus with reference to establishing his ideological strategies and textual devices. By means of critical discourse analysis, we will determine or evaluate Trump's speech seriousness and responsibility to face and stop such a pandemic.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Discourse and Critical Discourse Analysis

Political discourse analysis (CDA) is noticeably not "a homogenous model, nor a school or a paradigm, but at most a shared perspective on doing linguistics, semiotics or discourse analysis". (van Dijk, 1993:131). The objective of CDA is to conceptualize language in practice. Thus, language is not used within a vacuum; there are certain cultural, social and psychological traits when people use language. CDA has also been viewed as the analysis of interweaved connection between language use and social power. In this perspective, we adopt Richardson's definition of CDA:

"Critical discourse analysts offer interpretations [and explanation] of the meanings of texts rather than just quantifying textual features and deriving meaning from this; situate what is written or said in the context in which it occurs, rather than just summarizing patterns or regularities in texts; and argue that textual meaning is constructed through an interaction between producer, text and consumer rather than simply being read off the page by all readers in exactly the same way" (2007, p 15).

The element by which CDA is distinguished from other forms of discourse analysis is being a *critical*. Being a critical implies revealing the connections and causes which are hidden. Therefore, it has become important to reveal the hidden things, since they are not apparent for those people who are involved and as a result they cannot be struggled against. Fairclough (1989, 1992) is one of the significant theoreticians of discourse field whose contributions have established critical discourse analysis as a field of research and the main concern of different dimensions of power. He views critical discourse analysis as a research scheme rather than approach of thought or a model of analysis.

Similarly and from a constructive point of view, CDA looks for the meaning which is hidden in or that was not said directly. In this regard, Richardson argues that “DA argues that textual meaning is constructed through an interaction between producer, text and consumer rather than simply being read off the page by all readers in exactly the same way” (2007, p 15). Thus, this justifies language as constructive device of communication, and thus a discourse is drawn within that language determining the representation of social actors. Based on this, we should follow a critical way for analysis. Thus, we should also provide more explanations and justifying why the discourse is interpreted certain way rather than only identifying its features.

Wodak (1989) states that “a critical analysis would consider a systematic description of a discourse”. Being critical discourse analyst, however, does not prevent from describing the discourse; its characteristics. But, this would call for more than this by going beyond describing. The analyst should also focus on how, why and what the procedures of a discourse have made the linguistic choices or have avoid doing so.

## 2.3 Discourses in Crisis

Crisis is viewed as a phenomenon in the real-world having the material and semiotic properties. There is no universal accepted definition of crisis due to but some would view crisis as there is disproportional popularity of the term crisis as well as its semantic vagueness. In addition, there is an overlapping between the term crisis, disaster, emergency and more abstract concepts such as threat, risk and insecurity. However, the Oxford English Dictionary provides a comprehensive definition of crisis:

“The point in the progress of a disease when an important development or change takes place which is decisive of recovery or death; the turning-point of a disease for better or worse; also applied to any marked or sudden variation occurring in the progress of a disease and to the phenomena accompanying it”.

Despite the fact that crisis leads to progressive and emancipatory changes, previous research confirm that avoiding, containing and resolving crisis are very necessary aims. However, there are some factors such as indecision, inertia or inaction and leaving the crisis take its course are all seen as politically and social unfair or economically costly. It is also noted that crises are different in terms of causes, intensity, duration, scope, impact, the number of the victims. However, crisis avoidance, containing, management and resolving are not only a matter of material and practical steps, but for their successful execution, they also crucially depend on the language performance, interaction and discourse.

Previous literature showed that the events, nature and severity of the nature influence on what is said or written which will in turn results in new discourse and reinforce existed ones; then the discourse produces certain unintended non-discursive outcomes (Fairclough, 2006).

The relationship between language and crisis discourse analysis has been shown by Fairclough (2006). He calls this relation as “the discursual and non-discursual moments of social relations and changes” like conflicts and natural disaster. This has been the driving force of excessive research program.

The economic crisis that happened from 2001 to 2008 when the bank system issued huge but artificially cheap credits, for example “a home for every American” or credit with only an ID” to address a large number of borrowers with very low interest rates, have been viewed as an economic crisis in the world. In the economy crisis, presidents of the US have used a diplomatic way to describe the crisis and to defend their policy to face such crisis if happened or to avoiding them. They use the passive voice to acknowledge its effects on countries. For example, Barak Obama said about the economic crisis happened in 2008:

“Homes have been lost; jobs shed; businesses shuttered. Our health care is too costly; our schools fail too many; and each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet”.

By these words, Obama confesses the effect of the economic crisis on America as many people have lost their jobs, unable to pay for neither health care nor house fees.

Crisis has been the main and legitimate object of research for CDA since the time of instability could bring the hidden power structures, secret programs or agendas and underlying ideologies of a country or a particular community or group. Further, a conceived moment of truth can be revealed by the potential crisis. In another way, the impact of crisis brings to the ground evident essence of the phenomenon to be in crisis (Starn 1971: 16).

However, as coronavirus has super-spread all over the world causing a huge number of mortalities and isolating people and communities from each other, it can be viewed as a crisis. What confirms its seriousness

and giving it the essence of crisis is the unexpected declaration by the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson: “I must level with you, the British public. Many more families are going to lose their loved ones before their time” <https://www.ft.com/content>

In the U.K., for example more than 1000 people have lost their lives meanwhile the rate of infection is rising up, and the doubling of huge number of new cases every a few days. In Italy and Spain, the unprecedented threat has sent their death tolls way beyond China’s—the virus’s original place.

Thus, it could be argued that coronavirus is a big crisis so that our main task here in this paper is to reveal if such crisis can bring to the essence the hidden power images, secret agendas, ideologies and even personal instabilities.

## 2.2 Conceptual and Ideological Basis

The theoretical framework adopted in this paper is *conceptual and ideological analysis*. The conceptual analysis is represented by the discursive social practice of Fairclough (1992) whereas the ideological one is based on a sociocognitive approach of van Dijk (1999). The former involves three stages of CDA:

- (a) The first stage includes the formal description and the conditions in which specific discourse was initiated.
- (b) The second stage involves the process of production and interpretation that reveals the relation between the text intended for analysis and the process of interaction viewing the text as a result of that interaction and a source of interpretation.
- (c) The third stage is concerned with explanation, i.e. the social affects that affect the process of producing and interpreting the discourse (Fairclough 1989).

The conceptual analysis depends largely on Fairclough model of discourse and power and discourse and hegemony in terms of interweaving the social practice and linguistic as well as micro and macro discourse analysis (Fairclough 1989). In addition some analytical part in this research is concerned with the likely interrelatedness of textual properties and power relations (textual analysis) which is also included in Fairclough’s conceptual work. Moreover, in our research we aim to deconstruct covert ideology (van Dijk, 1999) hidden in the discourse (written or spoken) in terms of the theoretical assumption that acknowledges the ultimate aim of critical discourse analysis which is to expose how texts are built so that possible and particular ideologies can be shown, expressed and delivered delicately and covertly. Accordingly, the main analytical tool we adopted is a mixed dimensional approach: linguistic text, discourse practice and the social practice (Fairclough 1989).

From the other hand, ideological discourse analysis is related to the use and abuse of language. This requires involving different elements and dimensions such as cognitive, social and political ones. The participant of the discourse is ideologically distinctive in terms of representing his/her belief, orientation and social attitudes. For example, when a politician talks or writes about political or social issue, he is expected to reflect and express his ideology views. Another significant notion in the ideological analysis is that of power and solidarity. Language has the contribution in establishing and maintaining power and solidarity supported by the sense that ideology is largely reflected in the struggles over power.

## 3. Methodology

This article is a critical discourse analysis of Trump’s speech on coronavirus spread delivered on 11<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 to explain the US policies and strategies and the protective measures to face such a threat. Generally, the speech delivered accounted 1281 words. Both Fairclough (1996) and van Dijk (2004) are adopted as a descriptive analytic model to achieve the aims of this article.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

### 4.1 Trump’s Outline Speech about Coronavirus

Trump’s speech on coronavirus is available on: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-speech.html>

Trump’s speech can be internally divided into nine parts:

1. *Admitting the crisis of coronavirus (Paragraph 1):* Trump is so direct to acknowledging the crisis of such global threat. “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. Today, the World Health Organization officially announced that this is a global pandemic”.

2. **The governmental preparation and willingness to defeat the virus.** “We have been in frequent contact with our allies, and we are marshalling the full power of the federal government and the private sector to protect the American people”.

3. **The practical activities taken to protect the American people.** “To keep new cases from entering our shores, we will be suspending all travel from Europe to the United States for the next 30 days”, “Additionally, last week, I signed into law an \$8.3bn funding bill to help CDC 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 very quickly”.

4. **Reducing the risk of coronavirus:** “the risk is very, very low. Young and healthy people can expect to recover fully and quickly if they should get the virus”.

5. **Assuring the strength of American Economics and giving recommendations for all American people in particular the elderly:** “we have the greatest economy anywhere in the world, by far. Our banks and financial institutions are fully capitalized and incredibly strong”

6. **Making a promise for providing financial support for people “who are quarantined and caring for others due to coronavirus”.** “I will soon be taking emergency action, which is unprecedented, to provide financial relief. This will be targeted for workers who are ill, quarantined, or caring for others due to coronavirus”

7. **Confessing the critical time in fighting against coronavirus:** “We are at a critical time in the fight against the virus”

8. **Concluding that his government is working seriously and America will be stronger after this challenge:** “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”.

9. **Closing the speech by thanking and blessing the American people:** “God bless you, and God bless America. Thank you.”

## 4.2 Conceptual and Ideological Analysis

The analysis procedure of the selected texts provides a connection between the speech as a whole and the social practices to decode covert ideology involved in the texts.

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. Today, the World Health Organization officially announced that this is a global pandemic”. (Trump, 2020).

Starting with the opening lines of his speech, Trump seems to be less inclusive particularly by addressing the Americans: *My Follow Americans* rather than *my follow citizens* that has been used previously by Obama and Bush. However, *my fellow American* contradicts with *our nation*, i.e. that *my fellow American* expresses the exclusiveness of only original American rather than other nationalities, immigrants and other ethnic groups whereas *our nation* implies unity of the people living in the USA. Trump did not acknowledge the presence of non-United states audiences watching or listening to him. Trump does not only acknowledge the seriousness of coronavirus and the extraordinary reaction of the Americans towards it, but also prepares the ground to criticize China as the source of the virus supporting this by the WHO announcing it as a “global pandemic”.

2- “We have been in frequent contact with our allies, and we are marshaling the full power of the federal government and the private sector to protect the American people. This is the most aggressive and comprehensive effort to confront a foreign virus in modern history”. (Trump, 2020).

Further, Trump acknowledges the practical steps his government took into account: contact with allies and their willingness to the compete power for protecting the American people. Words like *our allies* and *marshalling* imply the military sense and power that Trump has. He also acknowledges that coronavirus is the most dangerous health threat in the modern history. He believes that coronavirus came from another country; that is why he uses the phrase *a foreign virus*. It is a strategy of refusing and defeating the news on mass media that such virus is a result of military test.

3- *“From the beginning of time, nations and people have faced unforeseen challenges, including large-scale and very dangerous health threats. This is the way it always was and always will be. It only matters how you respond, and we are responding with great speed and professionalism”.*

From other side, Trump also minimizes the vulnerability of coronavirus by resorting to the history of other nations. By using over wording of great speed and professionalism, he uses self-positive evaluation on the government preparations and responding to the virus.

4- *“Because of the economic policies that we have put into place over the last three years, 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 resources to handle any threat that comes our way. This is not a financial crisis; this is just a temporary moment of time that we will overcome together as a nation and as a world”.*

5- *“I am announcing the following additional actions: I am instructing the Small Business Administration to exercise available authority to provide capital and liquidity to firms affected by the coronavirus”.*

Trump describes the policies he has adopted to develop the American economy as the most successful that made the American economy the greatest in the world. Trump defends his administration approach and trying to satisfy the people that such threat should not worry about so much. He further describes the aforementioned crisis earlier as *a temporary moment*. Such evasiveness aims at arriving to his favorite motto which is the strength and greatness of America, i.e. *“America is still strong”*. Trump floated economic sense in responses to coronavirus. This floating could lead us to argue that Trump is afraid from collapsing the American economy as would unable to meet the defensive measures against coronavirus.

6- *“The European Union failed to take the same precautions and restrict travel from China and other hotspots. As a result, a large number of new clusters in the United States were seeded by travellers from Europe”.*

Opposed to his previous speeches which were filled of negative evaluation for others, there is an only one negative evaluation strategy against the EU. In order to show his successful plan in facing coronavirus, Trump compares the impact of his precaution to the European Union criticizing it as being unable to ban and restrict travelling from China and other affected countries as the American government did. As a result of UE’s disability to take the necessary precautions and restrictions, there have been a large number of American cities affected by the people returning to America.

7- *“I will soon be taking emergency action, which is unprecedented, to provide financial relief. This will be targeted for workers who are ill, quarantined, or caring for others due to coronavirus. I will be asking Congress to take legislative action to extend this relief”.*

8- *“Effective immediately, the SBA 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 Congress to increase funding for this program by an additional \$50bn”.* Trump projects his seriousness and responsibility to face such crisis by adopting transparency. He keeps the American people updated about his plan *“I am asking congress to increase funding for this program by an additional 50 bn*. This indicates his action towards remedying the immediate situation.

### 5.3 Textual Analysis

#### 1. The use of pronouns: I – We

Many deictic expressions in particular pronouns have been encountered in Trump’s speech. Such referential pronouns make a dichotomy between the second plural pronouns *“We”* and the first person singular pronoun *“I”*. These two pronouns are repeated excessively in Trump’s speech. Quantitatively, there was no a huge different frequency in using them. However, *“We”* has been used more than *“I”*. It has been acknowledged that using *“we”* establishes solidarity and involvement whereas the pronoun *“I”* is largely associated with individualism. If we returned a little into previous research (Mohammed and Javadi, 2017), we found that Trump, in his electoral campaign has used the pronoun *I* more than we. This is, however attributed to the occasion of his speech. In his political campaign to win America as a president he had to show and distinguish himself as the best candidate. Depending on positive self-representation, he tries to distinguish himself as the leader who will save America and the world from this pandemic. On the contrary, in the time of crisis, Trump, as his predecessors, Obama and Bush for example, used the pronoun *“We”* to show that the coronavirus is the responsibility of all American and also to ascertain the teamwork executed by the government. The

presidents' use of *We* and *I* in general close the distance between them and the audience and also to make the audience feel with solidarity and involvement that they all face the same crisis.

- 1- "Tonight, I want to speak with you about our nation's"
- 2- "I am confident that by counting and continuing to take these tough measures"
- 3- "I have decided to take several strong but necessary actions"
- 4- "I met with the leaders of health insurance industry"
- 5- "last week, I signed into law an \$8.3bn funding bill to help CDC and other government agencies fight the virus and support vaccines"
- 6- "I will soon be taking emergency action, which is unprecedented, to provide financial relief".
- 7- "I will be asking Congress to take legislative action to extend this relief.
- 8- tonight I am announcing the following additional actions"
- 9- "I am instructing the Small Business Administration to exercise available authority to provide capital and liquidity to firms affected by the coronavirus".
- 10- "To this end, I am asking Congress to increase funding for this program by an additional \$50bn".
- 11- "I will be instructing the Treasury Department to defer tax payments, without interest or penalties"
- 12- "Finally, I am calling on Congress to provide Americans with immediate payroll tax relief. Hopefully they will consider this very strongly".
- 13- "I will never hesitate to take any necessary steps to protect the lives, health, and safety of the American people".
- 14- "I will always put the wellbeing of America first".

## The Use of We:

- 1- "We have been in frequent contact with our allies"
- 2- "We are marshalling the full power of the federal government and the private sector to protect the American people".
- 3- "we will significantly reduce the threat to our citizens"
- 4- "we will ultimately and expeditiously defeat this virus"
- 5- "we are responding with great speed and professionalism".
- 6- "we instituted sweeping travel restrictions on China"
- 7- "We declared a public health emergency and issued the highest level of travel warning on other countries as the virus spread its horrible infection".
- 8- "we have seen dramatically fewer cases of the virus in the United States than are now present in Europe"
- 9- "we will be suspending all travel from Europe to the United States for the next 30 days".
- 10- "Anything coming from Europe to the United States is what we are discussing".
- 11- "At the same time, we are monitoring the situation in China and in South Korea. And, as their situation improves".
- 12- "We are cutting massive amounts of red tape to make antiviral therapies available in record time. These treatments will significantly reduce the impact and reach of the virus".
- 13- "we will re-evaluate the restrictions and warnings that are currently in place for a possible early opening".
- 14- "We are moving very quickly".
- 15- "we are strongly advising that nursing homes for the elderly suspend all medically unnecessary visits".
- 16- "we have issued guidance on school closures, social distancing, and reducing large gatherings".
- 17- "Because of the economic policies that we have put into place over the last three years".
- 18- "we have the greatest economy anywhere in the world, by far".
- 19- "we will overcome together as a nation and as a world".
- 20- "We are at a critical time in the fight against the virus".
- 21- "We made a life-saving move with early action on China".
- 22- "Now we must take the same action with Europe. We will not delay"
- 23- "we can reduce the chance of infection, which we will".

24- *"we will significantly impede the transmission of the virus. The virus will not have a chance against us".*

25- *"We have the best economy, the most advanced healthcare, and the most talented doctors, scientists, and researchers anywhere in the world".*

26- *"We are all in this together. We must put politics aside, stop the partisanship, and unify together as one nation and one family".*

27- *"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".*

### 2. Using Over-wording

Trump uses a range of over wording to stress what he wants to convey to the audience. In terms of the seriousness of coronavirus, he employed a variety of adjectives such as

1. *"...this is a global pandemic"*
2. *"...the most aggressive and comprehensive effort to confront a foreign virus"*
3. *"...large-scale and very dangerous health threats"*
4. *"the virus spread its horrible infection"*
5. *"...are fully capitalized and incredibly strong"*
6. *"...at a historic low"*
7. *"...This vast economic prosperity"*
8. *"...as a nation and as a world"*
9. *"...we will significantly reduce the threat"*
10. *"...and we will ultimately and expeditiously defeat this virus".*

Trump's speech critically viewed as containing paradox in some points. At the very beginning he starts to assure the threat of coronavirus, but then he lessens the degree its seriousness. For its seriousness, it is seen a crisis *"the virus spread its horrible infection, "very dangerous health threats", and "global pandemic".* However, such dangerous infection is viewed as just a temporary moment and something normal many nations have faced such unforeseen viruses:

11. *"this is just a temporary moment of time".*

It could be argued that Trump's paradox in evaluating coronavirus seriousness leads us to wonder about his instability and fear towards such a serious crisis. It is overwhelming obvious that global and local crisis effect on the president's speech towards positive self-evaluation.

### 3. Repetition

It can be noted that Trump focused one the economic domain as a strategy to defeat coronavirus. There is a wide range of economic repeated words such as:

1. *"We have the best economy, the most advanced healthcare, and the most talented doctors, scientists, and researchers anywhere in the world".*
2. *"I am instructing the Small Business Administration to exercise available authority to provide capital and liquidity to firms affected by the coronavirus".*
3. *"we have the greatest economy anywhere in the world".*
4. *"This vast economic prosperity gives us flexibility, reserves, and resources to handle any threat that comes our way".*
5. *"the SBA will begin providing economic loans in affected states and territories".*
6. *"These low-interest loans will help small businesses overcome temporary economic disruptions caused by the virus".*
7. *"This action will provide more than \$200bn of additional liquidity to the economy".*
8. *"To this end, I am asking Congress to increase funding for this program by an additional \$50bn".*

By examining the quotations above, there is overwhelming evidence that the President Trump's vision and plans are centered on the notion of economy more than health emergencies such as medical support. A range of wording is presented to show a deplorable view of American economy status such as *"we have the greatest economy anywhere in the world, by far..."*, *"Our unemployment is at a historic low..."* *"This vast economic prosperity gives us flexibility, reserves, and resources to handle any threat that comes our way. This is not a financial crisis; this is just a temporary moment of time that we will overcome together as a nation and as a*



world". By such wording, Trump tries to distinguish himself and his administration as the safe guard of America in the time of crises.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has focused on the ideological and textual content involved in Trump's speech on the threat of coronavirus. The ideologies embodied in the speech are a property of linguistic structures and social events. It is overwhelming obvious that global crisis effects only the self-positive evaluation. There was no space and time for him to negatively evaluate others since they are not a part of such natural disease or outbreak. It is also concluding that Trump was successful in reinforcing his ideology by adopting directness and economic attributes along with explicit promises. The general, basic theme of Trump's discourse is the need to be dependent on the American economic, to be enthused and empowered by the strength the economy that should be invested to be as a resort for defeating coronavirus.

This article is certainly not intended to show that his speech is acceptable, but instead it aimed to reveal the adopted language style used to unmask the ideologies implied.

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