

# How Persuasive the Presidential Speeches are During the Covid-19 Crisis: A Discourse Analysis Study of Some Selected Presidential Speeches

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## Abstract

*Since its outbreak in Wuhan, People's Republic of China, at the end of 2019, covid-19 poses exceptional challenges on everybody's life including the presidents. The presidential speeches were similar in essence, which is introducing the reality of the severity of this unprecedented crisis, but these speeches are different in how persuasive they are. Consequently, some of these speeches appeared persuasive, while others revealed vacillations in the reassurance of peoples. Therefore, two political speeches are chosen arbitrarily to be investigated in the study which is a discourse analysis one. Among the various strategies adopted by the President of Ukraine: Zelensky and the Indian Prime minister: Modi's breaking the conversational maxims will be concentrated on which requires applying Grice's model. The obtained results from the quantitative and qualitative analysis revealed the seriousness of the speeches of Covid-19 and their distinction from what is traditionally familiar.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, discourse analysis, presidential language, Grice's maxims. Implicature

## 1. Introduction

The core of the presidential language has changed since Covid-19 "coronavirus disease of 2019" comes to existence. Until this moment there is no vaccination for this virus which spreads with frightful quickness between people, and the result is millions of infected people worldwide (MphOnline, 2020). From this point, Wodak (2001) explains that, by language used by politicians, power is dominated to reveal the intended ideologies. In political speeches, power is the faculty of controlling others' attitudes; hence, persuasion is the means of this power. In turn, propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1999: 231). Mesthrie, et al (2000: 329) remarks that a key element of propaganda language is emotional language. Propaganda is a means of persuasion as the same aims are pursued by it, but the reliance of propaganda is on untrue information and other unethical tactics (Kolenda, 2013:2). Based on that, Mulholland (2014:xv) believes that manipulative approaches will fall into the category of propaganda.

### **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

Lockdown and travel restrictions have been put by most of the countries Due to Covid-19 severity. In their attempts in persuading their people to follow special instructions of the new way of life, presidents could break the maxims of conversation. But persuasion might fall in the category of propaganda according to the speaker's intention and the information presented which might result in misunderstanding.

### **1.2. Aim of the Study:**

The study aims at investigating the president of Ukraine: Zelensky's, and The prime minister of India: Modi's breaking of the maxims of conversation in addressing their people concerning COVID-19 pandemic, and to what extent the presidents' ability of persuasiveness of the results of the COVID-19 pandemic unprecedented situation is revealed in particular, and is corresponding their ideology in general.

### **1.3. Questions of the Study**

To achieve the aim of the study, the following questions are set :

- 1- To what extent do president Zelensky and Prime Minister Modi break the maxims of conversation to create specific implicature.
- 2- Are President Zelensky and Prime Minister Modi aware that breaking the maxims of conversation might lead to persuasiveness or other unknown results.

### **1.4. Significance of the Study**

The proficiency in non-observing the maxims of conversation is one of the various techniques manipulated in creating specific ideology. The core of the attention of academic and political institutions should be focused on the reliability of the breaking of the maxims of conversation and its favorable and unfavorable consequences.

### **1.5. Limits of the Study**

- 1- Only two presidents' speeches are chosen arbitrarily out of all presidents who address their people about COVID-19.
- 2- The focus of the study is on violating Grice's maxims only.

- 3- The pandemic has not yet reached its end until this moment. The results cannot be generalized for how Covid-19 completely affected the presidents' language but only of a specific period of time.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Previous Studies**

The maxims which are flouted is investigated by Szczepanski (2014) by applying Grice's cooperative principle and implicatures on the television series *Firefly* to find out the influence of flouting maxims. It was in the field of entertainment and discovering elements of comedy. In this study, the same model is applied but the concentration is completely different which requires a completely different data. The essential role of comedy in human beings' lives cannot be underestimated. But an unprecedented event such as Covid-19 and its impact on the presidential language on which the destinies of peoples depend requires unremitting efforts to transcribe presidential speeches that could be considered historical and fatal.

### **2.2. Persuasion and Politics**

Power is one of the main concerns of politics. What is meant by power is the power for making decisions and for controlling other people's values and attitudes. Thamas and Wareing (2000:34) see that controlling the discourse is the essential means in controlling others' ideas and actions by using language. Therefore, through skillful use of rhetoric, politicians achieved successful persuasion attempts with their audience (Jones and Peccei, 2004:71).

The ancient Greece philosopher 'Aristotle' introduced the first comprehensive theory of rhetorical discourse" (Dillard and Pfau, 2002), and in the field of rhetoric, the main concern of persuasion is persuasion in political contexts. (Hogan, 2013).

Fairclough(2015) demonstrates when the text makes 'natural' assumptions about the audience's values and beliefs, about what is 'normal' or 'common sense' then the text is persuasive. In addition to ideologies, emotion, as the 17th century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza wrote, has a significant power in persuasion by making inclination in the mind to prefer one thing rather than another (Spinoza and Curley, 1994). Garcia-Pastor's (2008:105,111) declares that the power practiced by the politicians in their interactions is "persuasive power" for gaining the addressee's persuasion. In the context of political persuasion, what appears to be a metaphorical use of language, is more than inappropriate use of words. (Macagno and Walton, 2014, p. 21). Therefore, it is worth mentioning that, according to Harden(2001: 41, 212), the key pragmatic

strategy in affecting persuasion is breaking Grice's maxims since they allows the speaker to communicate more than what is actually said.

### **2. 3. Cooperative Principle Theory**

The American philosopher, Paul Grice, is the first who coined Cooperative Principle (henceforth CP) theory in order to provide the appropriate interpretation of the added meaning that is not stated semantically, i.e., implicature (Kotthoff, 2006:271)

The "cooperative principle" runs as follows: *"make your conversational contribution such as required, at the stage, at which it occurs by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged"* (Grice, 1989: 26).

Grice is the first in declaring that the CP does work in the actual use of language and the absence of CP would result in breakdown in communication. (Grice, 1989: 26).

### **2.4. Conversational Maxims**

In addition to CP, Grice introduces four conversational maxims to be followed in an effective communication and interpreting the implicature in utterances (Thomas, 1995: 63).

#### **A. Maxim of Quantity**

According to this maxim, the right amount of information is required. It includes of two sub-maxims:

- 1- "Make your contribution as informative as required" (for the current purposes of exchange).
- 2- "Do not make your contribution more informative than is required".

#### **B. Maxim of Quality**

The right information should be provided.

- 1- "Do not say what you believe to be false".
- 2- "Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence".

#### **C. Maxim of Relevance**

The relevance to the topic of conversation is demanded.

#### **D. Maxim of Manner**

The focus of this maxim is on 'how' what is said is to be said.

- 1- "avoid obscurity of expression"

2-“avoid ambiguity”

3-“be brief”(avoid unnecessary prolixity)

4-“be orderly” (Grice, 1989: 27).

### **2.5. Non-Observance of the Maxims**

The non-observance of the conversational maxims will result in one of the significant instruments in persuasion which is implicature (Cockcroft, 2013:46)

Breaking a maxim is the result of the failure of observing a maxim. In breaking the maxims, the speaker obliges the listener for making inferences (Levinson, 1983: 104-109). For conveying implicit meaning, breaking a maxim is the prototypical way (Grundy, 1995: 41). There are five ways of breaking the maxims:

#### **A. Flouting the Maxims**

Flouting is the result of exploiting a maxim by the speaker with the intention of generating an implicature. It involves encouraging the listener for looking for deeper meaning without deceiving the listener. (Thomas, 1995: 64)

#### **B. Violating the Maxims**

Violating differs from flouting in the speaker's intention in misleading the hearer by giving true information with false implication. (ibid, 65)

#### **C. Opting-out of the Maxims**

Opting out of a maxim is the speaker's cooperating unwillingly with declaring this unwillingness. (ibid, 72)

#### **D. Infringing the Maxims**

It is the speaker's failure in observing a maxim without the intention to generate an implication due to some reasons such as linguistic differences. (ibid, 74)

#### **E. Suspending the Maxims**

Suspending a maxim is not understood as non-observance of a maxim by the listener due to ethical norms (ibid, 76).

### 3. Analysis and Results Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the Ukrainian president: Zelensky's speech and the Indian Prime minister: Modi's speech reveal that flouting the maxims is the only exploitation of the maxims that is used. The results are shown in the following tables:

**Table (1) the percentages of observance and non-observance of the conversational maxims in the both presidents' speeches**

	Flouting Grice's maxims	Non- Observance of Grice's Maxims	Total
<b>President Zelensky's</b>	24,5%	75,5%	100%
<b>Prime Minister Modi</b>	10,8%	89,2%	100%

**Table (2) the percentages of flouting Grice's maxims in Ukrainian president: Zelensky's speech and the Indian Prime minister: Modi's speech.**

	Maxim of Quantity	Maxim of Quality	Maxim of Manner	Maxim of Relation
<b>President Zelensky</b>	55,6%	1%	12,8%	30,6%
<b>Prime Minister Modi</b>	26,4%	1%	37,4%	35,2%

- Through breaking the conversational maxims, the two presidents add another meanings to their speeches but with different percentages; the president of Ukraine's non-observance of the Grice's maxims comes with (75,5%) percentage, and the Indian prime minister with (89,2%) percentage.
- The only way of failing to observe the Grice's maxims by the two presidents is *flouting the maxims* since there is no intention of deceiving and misleading the masses in a Covid-19 situation.
- The Ukrainian president chose to dwell on the facts of resistance to the Covid-19 with flouting the quantity maxim in (55,6%) percentage. As for the Indian prime minister, the breaking of quantity maxim comes with (24,4%) percentage focusing on showing off the Indian contribution to the world in Covid-19 crisis. Such as :

*“The aircraft delivered over 12 million masks, as well as hundreds of thousands of suits and glasses”.*  
(President Zelensky’s speech in 23 April 2020).

*“This vision of India turning crisis into opportunity is going to prove equally effective for our resolve of self-reliant India”.*  
(Indian prime minister in 12 May 2020)

- Maxim of quality is not observed by the two presidents in equal percentage (1%). The loss of evidence characterizes one utterance for each of them; President Zelensky did not accompany his following utterance with irrefutable evidence

*“And these days Ukraine begins clinical trials of the drug to combat COVID-19. There are preliminary findings from our scientists and manufacturers that this drug can be very effective. They have every reason to believe that it can significantly reduce or completely neutralize the risk of death from complications that coronavirus infection causes to the human body”.*  
(President Zelensky’s speech in 23 April 2020).

- Regarding the Indian Prime minister: Modi, the limitation of the effect of Covid-19 crisis to be only on ‘India’ creates illogical exaggeration since Covid-19 influence the whole world without exception. In general, the non-observance of quality maxim fall in the category of propaganda since the dependence of propaganda is on untrue information.

*“Such a big disaster is a signal for India”.*  
(Indian prime minister in 12 May 2020)

The core of the Indian prime minister’s speech is on the Indian self-reliance which might be ambiguous enough to be mentioned in the middle of Covid-19 crisis. Breaking the maxim of manner with (37,4%) percentage, the Indian prime minister achieved a higher percentage than the Ukrainian president who satisfied with (12,8%) percentage. The ambiguity in the president of Ukraine’s speech is centered on his people’s safety in Covid-19 crisis when he wishes that his peoples’ 36.6; this vague number is an indication on the normal body temperature in Celsius.

*“I wish you 36.6”*

(President Zelensky’s speech in 23 April 2020).

*“The state of the world today teaches us that a "Self-reliant India" is the only path .It is said in our scriptures - Aish: Pantha: That is - self-sufficient India”.*

(Indian prime minister in 12 May 2020).

- The Indian prime minister has the highest percentage in failing to observe the relation maxim which is (34,5%) while the Ukrainian president's percentage is (30, 6%). With these similar proportions, the two presidents touched on issues unrelated to Covid - 19. Implicitly, these issues are considered an extension of Covid-19, or that an indication that their responsibility as presidents requires inevitability of raising such topics and Covid-19 should not overshadow fateful issues.

*“And finally. April 23 is declared International Day of English and Spanish by the UN. Now, while at home, we can “pump” our foreign language skills and knowledge throughout the country. The day will come when all this will end and foreign tourists will be able to visit us. Let's improve our foreign language skills during quarantine and welcome our guests with a clean and impeccable “Welcome to Ukraine”.*

*(President Zelensky's speech in 23 April 2020).*

*“Friends, we have been hearing since the last century that the 21st century belongs to India”.*

*(Indian prime minister in 12 May 2020).*

#### **4. Conclusion**

- The element of surprise in the emergence of the Covid-19 has created a kind of spontaneity in the presidential language away from the embellishment and the prior intention to present the facts.
- Uniquely, in the situation of Covid-19 pandemic, presidential speeches are not devoid of propaganda, but with proportions barely noticed.
- Methods of persuasion did not contradict the countries' economic, historical and social reality.

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