

## Discourse Analysis of Selected Kenyan Leader's Utterances During COVID-19 Media Briefings

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### ABSTRACT

When Corona virus was discovered in Wuhan China, many countries, Kenya included, did not have a lot of information about the virus. Despite that, the citizens were looking up to the government together with other leaders to provide information about the virus. In Kenya, after sometime, leaders started issuing statements about the virus with an intention of providing public education to help contain the virus. Some of these were government officers while others were members of parliament and other pressure groups that deal with human rights. The purpose of this research was to look at the way the Kenyan leaders used language to communicate to the masses about Covid-19. The approach used was that of Critical Discourse analysis (CDA). Chunks of utterances from selected leaders that appeared in a Kenyan newspaper *Daily Nation* between 1<sup>st</sup> April and 30<sup>th</sup> April were analyzed using CDA parameters. The findings revealed that the utterances showed underlying social issues and disparities together with power relations and domination. A number of the utterances did not take into consideration the needs of the people or even the effects of the statements on the masses. Some appeared to give orders to people that did not resonate well with the masses. There is need for the leaders making statements to be more considerate, educative and diplomatic in their approach to make their messages more effective and to obtain the desired result. This could be done by allowing those who are experts in a given field to take charge in disseminating information to the populace.

### 1. Introduction

On 31st of December 2019, there were reports of an outbreak of the novel corona virus and COVID-19 in Wuhan China. In most African countries including Kenya, this sounded so distant. It did not appear real and therefore many people did not take it seriously. However, the period between the outbreak and the time it took the first case to be reported in Kenya was long enough to fuel speculation and theories about its origin, its effects and many other myths. Some of the most common were that the disease did not have any effect on Africans and that their immunity is much higher than other races, another was that the climatic conditions in Africa are unsuitable for the survival of the virus.

Most of these theories came about because the information about the virus was scanty. This made it possible for most people to believe myths by bloggers and rumors from people who knew nothing about the virus. This was understandable because even in areas where the virus was first reported it took time for the authorities there to understand exactly what the virus was and how to deal with it.

When the first case of Covid -19 was reported in Kenya on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2020, people had a lot of information but not all of it was necessarily correct information. The government officials then had double work to do, the first was to try and undo the

damage that the rumors and false information had caused and secondly, to replace it with correct information about the virus for the benefit and safety of her citizens. This was not an easy task. The tool that was employed was language. There was therefore a need to examine the way this language was used by leaders to communicate information about the virus. Most of those who were tasked with this responsibility were government operatives but there were also politicians and some non-governmental organizations. Although this pandemic was a medical issue, not all government officials who were tasked with packaging information and passing it on to the masses were medical experts. There was no homogenous manner in which information was passed. Different personalities had their own way of passing information to people. These utterances were widely reported by the main media houses in Kenya. The briefings were attended by news reporters as they served both as national briefings and press conferences.

The discourses used in this study were taken from the reports of *Daily Nation* a Kenyan newspaper which has a daily circulation of about 170,000 copies. For purposes of the analysis only those areas where the leaders were quoted have been considered and not where the opinion of the news reporter is included.

This paper examines selected utterances of Kenyan leaders during briefings on the status of the disease in the country in the month of April 2020.

## 2. Literature Review

Most experts in discourse analysis agree that what people say usually has meaning beyond the traditional meaning that we know. This is because discourse usually has a societal and cultural context. When put in a social cultural context, words can have meanings that are different depending on the dictates of the situation

Gee (2001) notes that Language has a magical property: when we speak or write we craft what we have to say to fit the situation or context in which we are communicating. But, at the same time, how we speak or write creates that very situation or context. It seems, then, that we fit our language to a situation or context. During the press briefings by the Kenyan leaders for example, attempts were made to fit whatever they were saying about Corvid-19 into situations as they kept changing from time to time. This considering the fact that as information about the virus was filtering in from different parts of the country, there was need for information to be tailored to fit the situation.

Discourse analysis is a research method used in studying written or spoken language and how that language relates to social context (Luo 2019). The emphasis is placed on how language can be used to build trust, evoke emotions and even manage conflicts. It is worth noting that in this study, the conflicts were in the minds of the recipients of the discourse in question. During the briefings it appeared that the officials had an idea of what they thought the recipients knew and were making an attempt to change that view.

Discourse Analysis looks at running conversation in speaker and listener-both context and what is being said. According to Van Dijk (1993) it is about real language, real speakers in real situations. It concentrates on analyzing large chunks of language rather than pieces like words and phrases as is commonly done in grammatical analysis.

Further Critical discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary theory and method which looks at the way individuals and institutions use language. It operates on a premise that interpretation of meanings of texts and utterances goes beyond the textual meaning to the interaction between the producer and text and the consumer. The idea is that real meanings are hidden behind words and there is need to give more explanations on why the discourse is the way it is rather than just interpret texts as it were. Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory (Van Dijk 1993).

Owala (2013) observes that CDA illuminates ways in which dominant forces in the society construct versions of reality that favor their interests. This was shown in a study of how leaders from various parts of the world issued statements on terrorism that basically served their interests, to demonstrate to the governed that they were able to protect them. The relevance of that study can be seen in the context of the government officials who wield power giving instructions on the kind of behavior they expect in order to combat COVID-19 disease. These statements are meant to create an impression that they are protecting the interest of the masses. However, some of the citizens engage in economic activities that make the orders unfavorable to them, for example those in small and medium size enterprises. Some of these people are found in grocery markets, flea markets and motorcycle riders commonly known in Kenya as '*boda boda*' a term used to refer to motorcycle taxi business in Kenya. When orders are given not much care is taken to ensure mitigative measures for this class of people. The social class referred to puts them in a position of the dominated as they have very little say over what happens way of influencing policy direction.

In many cases utterances of the government operatives do not give room for diverse views about the matter in question since most of those they address do not have discourse access. In its analysis, CDA addresses such social problems.

Bird (2011) in his investigation of the rhetorical style in President Clinton's speeches states that "Defining and constructing reality is a fundamental function of epideictic rhetoric; when an upsetting or confusion event has occurred, audiences will often turn to public figures for a definition and construction of a reality that will help make sense of what has happened". This assertion is relevant to this study as most of the citizens had to look up to public figures in Kenya to be able to understand what Covid-19 was.

Van Dijk (1993) avers CDA helps in understanding the nature of social power and dominance. CDA is important because managing the minds of others is essentially a function of talk and text. When one listens carefully to the briefings of the leaders, on the face value, they may not appear bluntly manipulative, they may appear natural and intended to benefit the masses yet inequality and domination are inherent in the briefings. This can be seen by looking for themes within a given content in the discourse whereupon emphasis is put on authoritarianism that is inherent in the discourse. CDA seeks how discursive practice within societal structures secure and maintain power over people.

According to Wodak (2006), CDA is fundamentally interested in analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination power and control when these are manifested in language. In other words, CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, constituted and legitimized by language use.

Van Dijk (2001) explains the principles and aims of CDA as

- Understanding and comprehension of social issues
- Analysis of the complex relationships between dominance and discourse
- Analysis of fundamental clauses, conditions and consequences of social issues
- Relationships between text, talk, social cognition, power, society and culture

The critical targets in CDA are the power elites because in retrospect they are the ones who have discourse access through the media and other avenues. Using those avenues, they seek to control social issues and exercise dominance through language. The power elites basically take charge of almost any situation and manipulate it as much as possible for their own benefit. In the case of Covid-19 in Kenya, they attempted to take control of the phenomena even though some of them did not have much knowledge about the virus.

### **3. Methodology**

The method used in this study was a critical discourse analysis of the selected utterances. The excerpts have been identified from speeches of leaders during the media briefings and thereafter a critical analysis done using the parameters of CDA to show how social power and dominance that emanate from the discourse. An attempt has also been made to show how surveillance and enforcement of that domination is implied in the discourse presented. Some of these are in the form of speech acts especially where the police and the president have given orders.

Chunks that are of a similar theme have been put together for the purposes of ease of analysis. There is also an attempt to explain the possible implications of the utterance under analysis and its effect on the recipients.

The period under study was chosen because at the beginning of these briefings, the government officials gave a raft of measures which according to them were aimed at 'ensuring the virus spread is checked'. The month of April was very close to the date the first incidence of the disease was reported in Kenya which was March 13<sup>th</sup> 2020. This means there were several statements given through the media with an intention of reaching the populace.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

*C-1 I am the one who said that the Kilifi deputy governor should be arrested I wish he gets 10 years in prison to serve as a lesson for his negligence. How can a leader fly from Germany and start infecting people in Nairobi and Kilifi? President Uhuru Daily Nation. April 8 2020 pg.2*

C-1 was a reaction of the President of Kenya to information that one of the county officials had travelled abroad and came back to the country. He mingled with people without taking necessary precautions required so that he does not infect others.

The statement exhibits three main issues:

(i) His authority is emphasized- the president is clearly emphasizing the fact that he has authority over everybody else in the country and challenging those who might think that he is weak and therefore cannot deal with them. According to the law, he does not have the power to decide the jail term for any crime, that is the prerogative of the law courts. However, it can be seen here that he is trying to address the courts albeit through the backdoor to try and influence what the courts may have to decide about the case. He is trying to verbalize his disciplinary power and expect the courts to enforce it. He shows that he has the power and he is in charge. This is an affirmation of power relations a key element in CDA.

(ii) Taking credit for the action taken against the deputy governor – It is well known that the deputy governor was arrested by the police. The president is not the police. If it was the president who ordered his arrest then with time it would have come out without him necessarily saying it. The order to arrest the deputy governor was not made in a public forum because if it was people would have known. The question that comes to mind here is, who the president meant his message for. It is clear it was made to whip up public confidence in him by making the masses who are under his dominion see that he took action to defend them against a threat to their lives. The aim was to score political points. While the statement sounds harmless, it is certainly manipulative, it is aimed at controlling the minds of the recipients of the discourse.

(iii) Finally it is meant to instill fear among those who might dare to do what the deputy governor did, it sets bounds and prescribes what might happen to those who dare.

**C-2** *Police officers have been asking Kenyans to wear face masks. We are going to take another step to make sure the law is followed but before police enforce the regulations, I appeal to Kenyans to take the initiative to wear the masks, it is no longer an advisory as the rules have been gazetted. Hilary Mutyambai. (Inspector general of police) Daily Nation April 15 2020 pg. 7*

This utterance was made by the inspector general of police. This statement is a classic example of advice but laced with threats drawn from the power the speaker wields as a result of his position in the society. The masks which are the subject here were meant to protect people from the virus. It would have been easier for them to understand if they were well educated on the matter. However here comes the inspector general with the pronouncement “We are going to take another step to make sure the law is followed”. That statement effectively changes the purpose of wearing the mask from being protective to a legal requirement. He goes on to add that “it is no longer an advisory”. On the face value, it can be said that the beneficiary here are the people. Despite that the method used to ‘help’ them reduces them to people of little intelligence who must be controlled through language (orders) which are then enforced by the police. The net effect here was that people wore masks out of fear of the police not because they thought the masks were useful for protection of their health. Thus, in this case language has been used to express power and authority but with disastrous consequences.

The following chunks, C-3 and C-4 were uttered by two members of the Kenyan legislative assembly who appeared to have diverse views on whether it was necessary to have a lockdown to control the virus spread or not.

**C-3** *What happens in the next two weeks which are critical will force the government to take some drastic measures regardless of economic implications because life comes first. John Mbadi, (Suba MP minority leader). Daily Nation April 7 2020 pg.5*

This was a member of parliament who under normal circumstances presents the views of the people. The background of this discourse is that a lockdown was unpopular because people felt it was going to hurt SMEs while it would not have much effect on the more privileged members of the society. It is clear from this discourse that the legislative assembly member opted to join his social group and ignored the needs of the masses majority of who he represents in parliament. While stating the government position, he takes a role that does not belong to him in a democratic set up because he was an opposition member of the legislative assembly and not a government spokesman. His stance reflects the social and cultural context in the sense that those who are well endowed in the society find it easier to support a world view that is popular among people within the social ladder they belong to. This comes out in the way they use language. For the masses there is no difference between economic activities and life, it is their economic activities that they value. They would rather eat and die of disease than die of hunger. A member of parliament is able to store enough food to last a long time and would therefore not be affected by a lockdown. This is a clear example of how language can be used to perpetuate social domination.

**C-4** *A lockdown will be disastrous to the economy, we are looking at over two million people in Nairobi who live from hand to mouth who will be affected. Pkosing David (Pokot South MP) Daily Nation April 7 2020 pg5*

The discourse in C-4 also came from a member of the legislative assembly. A careful examination of that discourse shows that the stand he took is contrary to his colleague in C-3. The discourse is carefully constructed to make the speaker appear to be

defending the masses. He specifically refers to over two million people in Nairobi who live from hand to mouth. It is instructive to note that the speaker does not represent a constituency in Nairobi which he is referring to. This statement is calculated to make the speaker appear nationalistic. This is consistent with the behavior of most politicians as most of the time they use language to construct realities in a manner that favors them. This illustrates how discursive practice within societal structures secure and maintain power over people. The intention of the speaker is to present himself as a defender of the people.

**C-5** *The curfew poses a great and imminent danger to the general health and safety of Kenyans, particularly the poor and vulnerable members of the society as it is disproportionate and draconian in a free and democratic society. Law society of Kenya Daily Nation April 17 2020 pg.2*

This statement was given by the Law Society of Kenya during a brief to the press. This is the organization that brings together lawyers who are qualified to practice law in Kenya. The context of the statement was that a curfew had been imposed by the government to limit movement in the evening. This curfew was running between 7.00 p.m. to 5.00 a.m. East African standard time. The statement contains conclusions drawn from legal premises that are not explained in the statement. It can be seen that it is a populist statement that was meant to appeal to the masses. It specifically referred to the poor and vulnerable without giving specifics on how it posed danger to their general health and safety. However, within the societal context, the intention of the statement was meant to emphasize the relevance of the legal fraternity in defending the rights of the downtrodden in society. It gets clearer by looking at the authority that gave the curfew order which is the government and the implementing agencies which are the police, the courts and the warders in case someone is arrested convicted for violating the order and taken to prison. The statement was meant to challenge that authority. When examined carefully it sets an out of court preamble for a legal tussle should the lawyers find themselves defending those arrested. It is rallying the lawyers in the country to take a common stand on the matter. The statement was therefore meant for the ears of the court officials-magistrates and judges-with an intention of tilting the legal scale. The construction of reality in this case has been given a version that favor the interest of lawyers.

**C-6** *Fellow Kenyans I do not want to scare you, but with the figures I have just read to you, the number is likely to rise. It's important to note that this virus does not move by itself. It is moved by you and I. We must change our behavior and attitude if we have to cut the transmission of the virus. But as of now, I urge you to take extreme precautionary measures wherever you are by observing the highest standards of hygiene, social distancing as well as any other measures the government has announced to you. Mutahi Kagwe (Cabinet Secretary Health) Daily Nation April 3 2020 pg. 1*

Kagwe was the minister for health in the Kenyan government and was tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that the spread of the virus was limited as much as possible. The statement starts with words that give a clue to the intentions of the speaker. Within the Kenyan population at that time, there was a feeling that the virus was not real and even if it was, the numbers were deliberately manipulated to achieve certain goals that were not disclosed to the people. People did not seem to trust government ministers because of diverse reasons. One of them was that some of them kept holding political meetings that did not seem to respect the protocols that the government had put in place making them doubt the sincerity of government statements. Secondly, they felt that not enough information was available including those who had contracted the virus. It is against the law in Kenya to give such disclosures especially of patients without their express authority. This law did not help much as it contributed to lack of trust.

Despite the ministers opening statement, that he did not want to scare people, that was actually the real intention. In the absence of enough information and lack of trust from the masses, the presentation was carefully manipulated. First present figures that appear scary to shock the people, then follow with a statement that appeared educative and appealing but which a close analysis show was purely manipulative. This is captured in the fourth sentence *We must change our behavior and attitude if we have to cut the transmission of the virus*. The word *must* in that statement is not an appeal but an attempt to assert his authority and show his dominance over the people he was addressing. In a country like Kenya the virus spread could not be stopped by authoritarian orders but by public education, the reason being that the government machinery is not sufficient to enforce such orders given the ratio of the population to the police.

**C-7** *The youth can organize themselves into groups and assist our security agencies in ensuring Kenyans maintain social distance among other measures we have announced in the fight against this disease. Do not go home, you might kill your parents or grandparents who are elderly. Statistics show that the young people are the ones contracting the disease and then passing it on to the elderly. Mutahi Kagwe (Cabinet Secretary of Health) Daily Nation April 5 2020 pg.2*

In C-7 the same minister in his brief made a statement that appears to be a realization that there is need for more than just security agencies to contain the virus. He is appealing to the youth to come out as volunteers. However, in the same discourse he is urging the youth not to go home because they may kill their parents and grandparents. From this statement one would think that the youth are completely detached from the rest of the society. Where and how would the youth volunteer to work if they are not supposed to go home? In the concluding sentence, the minister states a medical fact but the communication from this discourse is completely muddled. This leads to the question, why was the statement made? It would appear that the minister was merely fulfilling his political obligation, to show the authority the government has over her people even if what he had to say did not come out to be useful. In the context of discourse access, the people he was addressing (the youth) lacked access and therefore could not put the questions to him or seek clarification. The flow of the discourse is from top to bottom in a hierarchical relationship. Government official giving directions to the citizens irrespective of whether those directions are tenable.

**C-8** *The virus is now domiciled across the length and the breadth of our republic from down South in Kilifi to Mandera in the north and from the west in Vihiga to Kitui in the east. Mercy Mwangangi (Chief Administrative Secretary - Health) Daily Nation April 10 2020 pg. 4*

This statement originated from a deputy minister for health. This deputy minister is an expert in health matters. In her statement, she merely states the facts as they were and leaves her audience to make a decision on how to behave. The places she mentioned are found in different parts of the country. She intelligently uses the compass direction to make her audience realize the extent of the spread but she does not issue orders or threats as was in the case of C-6. She does this with the hope that the moment people realize that the virus had permeated all corners of the country, then their response will come as a result of the desire to avoid actions that can make it possible to avoid the virus rather than being coerced.

**C-9** *We want to make it clear today that contracting corona virus is not a crime. All of us have a potential risk of contracting the disease. That is why we have come up with measures and guidelines to ensure we all can avoid contracting the disease. Mercy Mwangangi (Chief Administrative Secretary - Health) Daily Nation April 23 2020 pg.5*

This discourse although appearing to be addressing the masses is actually not meant for them. It is meant to correct the impression her seniors had created. At some point, there was stigmatization about the virus to the extent that people were threatened with forced quarantine, being locked up in isolation centers and police stations. The net effect of that approach was that people did not want to come out to be tested, go to hospitals or even have their temperature read for fear of being forced into quarantine. This was therefore a form of damage control and an attempt to change the attitude of the people about the virus. The deputy minister is aware of power relations and therefore is careful to bring out her statement in such a manner that it does not appear to openly contradict her bosses-the minister for health and the president. But in the discourse, it can be seen that she is aware previous statements about the virus appeared to criminalize the disease. Note in C-1 the president ordering the arrest of a deputy governor who had the virus.

**C-10** *In old town, the houses are closely built and if one is affected the neighbor is in danger. some people are not following safety protocols to combat the virus. I believe if we follow these safety measures well, we will minimize the spread. Ms. Hawaa Mohammed, (health expert). Daily Nation April 23 2020 Pg. 5*

This is a statement emanating from a leader but who is also a health expert. It can be seen that there is a striking similarity with the deputy ministers' approach. She points out to the closeness of the houses in Old Town Mombasa without demeaning them but showing that neighbors can be affected because of the closeness of the buildings. When she is talking about people who are not following safety protocols, she is simply making an observation without condemning anybody. She finally offers advice which in her opinion will minimize the spread. The attitude and approach in this discourse could probably be more useful in changing the attitude of the recipients towards the measures put in place to limit the spread of the virus.

## 5. Conclusion

The study has shown that discourse access over matters such as Covid-19 is a preserve of those with power in the society. In this case most of the statements came from politicians, the police, the minister for health. In some cases, discourse access was also given to those with expert power, specialists in health issues. While the masses were generally ignored, it is not because they do not have an opinion but rather because they cannot get access to the means like newspapers to make their opinion heard. This creates a situation where solutions to social problems do not necessarily emanate from those with the problems but from those who have the ability to speak and be quoted. Following that, it means such solutions can at times be irrelevant.

The power relations at play in the analyzed texts show that the dominance that those in authority try to exercise can at times obscure the public good. In the texts it appeared that the president, the inspector of police and even one member of parliament used their authority to threaten people who needed convincing rather than threatening. They were basically forcing their opinion on the people in a matter that needed expertise which they obviously did not have. This even led to criminalization of a medical issue. In the same domain of power and domination, those who appeared to be on the side of the dominated did this for popularity purposes. As can be seen in the comments of Mr. Pkosing and the law society of Kenya. It is clear from the analysis that the health experts did much better in managing Covid-19 issue than those with political power. This is important in the sense that, moving forward such issues should be entrusted to those with expert power rather than political operatives. That will make easier to manage a pandemic.

The inconsistencies that have been revealed by this study in public discourse management calls for the need of more research on matters that are handled nationally by various governments across the world with a view to structuring the response to a public concern like Covid-19. There is also a need to study the role apportioned to the masses in matters that directly affect them in public discourse. This can lead to public ownership of any mitigative response and hopefully make them more responsive to the rules and regulations put in place by the authorities.

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