

Construction of Legitimacy Through Discourse in Mike Pence's Speech of COVID-19 Task Force Briefing

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Abstract:

To investigate how legitimacy is constructed through the deliberate use of discourse, this study employs a descriptive qualitative method in examining the transcript of speech in Mike Pence's COVID-19 Task Force Briefing. Within the context of fundamental theory, this study uses the three-dimension synthesis of Fairclough's (1992) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Along with the CDA theory, the arguments of findings are given interpretation through existing significance lexical choices and metaphors that most indicates the linguistic pattern of the subject. Such as inclusive expressions. The study reveals that legitimacy arises from discursively built, rhetorical and persuasive communication that shapes moral obligations, rather than genuine public consent. It further suggests that political language during the period of crises operates in the form of power and the authority to influence public perception. Additionally, this study seeks to significantly contribute to the research of how language acts firmly on constructing human social purpose and goals.

Keywords: Mike Pence, legitimacy, discourse, collective, COVID-19,

Abstrak:

Untuk menyelidiki bagaimana legitimasi dibangun melalui penggunaan wacana yang disengaja, penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dalam menganalisis transkrip pidato dalam konferensi pers Tim Tugas COVID-19 Mike Pence. Dalam konteks teori dasar, penelitian ini menggunakan sintesis tiga dimensi Analisis Wacana Kritis (CDA) Fairclough (1992). Selain teori CDA, argumen temuan diinterpretasikan melalui pilihan leksikal dan metafora yang ada, yang paling mencerminkan pola linguistik subjek. Misalnya, ekspresi inklusif. Studi ini mengungkapkan bahwa legitimasi muncul dari komunikasi retorik dan persuasif yang dibangun secara diskursif, yang membentuk kewajiban moral, rather than persetujuan publik yang sejati. Hal ini juga menyarankan bahwa bahasa politik selama periode krisis beroperasi dalam bentuk kekuasaan dan otoritas untuk mempengaruhi persepsi publik. Selain itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memberikan kontribusi signifikan terhadap penelitian tentang bagaimana bahasa berperan secara tegas dalam membangun tujuan dan sasaran sosial manusia.

Kata kunci: Mike Pence, Legitimasi, Wacana, Kolektif, COVID-19, Leksikal, Metafora, Pemerintah.

INTRODUCTION

The abrupt outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in the early months of 2020 created an unprecedented global crisis, affecting not only the global health and economic sectors, but



also in political aspects. According to Einchengreen et.al (2022), “the public policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of effective communication.”. During such times of crises, the societal situations worldwide had been severely deprived. Hence, the public perception towards the government tends to be relative. Meaning that political actors are reconsidering their use of language as strategically as possible, which generally aims to maintain their positive reputation. Besides preserving self-images, a condition of force majeure tends to force any parties like the government to take forced, yet measurable actions. These subsequent factors bring politicians to the use of effective communications in an attempt to provide legitimacy within every move they initiated.

Legitimacy, as proposed by Tyler (2006) refers to “the belief that authorities, institutions and social arrangements are appropriate, proper and just”. Furthermore, within the context of communication in the political landscape, legitimacy generally depends on the fair perception of cooperation between a state and its conjoining institutions. Most importantly however, legitimacy is not inherent but constructed through discourse that frames action and even political stance.

Defined by Fairclough (1992, p. 63), discourse is a “form of social practice which both constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practices”. Broadly speaking, language that is used in social interaction and their societal purpose is called discourse. Furthermore, the constructive ability of discourse has its own collective sense of shared belonging that refers to the discourse of unity within the frameworks of CDA. Moreover, such unifying form of discourse often “aims to construct sameness in contrast to external or internal threats” (Wodak, 2009, p. 43). Hence, the discourse of unity becomes an essential rhetorical instrument through which political actors produce legitimacy by presenting harmony as natural yet desirable social goals. Additionally, CDA through its critical approach can be used to reveal biased intentions behind linguistic expressions. In which in this case, may possess deeper political aims and meanings.

Particular attention is given to the distinctive use of lexical and metaphorical choices as strategies, to deliver practical goals of language. Represented in lexical is word choices that encodes social relations and ideological positions (Fairclough, 2003 p. 135). These lexical choices further aggregate with fundamental grammatical features, like verbs in particular. Verbs are processes and actions through which social relationships and experiences are constructed (Halliday, 1994, p. 106). Likewise, metaphors also play a

crucial role in the construction of social meanings. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 5), “human thought are fundamentally structured with action through the use of metaphor”. Therefore, these certain fundamental linguistic features of language are focal in bolstering the effectiveness of the discourse itself. Additionally, acting as markers of interpretation.

Examining the legitimization of language through unifying conveyances is the main significance of this study. Equally important in this case, is how the 48th Vice President of the United States employs his framing language during the weekly assessment speech of Coronavirus Task Force Briefing. The presence of specific lexical and metaphorical choices is supplementary to the base analysis of CDA as indicators. Furthermore. Beyond describing how Mike Pence communicates discourse for legitimacy, the study also focuses on giving an exposing interpretation of Pence’s hidden meanings and power interests that underlie his speech.

Recent previous studies had similarly discussed political communication under the various contexts, certainly on COVID-19. For instance, a previous manuscript conducted by Watkins & Clevenger (2021) analyzed 239 transcripts from several press briefings of president Donald Trump and U.S governors about the assessment of crisis leadership styles and public blame assignments. Furthermore, another recent similar study of Adegbenro & Olayenmi (2025) focuses on 47th U.S president Joe Biden and the context of COVID-19 pandemic with the extra scope of framing. It examines how Joe Biden frames through negotiation with prevalent condemnations. Meanwhile, a distinguished linear previous study like the one conducted by Veronika & Degaf (2024) discusses the distrust for vaccine opposition through the representation of the media, not from political figures. In summary, these past studies indeed do have some similar subjects, objects, and the fundamental theory to each other. However, there are lack of studies that yet focus on Mike Pence, CDA, and COVID-19 thus forming a significant gap. This study aims to fill the gap by also attributing to the use of linguistic and discursive examinations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Discourse Analysis

The fundamental theoretical framework of the study is based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) theory proposed by Norman Fairclough (1989, 1992). The study adopts a three-dimensional model of discourse based from the combination of two Fairclough

literatures (1989, 1992). In which, it simultaneously views discourse as a text, a discursive practice, a social practice. The followings are the comprehensive synthesis of Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA, which consists of:

Textual Practice

Mainly focuses on the linguistic features like meanings, in which it can be used to realize messages. This particular synthesis of Fairclough's theory draws on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics. Furthermore, according to Halliday (1985, p. 10), "Language is as it is because of the functions it has evolved to serve in people's lives". Thus, it can be viewed that language is a fundamental resource for making meaning in social context, as well as how language can be interpreted through its lexical choices and grammatical patterns.

Discursive Practice

Examining the mechanism of text circulation in a specific interaction of social context. Fairclough (1992) emphasizes that "the analysis of discursive practice involves processes of text production, distribution, and consumption, which are socially determined". Furthermore, discursive practice often uses nominalized language that makes actions sound neutral rather than chosen. Moreover, in textual and discursive context, such processes can be used to reveal how the government reinforces discourse with their own institutional narratives to build credibility or legitimacy.

Social Practice

Fairclough (1992, p. 86) asserts that "the analysis of social practice regards discourse as a mode of action, one form in which people may act upon the world and upon each other, as well as a mode of representation". From this assertion, discourse may link to a wider social context, certainly power. This particular dimension however, is heavily influenced by Foucault's conception of power and struggle in discourse. According to Foucault (1972, p. 100) "Discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized"., discourse can significantly be used in political practices, in order to conclusively construct legitimacy.

Each dimension provides a more detailed analysis of discourse such as how discourse is linguistically produced and distributed. The three-dimensional model is a synthesis of Fairclough CDA theory that is supported by earlier concepts from those of Halliday & Hasan (1985), and Foucault (1972).

RESEARCH METHODS

The study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the transcript of speech delivered by the 48th Vice President of the United States, Mike Richard Pence, during the March 2nd, 2020 coronavirus task force briefing. The research's authentic data is taken from the transcript of a Youtube video aired by CNBC Television news channel. Then, the data was transcribed using a web-based transcript generator and carefully analysed in order to give adequate discussions and arguments. In addition, to make the research analysis easier to navigate, additional content like the indicator of duration is incorporated in each subsequent part of the utterances.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study identifies an approximate of 6 data of utterances that most significantly represent the linguistic patterns relating to the construction legitimacy through discourse. Each 2 of the 6 utterances represents each of Fairclough's three-dimensional synthesis of model (2 excerpts for textual practice, 2 for discursive practice, and 2 for social practice). Additionally, utterances provided with apostrophes are the indicators for the significant markers of interpretations.

Textual Practice Data 1 [00:01:32 - 00:01:54]

Mike Pence: “We extend our deepest condolences and sympathies to the families of those that were lost despite today’s sad news. Let’s be clear, the risk to the American people of the corona virus remains low according to all of the experts that we’re working with across the government as the president has said we’re ready for anything but this is an all-hands-on-deck effort”.

Based on the excerpt, the collective noun of ‘we’ is used to merge the president, the office, and the public into one single subject, as well as the phrase “we’re working” emphasizes the collective work of experts and the government. However, the particular metaphor ‘*all-hands-on-deck*’ presents both linguistically to say teamwork or equal participation, and ideologically as a way to silence criticism. In another meaning, it implies that everyone must contribute without hesitation. Furthermore, the utterance “the risk to the American people of the corona virus remains low” also indicates Mike Pence’s uncertainty regarding the scale of the risk. Though he can still be able to calm the situation with the use of the word ‘despite’ in “despite today’s sad news” and positions the government as competent by stating “according to all of the experts that we’re working with”. Thus, such significant expressions indirectly emphasize Mike Pence’s intention of

asserting confidence and moral obligation during the situation, using the framing of solidarity eventually enables legitimacy as the outcome of those unified efforts.

Textual Practice Data 2 [00:04:40]

Mike Pence: “The president has directed us to bring the full resources of the federal government and to bring the very best minds in this country to bear on this effort”.

From the data, the 2 transitive verbs ‘bring’ implies purposefully to emphasize the coordinated movement of the government. Nevertheless, the presence of the utterance “the president has directed us” is framed by Mike Pence, as if everything is the president who carries the highest responsibility. To make it seem less authoritative, the term “full resources” gives the impression that the government is doing everything possible, so people are less likely to question what is actually being done. These lexical choices of Mike Pence frames legitimation through the justified government’s action that is firm yet caring.

Discursive Practice Data 1 [00:02:54]

Mike Pence: “We are committed to a full partnership with state governments and to their health officials and to local health care providers going forward”.

This utterance exemplifies discourse production within an internal context of institutional frame. By foregrounding the nominal terms ‘committed’ and ‘partnership’, Mike Pence creates the impression that the federal government is cooperative rather than directive. The term ‘partnership’ alone implies equality and the whole statement itself gives people the feeling that a united response to the crisis already exists, thus any form of disagreement would appear as going against the government. From this way, the language converts the obedience of orders into acts of loyalty, so people have no option but to validate the government’s legitimacy.

Discursive Practice Data 2 [00:03:39 - 00:03:57]

Mike Pence: “Our pharmaceutical companies which are recognized as the greatest in the world, all have already formed a consortium to work together, to share information in the development of therapeutics and vaccines”

The utterance above begins with the possessive noun ‘our’ which symbolizes collective ownership, especially if elaborated with the clause “recognized as the greatest in the world”. The clause is a self-praising statement uttered by Mike Pence that positions the United States as globally superior in pharmaceuticals, as well to persuade the people that any response from the United States government must be viewed as trustworthy and in this case, it means to be viewed as legit. Moreover, by linking his language with patriotic

senses, Mike Pence created the impression that any criticisms for the government can be deemed as unpatriotic. This tone of patriotism is then followed by the utterance “to work together, to share information in the development of therapeutics and vaccines”. It suggests that all information obtained by the should be from those of official updates, not from outside media outlets and critics. Through these linguistic choices, it can be said that Mike Pence attempts to legitimize authority by discouraging doubts and the use of emotional connections.

Social Practice Data 1 [00:27:52-00:28:12]

Mike Pence: “This is a time to use common sense, good time to wash your hands and at this time of year, that’s always a good decision but as we said, the risk remains low”.

Based on the excerpt, the use of the phrase “common sense” works ideologically to normalize obedience. Furthermore, the phrase implies that the people themselves are primarily responsible for preventing the infection. Mike Pence intended to frame that the pandemic is still manageable through basic habit, something that does not have to be treated as an urgent matter that requires systemic response. Moreover, it is also found that Mike Pence repetitively says “the risk remains low” which technically reinforces this same effect. It serves as a reassurance for the public that the government is having the situation under control, prior to Mike Pence’s order to the people to wash their hands. Therefore, legitimacy here is constructed through cooperative prevention between the government and the citizens, but it cannot be said in this matter that the government also equally wash their hands.

Social Practice Data 6 [00:30:12]

Mike Pence: “We’ll be back here every day, get used to seeing us, we’re gonna bring the experts in, we’re gonna make sure and give you the best and most high-quality, real-time information from the best people of the world”.

In the final excerpt, Mike Pence’s mentioning of the phrases “bring the experts in” and “the best people in the world” implies his openness towards working with experts on handling the situation. The discourse also strengthens people’s dependence on the government for information regarding the pandemic. Hence, if correlated with the utterance “we’re gonna make sure and give you the best and high-quality real-time information”, Mike Pence promises to the public that the upcoming official briefings will only reflect to the most reliable source possible. This way, the government can easily control the flow of information, deciding what, when, and how people see the crisis.

Unfortunately, in this sense, the public is then encouraged to believe and not to evaluate. It can be further interpreted that the governments are saying that independent media are less credible, which Mike Pence used as a strategy of persuasion to achieve legitimacy.

CONCLUSION(S)

The study conclusively finds that Mike Pence constructs legitimacy through a calculated and deliberate use of discourse. Based on the critical three-practices of CDA, the analysis reveals that the proper selection of linguistic choices such as lexical and metaphors are effective in shaping public perception into a shared moral projection. Moreover, the use of discourse itself becomes a sophisticated governing instrument, making any directions the government take is judged as mere action for the greater shared good.

Behind this solidary tone however, the discourse of Mike Pence lies an ideological purpose. The study exposes several contradictions, such as what seems like collective is actually directive, and what seems open is actually designed to suppress. The speech of Mike Pence's COVID-19 Task Force Briefing successfully transforms authoritative order into an attentive tone. This hereby shows that legitimacy can be built solely through discourse even without real public agreement and genuine capability of the government. Particularly, through persuasive language that stirs people's emotions.

The analysis of this study is hoped to open new directions for discourse research. Future studies could examine how crisis communication across nations or institutions uses similar discourse strategies to maintain jurisdictions. Nevertheless, comparative or multimodal analyses might be adequate to reveal how language, tone, and symbolism work adjacently to shape the overall public belief. With CDA-based analysis, researchers can determine and emphasize their stance regarding the studied phenomena. Additionally, based on this study it is concluded that political communication can never be neutral. It is a precise contest over meaning, power, and the right to define nor shape truth.

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