

POLITICAL DISCOURSE DURING CRISIS: DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES IN PRESIDENTIAL COVID-19 SPEECHES

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Abstract

This study investigates the discursive strategies employed by Ghana's President, Nana Akufo-Addo, in his public addresses on the COVID-19 pandemic. The corpus consists of twenty-nine televised national update speeches delivered between March 2020 and May 2023. Socio-cognitive model of critical discourse analysis, the study examines how discursive strategies are used to construct ideological representations, shape public consciousness, and sustain political legitimacy during a period of national crisis. Employing a qualitative interpretive approach, the analysis identifies eighteen discursive strategies, including authority, metaphor, number game, evidentiality, victimization, comparison, and national self-glorification. These strategies are strategically deployed to construct ideological polarization, mobilize public emotions, justify governmental interventions, and reinforce presidential authority and national unity. The findings reveal how political discourse functions not merely as communication, but also as a mechanism of persuasion, ideological reproduction, and crisis management. The study contributes to scholarship on political discourse, critical discourse analysis, and crisis communication by demonstrating how rhetorical and ideological resources shape public perception and legitimize political power during national emergencies.

Keywords: *COVID-19; crisis speech; critical discourse analysis; discursive strategies; political discourse.*

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected governments worldwide, and public health communication played a crucial role in educating citizens about appropriate actions to mitigate viral transmission. Ghana's President at the time, Nana Akufo-Addo, delivered a national address to communicate the government's implemented actions, despite the absence of any recorded cases in the country at that time. This prompt dissemination of information by the president effectively primed and equipped citizens for the onset of the worldwide/nationwide crisis. This presidential effort was crucial in protecting citizens' physical safety and psychological well-being. Presidential speeches have played a significant role in enhancing public knowledge and addressing health inequalities during pandemics (Allen, 2001; Sibiri et al., 2021). Political leaders employ various discursive strategies to

define the nature and scope of the pandemic and to reflect their priorities and values (Adom, 2020; Alhassan et al., 2023; Essel & Logogye, 2021; Anyanwu & Abana, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, presidential speeches served as key channels for communicating the government's interventions to safeguard citizens and prevent the spread of the pandemic at the border. Sibiri et al. (2021) thus note that analysing these speeches provides valuable insights into the complexities of leadership during a global crisis and the intersection of politics and public health. Through discursive strategies and ideological representations, leaders frame the crisis, communicate vital information, and project their political ideologies (Coombs, 2020). While several studies have examined Ghanaian presidential COVID-19 speeches (Alhassan et al., 2023; Amankwah et al., 2022; Musah, 2021; Pedavoah & Ansah, 2023; Inusah, 2021; Koller, 2023; Rockson et al., 2023). These studies have largely focused on specific rhetorical devices or thematic analysis rather than providing a comprehensive mapping of discursive strategies across the entire corpus of presidential updates. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the full set of presidential COVID-19 update speeches through the lens of Van Dijk's discursive strategies. Hence, the paper seeks to answer the question: What discursive strategies are employed in President Akufo-Addo's COVID-19 update speeches?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Discourse in Crisis Situations

Coombs (2019) defines a crisis as a significant disruption to an individual, group, or organisation's normal functioning that requires immediate resolution to mitigate negative consequences. Crises are unexpected, high-stakes events that threaten the well-being of individuals and organisations (Coombs, 2019). Similarly, Pearson and Clair (1998) describe crises as low-probability yet high-impact events that demand urgent decision-making and responses. The nature of discourse during crises is characterised by urgency, an emotive tone, and an emphasis on reassurance and guidance. This discourse serves multiple functions: to inform, persuade, reassure, and mobilise action among stakeholders. During crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders and organisations often employ language that blends factual information with emotional appeals to foster trust and compliance.

During a crisis, the discourse surrounding the event often focuses on providing clear and accurate information. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, public health officials emphasised transparent communication about infection rates, safety protocols, and vaccination campaigns (Dhanani & Franz, 2021). This approach aims to reduce uncertainty and equip audiences with actionable insights. Additionally, emotional framing is used to foster solidarity and resilience. Leaders often employ metaphors and narratives to foster a sense of unity, for example, referring to the pandemic as a 'battle' that requires collective effort (see Pedavoah & Ansah, 2023).

Speeches during crises often incorporate empathetic language to acknowledge the suffering of affected individuals while offering hope. For example, many COVID-19 speeches recognised the sacrifices of frontline workers and the grief of bereaved families (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021). Crisis communication also seeks to persuade audiences to adopt specific behaviours. During the COVID-19 pandemic, speeches by health authorities and governments emphasised compliance with public health measures, such as mask-wearing and social distancing (Van der Linden et al., 2020). Studies analysing crisis speeches,

particularly those from the COVID-19 pandemic, highlight the diverse linguistic and rhetorical strategies employed by leaders worldwide. For example, Morrison's speeches in Australia used war metaphors to frame the pandemic as a threat. In contrast, Duterte in the Philippines employed assertive, directive language to convey authority and emphasise public compliance (Gelilang et al., 2021). In the U.S., Trump's tweets were analysed through Van Dijk's ideological framework, revealing a dichotomy between 'us' (America as a hero and authority) and 'them' (China, WHO, and others blamed for the crisis) (Luo et al., 2022).

African researchers have also examined crisis communication, uncovering unique linguistic and rhetorical patterns. In Ghana, studies of President Akufo-Addo's speeches reveal a focus on freedom and security, the use of metaphors such as war, and elements of African communitarianism to emphasise collective welfare (Pedavoah & Ansah, 2023; Musah, 2021). Moreover, research in Ghana highlighted how Akufo-Addo's speeches integrated resilience theories and emotional appeals, demonstrating flexibility in strategies to mitigate the pandemic's effects (Amankwah et al., 2022). Across these studies, discourse analysis tools, including metaphor and framing theories, underline how crisis communication adapts to sociocultural and ideological contexts to address public concerns. Kenyan and Tanzanian media framed the crisis through newly coined words and war metaphors, while South African politicians relied on multilingual resources (Rudwick et al., 2021; Habwe & Ndung'u, 2022).

There is a plethora of studies on presidential speeches about COVID-19 across different geopolitical contexts (e.g. Alhassan et al., 2023; Abdel-Qader & Al-Khanji, 2022; Alyeksyeyeva et al., 2021; Dada et al., 2020; Gelilang et al., 2021; Jinshuang & Rong, 2022; Luo, He & Yu, 2022). These studies adopt different approaches which offer revealing insights into the rhetoric of health, politics and security (Musah, 2021). In Ghana, for example, the President's updates have been studied several times (e.g. Amankwah et al., 2022; Gyamfi & Amankwah, 2021; Musah, 2021; Navei & Donkoh, 2022). However, drawing on CDA, particularly the socio-cognitive approach, to reveal his discursive strategies, which are influenced by his political ideologies, remains unstudied. Consequently, the present study examines the discursive strategies deployed by President Akufo-Addo in his public addresses on the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2 Theoretical Lens

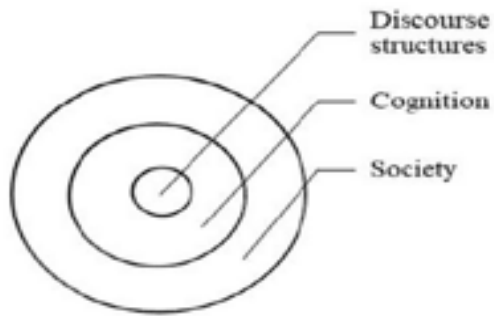
Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines how language shapes social order and reflects hidden ideologies within sociocultural contexts. Scholars such as Widdowson (2000) and Rahimi and Sahragard (2007) emphasise CDA's focus on exposing power and inequality in society through linguistic analysis. Fairclough (2003) highlights that discourses represent unique perspectives on the world, shaped by individuals' social connections. Van Dijk (1998) underscore CDA's interdisciplinary nature, integrating insights from linguistics, sociology, and psychology to analyse the relationship between linguistic and social structures. It is argued that CDA examines how linguistic structures convey ideological meanings and reveal social orientations and power dynamics in texts (Corson, 1995).

This study applies Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, which views the relationship between discourse and society as cognitively mediated (Van Dijk, 2016). This approach combines CDA methods with cognitive linguistics to analyse discourse structures within social and cognitive frameworks (Attiah, 2007). Van Dijk (1995) notes that the socio-

cognitive approach comprises three key components: the social, the cognitive, and the mediating role of cognition between discourse and society (see Figure 1). This approach highlights the complex interplay of language, cognition, and social structures in shaping communication and power relations.

Figure 1.

Van Dijk's three components of the socio-cognitive approach



The social component focuses on overarching social structures and addresses group relations, including discrimination, racism, and sexism, as well as group dynamics. The cognitive component examines both social and personal cognition, including values, ideologies, and knowledge, with a dual focus on societal and individual perspectives. The discourse component analyses linguistic features such as syntax, semantics, and lexicon, exploring how ideologies shape the meaning of discourse. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach seeks to uncover the network of beliefs, attitudes, and biases enacted through discourse. Central to this approach is the concept of mental models, which guide perception, interaction, and discourse comprehension (Van Dijk, 2014). Mental models represent subjective depictions of experiences, encompassing personal emotions, thoughts, and sensory details. Van Dijk (2014) distinguishes between situation models, which reflect an individual's interpretation of a situation, and context models, which assess the relevance of conditions within a communication context (Van Dijk, 2014, 2018). These models are grounded in shared knowledge expressed through language and facilitate mutual understanding among discourse participants. Language thus serves as a medium for constructing and interpreting subjective experiences.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data and Procedures

The COVID-19 updates delivered by Nana Akufo-Addo during the pandemic constituted the data for the study. The Updates were written but orally delivered by the President. In all, the President delivered twenty-nine (29) Updates from 11th March 2020 to 28th May 2023, and all these were included in the data for the study to provide a comprehensive account of the discursive strategies employed. The written updates that were used for this study were obtained from the official websites of the President (<https://www.moh.gov.gh>) and the Ministry of Health, Ghana (<https://www.presidency.gh/>). Figure 2 illustrates the lengths of all the data included.

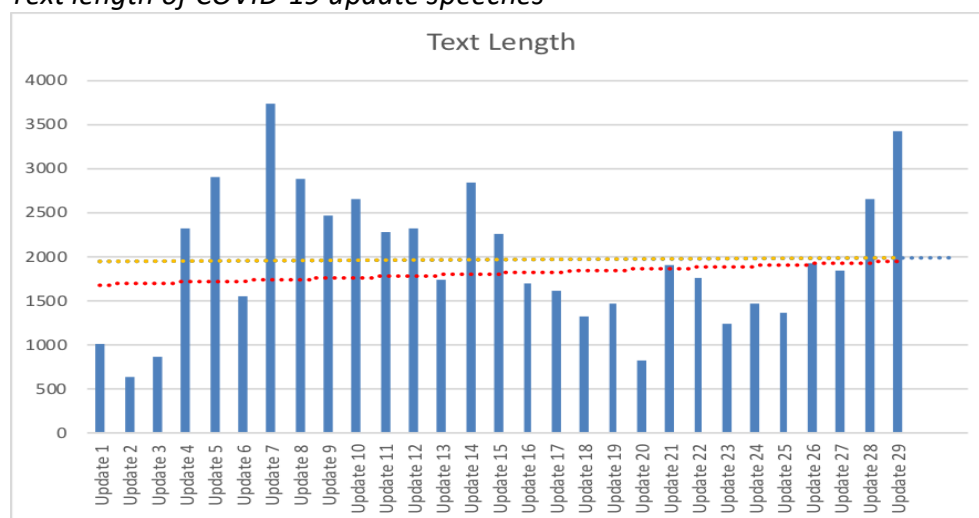
Figure 2.*Text length of COVID-19 update speeches*

Figure 2 shows the lengths of all the 29 updates. The length of the updates marginally increased with updates, reaching a peak in update 7, arguably reflecting the pandemic's peak effect, and again in update 29, marking the end of the pandemic. The updates were coded using the acronyms CUS001-CUS029.

3.2 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework used in this study was proposed by Van Dijk (2005). Van Dijk (2005) offered 25 discursive strategies. The 25 discursive devices identified by Van Dijk (2005) are as follows actor description, authority, burden (topos), categorization, comparison, consensus, counterfactuals, disclaimers, euphemism, evidentiality, example/illustration, generalization, hyperbole, implication, irony, lexicalization, metaphor, self-glorification, norm expression, number game, polarization, populism, presupposition, vagueness, and victimization.

Van Dijk's (2005) 25-discursive framework provides a robust foundation for analyzing language and ideology. However, this framework has notable weaknesses that pose challenges during data analysis. A fundamental weakness of the framework is its focus on textual elements. The framework does not encompass the broader context surrounding the speeches. To address this, the study incorporated additional information, such as the period of the speeches. This contextualization helped in adopting various strategies for specific situations, target audiences, and the overall messages. The model also posed a challenge during data analysis. A major challenge encountered during the analysis was the inherent overlap between certain discursive strategies. For instance, evidentiality is intertwined with illustration, polarization and victimization. To resolve these overlaps, we considered the context. First, the analysis was iterative. We examined how individual discursive strategies interacted and contributed to the broader strategies and ideologies in the speeches.

4. Findings and Discussion

The first part of the analysis examines the discursive strategies employed by Akufo-Addo in his COVID-19 speeches. In all, the President employed eighteen discursive devices in his speeches, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Distribution of discursive strategies in PAA's COVID-19 Speeches

Discursive Devices	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
Authority	83	12.0%
Metaphor	78	11.3%
Number game	74	10.7%
Illustration	68	9.9%
Evidentiality	62	8.0%
Categorization	40	5.8%
Populism	40	5.8%
Disclaimers	37	5.4%
National self-glorification	36	5.2%
Actor description	35	5.1%
Consensus	33	4.8%
Counterfactuals	29	4.2%
Hyperbole	26	3.8%
Comparison	19	2.8%
Polarisation	14	2.0%
Victimisation	8	1.2%
Euphemism	4	0.6%
Irony	3	0.4%
Total	689	100%

Table 3 shows that authority was used most frequently, occurring 83 times (12.0%); metaphor occurred 78 times (11.3%), and the number game occurred 74 times (10.7%). Similarly, Victimisation occurred 8 (1.2%) times, euphemism 4 (0.06%) times, and irony the least, 3 (0.4%) times.

4.1 Actor Description

Actor descriptions are used several times in the speeches to illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of belonging to and not belonging to groups. Characters are described differently based on their traits and characteristics. Projecting members of the outgroup as bad and those in the ingroup as neutral or positive is a typical practice (Wodak 2001; Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1993). PAA used the actor's description 35 times to highlight the positive and negative qualities in himself and others, respectively. To project a favourable image of himself, PAA employed several actor descriptions. An instance of the actor description in the speeches is shown in extract (1):

1. *I have provided, so far, seventeen (17) updates, which have demonstrated the coordinated approach we initiated towards winning the battle against the pandemic. We can safely say that the benefits are showing.* (CUS018).

In extract (1) above, PAA demonstrates his ability to work. In an attempt to secure public confidence, he demonstrated his capacity to prevail over the pandemic. Clausal expressions like "we initiated towards winning the battle against the pandemic", "we can safely say," and "the benefits are showing" illustrate how hard he has worked to combat the infection in Ghana. In extract (2), the President portrayed the opposition as a bad force.

2. *Fellow Ghanaians, I know there are still some who continue to express doubts about the vaccine, others have expressed reservations about its efficacy, with some taking sides with conspiracy theorists who believe the vaccine has been created to wipe out the African race. This is far from the truth.* (CUS024).

The indefinite pronouns "others" and "some" were employed by PAA in extract (2) to allude to those he believed to be his opponents who had doubts about the vaccines. He emphasises his knowledge, beliefs, and opinions by using the perceptive verb "know" and the expressive verbs "express" and "believe."

4.2 Polarization

Elaine Eaton, S. (2016) contends that ideological polarisation leads to public uncertainty and controversy. PAA successfully employed this tactic by manipulating speech acts and by providing explicit or implicit information. Extract (3) suggests that there is a non-negligible chance that the majority of Ghanaians will be exposed to COVID-19. PAA's claim is supported by empirical evidence; his credibility is uncontested. Although he appears to suggest that the country may be in danger, PAA offers assurances that Ghana is implementing increased measures in response to the pandemic, which contradicts his later declaration of a state of emergency. This has a significant psychological impact on recipients, as it conveys a clear indication that their risk of contracting the virus is high, given that neighbouring countries have confirmed cases. The impact of this situation suggests that Ghanaians should be concerned about the low risk of infection.

3. *Fellow Ghanaians, as you may have heard in the news, Burkina Faso our Northern neighbour has confirmed their first two cases of Coronavirus infections. Togo, to our east, has one confirmed case. Côte d'Ivoire to our West also has one confirmed case.* (CUS001).

4.3 Authority

Individuals with disparate views often cite multiple authorities to bolster their claims. PAA used authority in all his speeches to bolster the argument for his positions. Van Dijk (2005) defines these authorities as organisations or individuals who are highly regarded as specialists in their field and are impartial with respect to political parties. Leaders employ this strategy of citing sources to support their positions. Authority exists to either encourage or strengthen the in-group while demoralising the out-group. It is an incredibly strong force. PAA referred to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Ghana Health Service (GHS), and other national institutions, such as the Food and Drugs Authority (FDA) and the Bank of Ghana (BoG), when discussing data on COVID-19 and the state of the Ghanaian economy. Several times in PAA's speeches, he referred to the World Health Organisation (WHO) when speaking about data on the coronavirus pandemic. This is exemplified by extracts (4–6).

4. *WHO has now characterised it as a pandemic.* (CUS001).
5. *At the outset of the pandemic, the scientific community and the World Health Organisation (WHO), on 12th January 2020, recommended two main criteria for declaring someone who has tested positive as having recovered from the disease...* (CUS012).

6. *Some three weeks ago, on 5th May, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that COVID was no longer a public health emergency of global concern. (CUS029).*

By citing the WHO, PAA sought to demonstrate that Ghana's pandemic response is not in isolation. He encouraged Ghanaians to believe that the government's measures to address the novel coronavirus disease are consistent with WHO directives on COVID-19. PAA made use of authority in announcing and denouncing COVID-19 as a global pandemic, respectively, as "... WHO has now characterised it as a pandemic", and "... the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced that COVID-19 was no longer a public health emergency of global concern."

4.4 Metaphor

Metaphors are essential mental structures that enable us to apply our understanding of social and physical experiences to a wide range of issues (Atuhura, 2022). Metaphors are regarded as concepts rather than merely literary devices, which shape our perceptions and subtly influence our attitudes and actions. President Akufo-Addo employed metaphor as a discursive strategy 78 (11.3%) times in his presidential addresses on COVID-19. This discursive strategy enables the relatability and tangibility of meanings that are abstract, complex, or emotional.

7. *...We should not go down that road...Let us continue down this path. (CUS0020)*

Here, he did not intend to pursue a physical path but to follow the measures to combat the pandemic as directed by the government. A variety of metaphorical discourse frameworks, including personification, symbolism, and allusion, are used in excerpts 8 and 9 to depict COVID-19 as a battle or an act of war. President Akufo-Addo again said:

8. *...They are and will remain our weapons in this struggle against the virus. (CUS017).*
9. *Our success in defeating the virus is largely within our control... (CUS007).*

In excerpt 8, the President did not mean real weapons, but rather the steps the government was taking to eliminate the virus and the measures being implemented to progressively and safely ease the restrictions put in place to defeat it. In this context, the comparison is that the impression or atmosphere conveyed in the expression can be likened to warfare. The phrases "in defeating the virus", "our weapons", and "the struggle against this virus" in the excerpts are used to refer to COVID-19 and figuratively depict it as a war that needs to be fought. The president refers to his belief that "Our success in defeating the virus is largely within our control" in excerpt 9. He refers to himself and all Ghanaians as "fighters" who must arm themselves with a "strong sense of selflessness, self-control and self-discipline" in the fight against COVID-19.

4.5 National self-glorification

National self-glorification produces a favourable image of a particular nation (Kuo, 2009). Dominant groups often use it to exaggerate and emphasise their achievements, qualities, and values, thereby constructing a positive self-image and identity. This strategy is

also used to legitimise their power and dominance over other groups, to disguise or downplay their flaws and wrongdoings, and to justify their interests and actions (Wodak, 2001). President Akufo-Addo employed national self-glorification as a discursive strategy in his addresses on COVID-19 updates. The president used it 36 times (5.2%).

10. *We have demonstrated not only to ourselves but also to the entire world that we are capable of charting our path towards containing the spread of this disease. We must all be proud that we have become a reference point for others on how to combat it. (CUS010)*

In excerpt 10, PAA is proud of his own country for the feat achieved in combating the virus. Employing the subject pronoun, ‘we’, he rhetorically enhances his strong position by recognising the importance of celebrating as a nation and as a people for being “a reference point for others on how to combat” the virus. His hyperbolic declaration that ‘We have demonstrated not only to ourselves but also to the entire world’ and ‘we are capable of charting our path’ implies that Ghana deserves applause for being proactive and a leading example. The glorification of Ghana is emphasised with further declarations: ‘We must all be proud’ and ‘We have become a reference point for others’ to cement his pride in the country’s success.

4.6 Populism

Van Dijk (1998) postulates that populism encompasses political ideologies and actions aimed at advocating for the interests and desires of the general population. Thus, populism is a political discourse and strategy that appeals to the masses by simplifying complex issues, fostering a sense of shared identity, and employing emotional language. Van Dijk (1998) again views populism as a discourse that creates a binary between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ by exploiting emotions such as anger, fear and resentment to mobilise support. The approach is to demonstrate individuals’ inclination towards either endorsement or opposition. Most of PAA’s speeches employed populism as a discursive device, amounting to 40 instances (5.8%). In most updates, President Akufo-Addo consistently concluded with populist rhetoric, as illustrated in extracts (11–13).

11. *I’m confident that together, with all hands on deck, we will be successful in weathering the storm. May God bless us all and our homeland, Ghana, and make her great and strong. I thank you for your attention. (CUS001)*
12. *This too shall pass! For the Battle is the Lords. May God bless us all, and our homeland Ghana, and make her great and strong. I thank you for your attention, and have a good night. (CUS016)*
13. *This too shall pass!! For the Battle is still the Lord’s!! May God bless us all, and our homeland Ghana, and make her great and strong. I thank you for your attention and wish the Black Stars, who gave a good account of themselves in Kumasi, the best of luck in Abuja on Tuesday (CUS028)*

In excerpts (11–13), PAA expresses his utmost support, assurance, and optimism that, with God, the coronavirus pandemic will be a thing of the past. He also believes that successfully defeating the pandemic is not ordinary; it requires “all hands on deck” and God’s intervention.

4.7 Hyperbole

Hyperbole concerns the intentional exaggeration of specific facts or figures to create a stronger impact. The president used hyperbole as a rhetorical strategy in his addresses on COVID-19. People employ hyperbolic language to focus on things purposely. They embellished the commendable actions of individuals within their group while magnifying the negative actions of those from other groups (Van Dijk, 1998). To him, politicians use hyperbole as a strategic device, alongside media and other powerful actors, to emphasise a point, create a sense of urgency or crisis, and mobilise public opinion or support. The speeches had a total of 26 instances of hyperbole, which accounted for 3.8% of the total occurrence of discursive strategies in the text. This is illustrated in extract (14).

14. *It has taken three years five months and twenty days of unbelievable tumult, unrelenting pain and suffering and emotional turbulence of a world turned upside down, but we have at last heard the words for which we had all been praying.* (CUS029)

In extract (14), President Akufo-Addo seeks to demonstrate the extent of the virus's damage and its effects on people. Similarly, the degree of the entire situation is exaggerated when PAA said that “the hospitality industry was devastated ... indeed our world was turned upside down.”

4.8 Euphemism

Euphemism is when a moderate or pleasant term or expression is used in place of one that is rude or unpleasant. Politicians seek to defuse tensions by using softer language. Van Dijk (1998) views euphemism as a discursive strategy used to manipulate language and meaning, often to maintain power and control. PAA illustrates this in extract 15.

15. *... and who sadly passed away on Friday, as a result of a COVID-related death.* (CUS011)

He tried to mitigate the unbearable pain and grief associated with death by using the phrase “passed away” instead of 'died,' even though the latter is pre-modified by the adverb 'sadly.'

16. *Fellow Ghanaians, these are not ordinary times, so, let us all put our shoulders to the wheel and I am confident that by the grace of God, we shall overcome this challenge.* (CUS002)

He used euphemism as a discursive strategy in extracts 15 and 16. In this instance, the president used gentler language, such as “these are not ordinary times,” when discussing COVID-19 and its effects, to obscure the truth and conceal unpleasant realities. To create a more palatable narrative, PAA describes the COVID-19 pandemic as a “challenge” instead of a widespread outbreak of a disease. Here, PAA uses a softer and kinder expression for a positive spin or framing effect. This helps to construct a desired or positive image or reputation of himself.

4.9 Comparison

Comparisons are utilised to emphasise the distinctions and similarities between in-groups and out-groups. A comparison involves explicit comparisons between groups, policies and ideas, often used to highlight differences, contrasts, and inequalities (Van Dijk, 2013). He identifies two main types of comparison: Analogical reasoning (e.g. ‘A is like B’) and

Categorical comparison (e.g. 'A is a type of B'). Positive depictions of groups to which one belongs and negative depictions of groups to which one does not belong are presented. Van Dijk (2005) posits that ingroups are seen more positively, whereas outgroups are viewed more negatively. Various similes and metaphors can be employed to illustrate both optimism and pessimism. PAA used comparisons in the majority of his addresses on COVID-19.

17. *Like the World Health Organisation (WHO) has recently advised, I want to encourage you to wear a mask wherever you go, as it will help you not to contract the virus, and keep it clean. (CUS007)*
18. *The pandemic trend in Ghana is similar to the general global trend as announced by WHO. (CUS007)*

In excerpt 17, PAA used the pronoun "I" to liken himself to the WHO in his quest to admonish the Ghanaian populace to wear masks at all times. He does this to present a favourable image of himself and to equate his authority with that of the WHO. In excerpt 18, Ghana's situation in the wake of the pandemic is framed as similar to the global trend, as indicated by the use of the word "similar".

4.10 Irony

Irony is the deliberate and often humorous contradiction between what is stated and what the speaker intends to convey. As a discursive strategy, irony is used to influence social interactions and maintain social relationships (Van Dijk, 2013). He distinguishes between two kinds of irony: situational irony and verbal irony. Van Dijk (2005) asserts that statements made in seemingly less direct, more sarcastic tones may have a greater effect on listeners. This was something that PAA used a few times in his speeches. Extracts 19 and 20 exemplify this.

19. *I know some political actors will want you to believe that our current numbers represent a failure on the part of the Government. Do not begrudge them. They need to make such comments for their political survival. (CUS009)*
20. *However, some expressed various degrees of hysteria and negativity towards the exercise, with some, who swore heaven and earth to resist the compilation of the register at the peril of their lives, ending up registering. Some made delicate, personal sacrifices in the event of the register, yet still ended up registering. Some claimed that, amid a pandemic, the registration exercise should not be conducted, warning of an "explosion" in our case count and very high numbers of deaths should the exercise go ahead. (CUS015)*

In extracts 19 and 20, PAA trivialised the attitudes of his opponents using sarcasm, an instance of verbal irony. Van Dijk (2005) believes that irony can convey criticism or disapproval without directly offending others. PAA ridiculed individuals who made extravagant promises, individuals who made personal sacrifices and individuals who expressed varying degrees of "hysteria and negativity". For example, the expression "Do not begrudge them" is sarcastic because he meant the opposite. The comment that immediately followed it, "They need to make such comments for their political survival", gave it emphasis. He intended to reveal the false claims made by opponents regarding Ghana's

ability to compile a voter register without a significant increase in our case count and a high number of deaths.

4.11 Victimisation

The use of the binary distinction between ingroups and outgroups is a form of victimisation. This serves as a metaphor for how outgroup members harm ingroup members. D'Errico et al. (2012) posit that by employing verbal assaults such as criticism, accusation, and insults that insinuate a below-average evaluation, an individual might undermine the credibility of another person. PAA employed the notion of US-Them polarisation, where he openly criticised and vilified the opponents. Extract 21 shows his use of the victimisation strategy.

21. *So far, it has been established that the virus was imported into our midst from foreign shores and is being spread through person-to-person contact.* (CUS007).

In extract (21), PAA used the clause "the virus was imported" to refer to COVID-19, which appeared to reflect bias against immigrants. This contentious phrase implies that the virus did not originate in Ghana. Therefore, he asserts that travellers, whether or not they are Ghanaians, are increasing their exposure to the highly contagious virus spreading worldwide. The recipients of the bad presentation will accuse travellers of spreading the disease.

4.12 Counterfactual

A counterfactual is a statement that describes how something or someone might be different under different circumstances. Politicians typically employ counterfactuals to illustrate fictitious or compelling arguments. In the speeches, the president employed counterfactuals. PAA charged his speeches on COVID-19 with passion by employing rhetorical devices, universal emotions, and a positive self-image. Brown et al. (2012) postulate that pathos is the improper application of strong emotional appeals intended to change the feelings and moods of the recipients. This strategy is displayed in excerpt 22.

22. *Fellow Ghanaians, these are not ordinary times, so let us all put our shoulders to the wheel, and I am confident that, together, by the Grace of God, we shall overcome this challenge.* (CUS001)

PAA employs emotive frames in almost all of his speeches. For instance, he concludes with the lexical phrase "assured" rather than a logical conclusion to emphasise his point and elicit the readers' emotions. By expressing his confidence, he also conveys his feelings, supporting his claim that, by working together and using all available resources to combat the coronavirus pandemic, it is possible to defeat the virus. PAA seeks to elicit recipients' emotions and gain their trust by empathising with their feelings. This gives him the moral authority to choose the policy measures to implement to control the infection, and he expects recipients to accept his decision. As a result, the expression, "I'm optimistic that with everyone working together, we will be able to weather the storm."

4.13 Evidentiality

Evidentiality as a discursive marker is used to indicate the source of information, evidence, or claims, to establish credibility and legitimacy (Van Dijk, 2006). Facts, figures,

statistics, and other forms of proof are employed in political speeches as a discursive strategy. Lippi and Torroni (2016) argue that concerns with subjective and contested claims are automatically extracted to give ordered data for models of arguments and reasoning. PAA frequently employed this strategy to emphasise his ideas on the best ways to combat the pandemic and to sustain economic activity. Extracts (23 – 25) illustrate this discursive strategy.

23. *...I gave an update on the measures put in by the Government in response to the novel Coronavirus disease which has so far affected some 118,000 people across the world, resulted in the death of some 4,000 persons, and is wreaking havoc on the global economy. (CUS001)*
24. *... He will, then, immediately make available a minimum of one billion cedis (GH¢1 billion) to households and businesses, particularly small and medium-scale enterprises. (CUS004)*
25. *... This week, Wednesday, 24th February, to be precise, we took another concrete step in our quest to rid our nation of COVID-19, with the arrival in the country of six hundred thousand (600,000) doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, the first consignment of many more to come (CUS024).*

In extracts (23–25), the President reassures his audience that the government is committed to protecting Ghanaians' lives and managing the economy during the COVID-19 crisis. He does so by promising bold measures to mitigate the impact on businesses and households and minimise job losses. The specific mention of facts and figures (i.e., 118,000 affected persons, 4,000 deaths, GH¢1 billion, 600,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine) not only indicates that PAA is on top of the issues but also demonstrates its commitment to resolving the crisis. The use of these specific numerical figures in extracts 23-25 adds a level of precision and concreteness to the information. This numerical detail helps in quantifying the scale of the resources procured and distributed.

4.14 Illustration

PAA used the discursive technique of illustration in all of his speeches. Discourse experts adopt the use of genuine or fictional illustrations to bolster their stance or enhance their credibility. Citing particular examples is thus an effective tactic for making a persuasive argument (Van Dijk, 2005). For example, Nana Addo illustrated the prevalent challenges in Ghana as:

26. *... those who, as at 27th June, 2020, had the virus, stood at four thousand, two hundred and forty-five (4,245). As at midnight of 24th July, nearly a month later, the number of active cases in Ghana stands at three thousand, three hundred and seven (3,307). Again, a month ago, the number of recoveries stood at twelve thousand, nine hundred and ninety-four (12,994). Today, it is twenty-eight thousand, nine hundred and twenty-seven (29,494). This means our recovery rate has improved from seventy-five per cent (75%) of positives, a month ago, to eighty-nine point five per cent (89.5%), all in one month currently" (CUS014)*

27. ... *Additionally, we have procured and distributed forty-five thousand (45,000) Veronica Buckets; ninety thousand (90,000) gallons of liquid soap; ninety thousand (90,000) rolls of tissue paper; forty thousand (40,000) thermometer guns; seven hundred and fifty thousand (750,000) pieces of 200mils sanitizers; and 2.2 million reusable facemasks, i.e. three per person, all with the intent of guaranteeing the safety of students, teaching and non-teaching staff, Two (2) masks each will be delivered tomorrow, and the third within the next two (2) weeks (CUS013)*

The enumeration of various items, including “Veronica Buckets,” “liquid soap,” “tissue paper,” “thermometer guns,” “sanitizers,” and “reusable facemasks,” provides a clear and comprehensive picture of the range of materials distributed. This list helps the audience understand the variety of resources dedicated to ensuring safety. Moreover, the explanation of the distribution plan for facemasks is another illustrative element. The statement “Two (2) masks each will be delivered tomorrow and the third within the next two (2) weeks” provides a timeline and process, enhancing the audience's understanding of how the resources will be allocated. In addition, the repeated emphasis on the intent behind these measures, i.e., “guaranteeing the safety of students, teaching and non-teaching staff,” reinforces the purpose behind the actions taken. This emphasis on safety conveys the government's commitment to protecting the population's well-being. By incorporating these illustrative elements, President Akufo-Addo effectively employs Van Dijk's (2005) discursive strategy of “Illustration” to communicate the tangible efforts and resources invested in combating the challenges posed by COVID-19. This approach aims to make the information more tangible, relatable, and memorable for the audience.

4.15 Number Game

PAA used number games as a discursive tool in all of his COVID-19 updates. Van Dijk (2005) points out that several arguments are centred on enhancing credibility through actions that emphasise objectivity. This strategy has numerous applications. The number game is a discursive strategy that emphasises “reality” by using specific, detailed examples such as dates, timings, and figures. Since it is more powerful or direct, it is often refuted with additional concrete examples. For instance, PAA provided particular examples of the new coronavirus when he stated that there were around “118,000 infected individuals” and “4,000 fatalities worldwide.” Additionally, the Number game is evident in the details of suspended activities or events recorded by PAA, as observed in extract 28.

28. *Here, I am referring to the suspension of all public gatherings, including conferences, workshops, funerals, parties, nightclubs, drinking spots, beaches, festivals, political rallies, religious activities and sporting events. (CUS007)*

4.16 Categorization

This discursive device groups certain people or objects into broader categories. Collections are made up of connections between these categories. Van Dijk (2005) states that individuals tend to classify others, particularly when it concerns immigrants and refugees. This is done to categorise individuals by nationality, ideology, religion, and regional affiliation. President Akufo-Addo usually classified the people in the Ghanaian community

into groups or categories. In the wake of the pandemic, President Akufo-Addo used categorisation to define 'Frontline workers', 'Contact tracers', and 'isolation'. Extracts (29 - 31) show his use of the categorisation strategy.

29. *Frontline workers are those who are responsible for finding, testing, and treating virus-infected individuals. They also include those who guard our borders or prevent prospective virus-carriers from entering; these individuals are primarily drawn from the health and security sectors. (CUS004)*
30. *Contact tracers identify those who are searching for those who have interacted with those who have been tested and confirmed to have COVID-19 positivity. (CUS004)*
31. *While isolation refers to those who have been confirmed as having COVID-19 and are separated from the rest of the population to receive treatment, quarantine refers to those who have been identified and excluded from the population to be tested because they are suspected or probable infected. (CUS004)*

Extracts 29- 31 indicate that PAA makes a clear mention of numerous societal memberships and how important each membership is to the effort to combat COVID-19. When he demonstrates that all decisions regarding the measures and policies were made in consultation with members or stakeholders in the religious, health, labour, chieftaincy, educational, tourism, transport, hospitality, creative arts sectors and sports, he presents a positive self-image.

32. *I, therefore, call on all Muslims to heed this prophetic admonishment to pray at home, so that we might protect ourselves from the threat of COVID-19. (CUS008)*

This pronouncement identifies and acknowledges the Muslim community as a significant segment of Ghanaian society whose cooperation must be sought in the effort to combat the global pandemic. This is especially true given Ghana's sizable Muslim population.

4.17 Consensus

Consensus as a discursive strategy refers to the use of language and communication to achieve agreement and shared understanding among individuals or groups (Wodak, 2001). According to Van Dijk (1993), consensus is not always a genuine or inclusive agreement but can be used by dominant groups to maintain their power and control over marginalised groups. When they sense danger, politicians try to reach an agreement among various groups and organisations. This means that other parties, usually supporters, must be involved. It could be something intellectual, like principles, or something intangible, like friends or other groups. In a political context, consensus, according to Van Dijk (2005), is a national or cross-party mechanism for protecting a nation against external threats. It is done to achieve national or social unification. PAA employed this strategy to cultivate a positive self-presentation in its speeches by applauding or encouraging individuals and organisations to work together. The president also pledged that government institutions and agencies would cooperate to ensure that measures to combat the virus are implemented as necessary. He made the following utterance:

33. *The government, in collaboration with the National Board for Small Scale Industries (NBSSI), Business & Trade Associations and selected Commercial and Rural Banks, will roll out a soft loan scheme of up to a total of six hundred million cedis (GH¢600 million) ... (CUS005)*

From extract 33, PAA's use of the adverbial or prepositional phrase "in collaboration with" signals the government's collaboration, cooperation and consensus with other national agencies to establish loan support schemes for struggling businesses in the wake of the pandemic.

4.18 Disclaimers

This rhetorical strategy is employed to preserve one's reputation by diverting attention from one's shortcomings or mistakes to others' actions. Van Dijk (2005) argues that disclaimers serve the purpose of momentarily preserving one's reputation by acknowledging positive qualities. This has diverse effects because it assigns responsibility for a specific incident to a particular organisation or individual. President Akufo-Addo shifts the blame for his and the government's inadequacies to other individuals or institutional actions. This presents a negative portrayal of such entities while protecting his reputation from being threatened.

34. *Fellow Ghanaians, with the Bank of Ghana predicting a worst-case GDP growth rate scenario of 2.5% for 2020, should the virus continue to linger for the rest of the year, the effects on our economy would be dire. However, as we have demonstrated over the last three years, where we inherited an economy that was growing at 3.4% and transformed it into one which has grown by an average of 7% over the last three (3) years, I assure you that we know what to do to bring our economy back to life. What we do not know how to do is to bring people back to life. (CUS004).*

Van Dijk (1993) notes that disclaimers can be used to manage impressions, maintain a positive self-image, and avoid criticism. PAA in extract 34 shifts blame for the crisis to the crisis itself, claiming it is the worst-case scenario for GDP growth. Also, PAA distances itself from criticism, as shown in extracts 35 and 36.

35. *This is the time for sacrifice so that we do not have to bear a greater cost in the future. Unhappily, there continues to be the worrying news of a few Ghanaians aiding some West African nationals to enter our country illegally, despite the closure of our borders. Even more disturbing is the fact that several of the West Africans, who have been arrested, have later tested positive for the virus (CUS008).*
36. *These are unpatriotic acts and must stop. We cannot continue to allow a few persons, who are motivated by their own selfish, money-making interests, to endanger the lives of the rest of the population. Not only will persons who enter our country illegally be strictly dealt with, but so will Ghanaians who facilitate their entry (CUS008).*

The President occasionally condemns and disassociates himself from those who prioritise their self-interest over the common good and those who question the

government's capacity to combat the pandemic instead of collaborating with it. In this context, PAA avoids social repercussions by characterising some Ghanaians as misanthropes. To reiterate this point, the President cautioned the misanthropists for what he terms their persistent scepticism and desire to purposefully muddy the government's efforts to combat the deadly virus.

37. *The professional Jeremiahs and naysayers, who seek, cynically, to make a profitable industry out of spreading falsehoods, fear and panic, stoking divisive, ethnic sentiments, underestimate the resolve and the determination of Ghanaians to build a united, democratic, peaceful, prosperous, and happy Ghana. We will continue to work hard to prove them wrong (CUS015).*

The President uses phrases such as "professional Jeremiahs" and "naysayers" in excerpt 78 to shift blame to a specific group targeted in the speech. By calling them professionals and naysayers, there is an implicit suggestion that their motivations are sceptical and profit-driven. In addition, the President explicitly accuses the targeted group of engaging in undesirable activities, such as "spreading falsehoods," "fear," and "panic." This accusation serves as a disclaimer, pre-emptively addressing potential concerns about the credibility of the information shared by the targeted group. President Akufo-Addo denies any misconduct. He seeks to avoid accountability and therefore employs this tactic to save face.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated discursive strategies in Presidential speeches during a crisis. It specifically examined the speeches to uncover patterns of ideological self-representation and negative representation of others. The President of the Republic of Ghana's COVID-19 speeches were selected for analysis using Van Dijk's (2005) socio-cognitive model. To address the research questions, the study examined discursive devices individually, linking them to the socio-cognitive dimension of self-presentation and other presentation. The study employed qualitative methodologies to establish a connection between micro-level features, namely discursive devices, and macro-level phenomena, namely theme/mind control.

Analysing the use of various discursive strategies in presidential speeches allows us to discern how politicians employ language to manipulate their listeners' thoughts. PAA utilises the authority device to the greatest extent and employs minimal irony. In his COVID-19 update speeches, PAA employs a higher frequency of positive self-representation. The president's ideology is predominantly self-representational rather than characterised by a negative attitude toward others. Both positive and negative representations aimed to capture the audience's attention by portraying the president and his government as superior to others. This indicates the president's desire to portray himself as superior to his opponents. The president again employs the "Us versus Them" to establish divisions between ingroups and outgroups. Thus, the study has found that politicians employ various strategies to manipulate public opinion. They employ various discursive strategies to establish their superiority over others through positive self-representation and negative other-representation. This study contributes to critical discourse studies by demonstrating how discursive strategies function as tools for ideological construction in crisis governance communication.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that future research conduct a comparative analysis of the discursive strategies used by presidents in different countries. This can provide insights into cross-cultural variations in presidential communication. Secondly, this study focused exclusively on Van Dijk's (2005) socio-cognitive model, so future studies can consider other theoretical frameworks, such as politeness theory, to examine COVID-19 speech updates.

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