Critical Discourse Analysis of Leadership in Business and Politics - Examples of how Politicians Use Language to Communicate, Lead and Pass Statements to Large Audiences

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The current state-of-the-art in discursive leadership research in business and organisational studies, Larsson (2016: 174) identifies three broad strands of inquiry "How a designated leader enacts his or her role; how identities relevant to the leadership process are constructed in interaction; and what influence and organizing processes exist in interaction." Research in applied linguistics and pragmatics focuses on similar topics, albeit with a particular interest in identifying and describing the specific discursive practices through which leadership is accomplished on the micro-level of an interaction.

Following the "linguistic turn" in social sciences (Whittle *et al.,* 2015), over the past decade there has been a growing interest in the topic of leadership from a discourse analytical perspective. This research largely focuses on analysing the specific discursive processes through which leadership is accomplished at the micro-level of interaction – with the aim of gaining "a better understanding of the everyday practices of talk that constitute leadership and a deeper knowledge of how leaders use language to craft 'reality', construct meaning and contribute to sense-making" (Clifton, 2016). Discursive leadership research in both business and organisational studies, as well as applied linguistics and pragmatics, is characterised by a strong focus on empirical data –how things are done, – in contrast to much of the earlier mainstream leadership research – rejects attempts to establish "grand theories of leadership" (Clifton, 2006).

New Malaysian Prime Minister, Ismail Sabri Yaakob, addresses the nation in a call for unity and togetherness, as the country is battling rising covid-19 deaths.

Newly minted Prime Minister of Malaysia, Ismail Sabri Yaakob, has taken office at a very challenging time for the country with covid-19 cases and deaths rising daily during summer. The economy is in deep recession too. However, he has managed to present some encouraging traits especially the openness toward the opposition and institutional reforms, as well acknowledging that the economy needs to be reopened (Borneo Post, 2021). His speech and discourse style of unity and openness has evoked an emotional response from Malaysians. Let's review some examples where Ismal Sabri has managed to win people's trust and approval:

1. He recently took to social media to express his gratitude to his wife Muhaini Zainal Abidin, the woman he married in 1986.

"My wife is the one who has always been by my side since we became friends when I was 19 years old. I joined politics in 1986 at the age of 26 when we just got married." (Yahoo 2021)

Ismail Sabri expressed appreciation to everyone working tirelessly in combating Covid-19. He also thanked the media personnel for playing their role in disseminating accurate information to the community, as well as all Malaysians for complying with the standard operating procedures (SOP).

 "*I thank you all for your cooperation and support.*"

2. Reacting to the news on July 7 about his appointment, Ismail said he was first grateful to Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, God, and the Umno president "*for his support*" alongside the entire party leadership.

"*I would like to express the highest gratitude to Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin for the trust he has given. I am grateful to Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala for my appointment as deputy prime minister,*" he said in a short statement.

3. Ismail Sabri Yaakob appealed to all members of the Dewan Rakyat - both in the government and the Opposition - to work together and help the nation recover from the Covid-19 pandemic.

"*We need to find common ground to save our family, the Malaysian Family (Keluarga Malaysia). We need to find a common ground and move towards building a consensus for the security and safety of our family, the Malaysian Family. I adapt to the concept of Malaysian Family as this phrase is inclusive in nature,*" he said in his maiden speech as the prime minister on Sunday (Aug 22).

The word "*Rakyat*" means people has important familial connotations in the Malaysian language (Borneo Post, 2021). So, it is used here in a very deliberate manner that evokes unity, togetherness and common roots for all Malaysians. Note that in In Malaysia, political discourse conducted in the English language has keenly taken up the Malay word "*rakyat*", where once English term "the people" would suffice.

Most Malaysians lauded Sabri's appointment and seen as positive his promise on social media to improve the situation in overcrowded hospitals and boost the morale of frontline medical workers.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson thanks NHS staff for coronavirus treatment

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has praised the NHS staff who treated him for coronavirus in hospital. In a video message posted on his Twitter account, Boris Johnson singled out and named two nurses who had stood by his bedside for 48 hours at the most critical time.

He added the doctors and nurses had made decisions that he would be "grateful for [for] the rest of my life" (BBC, 2020). He also referred to the NHS as the country's "*greatest national asset*". Johnson also thanked the people of England for practising social distancing and staying indoors in a bid to keep the spread of the pandemic in check. Many analysts commented that in his address, he embodied the caring and sacrifice of National Health Service staff on the front lines of the pandemic. Johnson called the NHS "unconquerable" and "the beating heart of this country" after seeing its response to the outbreak first-hand. He lauded the courage of everyone from doctors to cooks (Chicago Tribune, 2020). The direct and highly personal message of Boris Johnson was meant to diffuse any negative public perceptions about government cuts of medical staff's salaries and benefits and overall austerity that deprived the NHS of much needed protective equipment and other valuable resources at a time when the health crisis was at its peak, causing the death of thousands of people on a daily basis. The Prime Minister's thankful message to NHS staff, who saved his life, resonated with public feelings of gratitude towards the NHS frontline workers. This is an example which demonstrates this: Together Coalition – a small non-profit organisation dedicated to bringing people together – led a national day of thanks and recognition to celebrate the incredible work of NHS staff. The idea of Thank You Day came from a grassroots campaign to hold the country's biggest ever thank you party in local communities as a way of thanking each other and building on the community spirit that so many felt during lockdown (NHS 2020).

It is obvious that the Prime Minister wanted to win people over his side by his personal address of NHS staff and his powerful and highly personalised thank you message to the individuals who attended to him during his hospitalization. We can say that this has been an effective way of winning over people's sympathy by showing his humanity and humility, he managed to reverse the negative public feeling and mistrust of the UK people towards his government. From this perspective, his speech was indeed quite effective as many people sent him get-well wishes on his social media pages.

Political Discourse of Apology in Politics

An ideal apology should contain a clear acknowledgment of responsibility, an illocutionary force-indicating device (IFID) and be devoid of any type of excuse and/or justification. Scholars such as Robin Lakoff argue that public apologies are meaningful only because of the ritualistic settings of their performance (2000: 31). In political discourse, most apologies are sensitive to various modes of manipulation in the discursive process of choosing the wording, evaluating and mediating the gesture for the public. A formal apology demands a clear acknowledgment of responsibility by the offender.

The speech act of apology can be carried out with the following performative verbs which Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984:207) classify as

IFIDs: (be) sorry; excuse; apologize; forgive; regret; pardon. Whilst it is true to say that all of these verbs can be used to produce utterances functioning as apologies. Alternatively, a politician may make reference to one of the factors which precipitated the need for an apology and their responsibility for the offence. In this case, the apology is performed *indirectly* through a speech act like 'statement of intent/desire'. We can say that the utterance gives rise to an implicature of the sort 'with this utterance, I am performing an apology'. However, as with all implicatures, that inferred meaning is cancellable. Below we will review some of former US President Donald Trump's speech acts of apologizing publicly as performative strategies for reducing personal accountability and evading personal responsibility.

A first example is when Trump felt compelled to pull back on his statement in Helsinki that embraced Russian President Vladimir Putin's version of the 2016 presidential campaign interference story over the facts presented by U.S. intelligence services in a television appearance. He read from the paper during this speech, using a formal tone here (reading from his script): "Let me be totally clear in saying that — and I've said this many times — I accept our intelligence community's conclusion that Russia's meddling in the 2016 election took place." Then he looked up. Change of tone, to the casual Trump, the voice his followers know conveys his true feelings. And then he interjected: "Could be other people also. A lot of people out there." He would however come back to his script, claiming that his error in Helsinki had been the misstating of just a single word — "would" instead of "wouldn't." "*So you can put that in*," he said, "and I think that probably clarifies things pretty good by itself." His tone of language fluctuates between formality and a more spontaneous and impulsive tone he uses to address and nod his followers. Combining ideas of unity and patriotism, we can say that his discourse promotes a sense of epic, which makes it easier for his followers to accept his attempt at apology (or deflection of that). Several studies have pointed out problems such as the ones we identified here: issuing of delegated apologies (i.e. apologizing for acts that the speaker was not involved in directly; (Cunningham, 1999), limiting expressions of regret to symbolic restitution (without material compensation (Govier & Verwoerd, 2002) and more.

In the same way, Trump apologized in 2016 for lewd and sexually aggressive remarks he made in the early 2000s. The then GOP presidential nominee posted a defiant 90-second video just after midnight on social media, telling voters that he is not a "perfect person" and that the words captured by a hot mic in 2005 "don't reflect who I am" (CNN Politics, 2016). This is another performative speech act to evade and deflect responsibility. Trump has expressed unapologetic criticism of opponents, religious groups, developing countries, the disabled and women, in ways that were unacceptable for those who went before him. How does he get away with it? Trump spins negativity instead of defending against it. If he is accused of racism,

he says he's pro-security. If he is accused of sexism as in the case above, he says he rejects imposed political correctness

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