Doctors' Orders vs. Politicians' Bafflegab: Analysis of Iranian President's and Deputy Health Minister's Speeches on the Coronavirus Pandemic

Farid KhezrMinaei[1, *] Esmat Babaii[2,]

[1]Department of foreign languages, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran
[2] Department of foreign languages, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract: This study adopted a critical discourse analysis approach to analyze the potential ideological differences between the Iranian President and Deputy Health Minister (DHM) in the representation of issues related to the Coronavirus Pandemic. The analysis was based on the meeting of the national task force against Coronavirus chaired by President Rouhani, held in 2020, and DHM's five press conferences and interviews during the same period. By integrating insights from van Dijk's model (2005), the findings revealed that the President's speech on the Coronavirus Pandemic was highly ideological. However, the DHM had a tendency to use more objective and neutral words in the descriptions of the COVID-19 and express his views in a transparent way. The findings of this study are significant in raising the public's awareness of the manipulative function of the language used by politicians to express political ideologies, even on a public health issue such as the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Keywords: Coronavirus Pandemic, Critical Discourse Analysis, Discursive Strategies, political discourse

1. Introduction

In December 2019, an epidemic Corona-virus disease broke out in China (Liu et al., 2020). "On January 30, 2020, the rapid acceleration in the number of confirmed cases in China and abroad led to the announcement made by WHO that the event has already constituted a Public Health Emergency of International Concern" (Feng et al., 2020). Finally, on March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Coronavirus outbreak a pandemic (WHO, 2020a).

Since then, the Coronavirus Pandemic has become a global health issue and led to numerous health, socioeconomic and political problems in the affected countries. The economic disruption caused by the pandemic has been devastating as well. The pandemic placed millions of people at risk of falling into extreme poverty and suffering from malnutrition, poor health as well as other types of abuse including child labor.

Given all these, the Corona-virus pandemic has become a crisis for governments. In fact, exceeding the description of 'a health issue', the pandemic has gained the status of 'a political hassle' in countries like Iran where there were already too many national and international challenges to deal with. Facing many crises and adverse circumstances, Iran has particularly been exposed to the effects of the Corona-virus pandemic. The political discourse around the pandemic in the country is not only about the disease, but also about other socio-economic and political issues related to the pandemic. As van Dijk (2005) suggests, politics, ideology and discourse are intricately related. Not surprisingly, then, the discourse about Corona-virus has been ideologically-laden when handled by Iranian politicians. Governments, as the policymakers in the society, are constantly judged by their people in terms of how successful or unsuccessful they have been in dealing with the pandemic-

---

* Corresponding Author: farid.minae@gmail.com

related issues, ranging from the mortality rate to the economic constraints and hardships. Since the starting point of the pandemic, Iranian people have observed differences or even discrepancies between the information provided by the medical authorities and the government officials. Such incongruities tend to produce an atmosphere of public mistrust, particularly when many people already assumed that transparency of information has been somehow compromised (cf. Rassouli, et al. 2020). These two suppliers of information also adopted different types of discourse to inform and warn the people and, at the same time, solicit their cooperation. It seems to us that critical analysis of speeches given by a top health official and the President as the top political authority can reveal their real perspectives toward a national health issue and help people discern the facts masqueraded under carefully-chosen rhetorical strategies.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been considered as a useful approach conducive to uncovering the bond between language and ideology, especially in political discourse. Van Dijk (1997) explains that one of the primary aims of CDA is to discover different sources of dominance, bias, and inequality in the society through analyzing written or spoken texts. Politicians have access to a wide range of discursive strategies and rhetorical devices which enable them to represent their underlying ideologies. Therefore, content analysis of such strategies employed by them could help illuminate how they use all the social events even the unfortunate ones to their own benefits. The aim of this study is to investigate Iranian President's and DHM's use of discursive strategies in their speeches on the Corona-virus pandemic to affect people's perception, which seems to be of special significance during a pandemic when the success of political leadership heavily depends on building trust and convincing the public to follow government guidelines.

2. Literature review

Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a new wave of critical discourse studies from different perspectives. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, social media has become an important platform for people to obtain news from health authorities, political actors, and even non-experts. Therefore, social media discourse around COVID-19 has been one of the main CDA strands that caught the attention of numerous researchers. These studies mainly focused on describing framing Covid-19 (Wicke & Bolognesi, 2020), impacts of the pandemic on public discourse and behavior (Rauchfleisch, et al. 2021), and the spread of misinformation (Gallotti, et al. 2020; Park, et al. 2020).

News media coverage of COVID-19 pandemic has been unprecedented. In fact, no other public health crisis has ever received this amount of coverage from news media, especially newspapers and news channels. News outlets are considered the primary source of information which have a key role in the construction of reality for most people worldwide. In addition, news coverage can embody the reporters' judgments as well as the attitudes of the news outlets towards the relevant events as well. Hence, a number of scholars have analyzed media coverage of COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of discourse analysis. Such studies focused on topics including media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic and financial markets behavior in its shadow (Haroon & Rizvi 2020), construction of China's image in media (Sun 2021; Jia & Lu 2021; Zhang & Shaw 2021), news media denominations of COVID-19 pandemic according to ideological differences (Prieto-Ramos et al. 2020), and boosting nationalism during the pandemic (Martikainen & Sakki 2021). Since the information provided by political actors plays a key role in the construction of our pictures of reality and keeping the country informed during the COVID-19 pandemic, various discourse studies focused on analyzing the behavior and discourse of politicians as a way to reveal their rhetorical strategies and hidden intentions. Such studies include communication and management of Covid-19 crisis by spokespersons using metaphor analysis (Castro Seixas, 2021) and political leadership and crisis communication during COVID-19 (Watkins, et al. 2021 and McGuire, et al. 2020).

A number of scholars have analyzed key strategies employed by political actors to form public perception while communicating COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Chepurnaya (2021) in her study analyzed key strategies employed by US President Donald Trump to form public perception while communicating a crisis, namely COVID-19 pandemic. Results suggested four groups of strategies: (1) legitimization (through emotions, altruism, a hypothetical future, voices of expertise, rationality, defeasibility, simple denial and bolstering), (2) delegitimization (through negative

evaluations, accusations, sarcasm, nicknaming, attacking the accuser, shifting the blame), (3) mitigation (transcendence and differentiation) and (4) intensification (through the use of repetitions, metaphors, superlatives, intensifiers). The study concluded that the macro goal underlying the described strategies is to present the Trump administration's efforts to address the COVID-19 pandemic as hard and effective.

CDA can be significant in raising public's awareness of the manipulative function of the language used by politicians to express political ideologies, even on a public health issue such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Within this tradition, we compare the discourse employed by a political authority with that a health expert in the politically-sensitive environment of Iran. As such, a brief account of Iran's sociopolitical environment of Iran before COVID seems necessary.

2.1. Iran's socio-economic and political setting

The COVID-19 pandemic has struck Iran at a moment of particular vulnerability for its government. The government had faced unprecedented socioeconomic and political challenges in the year before coronavirus hit Iran.

Iran's economy has been hobbled by the U.S. sanctions for years over its disputed nuclear program. The Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) could have relieved the sanctions and revived Iran's crippling economy. However, on May 2018, President Trump unilaterally pulled the US out of the deal and pursued a maximum pressure campaign against Iran. As a result, Iran experienced tighter sanctions, targeting nearly all sectors of the country's economy. A drop in the Iranian currency disrupted Iran's foreign trade and boosted annual inflation, which the IMF forecast at 35.7% (*Reuters News Agency*, 2019). This in turn increased unemployment, especially among the youth. The youth unemployment rate was 25.5% in Iran where almost 40% of the 80 million people are under 25 (*The World Bank*, 2019).

Facing several socio-political crises afterwards, i.e., public demonstrations protesting gasoline price in November 2019, the assassination of a top Iranian military General, Qasem Soleimani, by an American drone on January 2020, mistaken shooting of Ukraine International Airlines flight PS752 by Iranian air defense crew within days after assassination (BBC, 2020a, b, and c), Iranian government's already weak status received a new devastating blow. On February 19, 2020, Iran officially announced its first two coronavirus cases (Tylor, 2020). Shortly after, Mainstream news agencies reported that the government was hiding the number of infected and death toll (BBC, 2020b; AP, 2020; France24, 2020). However, President Rouhani's government strongly denied any cover-up of a growing outbreak. Moreover, the government was criticized severely for not acting properly against the epidemic. The government heavily criticized for what people considered its poor judgment, incompetence, and failure to comprehend the severity of the crisis (Fassihi, 2020).

2.2. Research questions

Applying van Dijk's critical discourse analysis model (2005), the current study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the discursive strategies used by Iran's President and DHM to express their ideologies in addressing issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. How the COVID-19 pandemic is framed and evaluated in Iran's President and DHM speeches?

3. Methodology

3.1. Corpus

The data comprised the meeting of the national task force against Coronavirus chaired by President Rouhani, held on May 14, 2020, and DHM Iraj Harirchi's five press conferences and interviews in the same period. The national task force against Coronavirus was established in February 2020. It is worth noting that all the necessary measures for prevention and control of covid-19 including lockdown order are taken and subsequently announced by the national task force against the COVID-19 pandemic.

The full speech of the meeting of the national task force against Coronavirus was retrieved from www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9r8S-9Ykpo. Furthermore, DHM Iraj Harirchi's five press conferences and interviews were taken from (https://www.aparat.com/v/CiuS4), (https://www.aparat.com/v/FO3Tt),(https://www.telewebion.com/episode/2411062), (https://b2n.ir/b36301), and (https://b2n.ir/d37357).

3.2. Analytical Framework

As mentioned before, van Dijk's (2005) CDA model was used as the analytical model in this study. Van Dijk (2008) suggests that CDA, which he preferably calls Critical Discourse Studies, is an academic movement rapidly spread in linguistics and the social sciences since 1979. Richardson (2007, p.1) describes CDA as "a perspective on critical scholarship: a theory and a method of analyzing the way that individuals and institutions use language". As a discipline, Critical Discourse Analysis has expanded into a number of approaches which despite sharing similarities in their fundamental principles are based on different theories. Among them, Socio-cognitive approach developed by van Dijk has gained prominent status through widespread application. His socio-cognitive theory of critical discourse studies proposes a three-layer model including the interaction among discourse, cognition, and society (see van Dijk, 2008; Lin, 2014). In fact, "van Dijk uses cognitive schema theory (e.g., context models) as the middle layer to mediate between structures of language and discourse (e.g., lexical choices, rhetorical strategies) at the micro level and structures of society at the macro level (e.g., gender, ethnic, sexual categories)" (Lin, 2014, p. 215). In unmasking the existing ideologies, van Dijk (2005) introduces 27 categories of ideological discourse analysis including Number Game, Authority, Categorization, Implication, and Comparison, etc. The model proved highly instrumental in analyzing the corpus under investigation.

3.3. Data analysis

The first step entailed transcribing the speeches. All the speeches of the President and the DHM were transcribed. Afterward, the transcripts were content analyzed for the major themes. Five major themes emerged. The text sequences related to each theme were then translated literally into English. The next analytical step involved the identification of discursive strategies. Words and longer text sequences were scrutinized to identify the discursive strategies employed by both the President and the DHM in their speeches. Finally, the potential ideologies of the President and DHM were revealed and interpreted through their use of the mentioned discursive strategies.

4. Results

Based on the analysis of the transcribed speeches, five major themes emerged: i) 'Reopening of the Economic Activities', ii) 'Coronavirus Test and Medical Care Costs', iii) 'Development of Coronavirus Vaccine', iv) 'Medical supplies, accommodations, and Medical Staffs' Needs', and v) 'Observance of Health Protocols by People'.

4.1. Reopening of the Economic Activities

4.1.1. President Rouhani

(1) "Once we started the reopenings [of economic activities], another bipolarity was about to form. A bipolarity of life and <u>bread</u>. Where one says life is more important and the other says bread is more important."

   President Rouhani by using the word "bread" employed a semantic-rhetorical figure, namely metaphor. Metaphor is a figure of speech in which a thing regarded as representative of another thing. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain "Metaphors are crucial for expressing attitudes and beliefs and making sense of complex events" (p. 156–160). Metaphors are commonly used to provide clarity when explaining an idea. But, it is not always the case, especially in political discourse. In fact, Metaphor

can be a subtle way of obscuring or hiding salient aspects of things. In the excerpt above, "Bread" metaphorically refers to income and livelihood. Generally, income should cover food, clothing, housing, health care, entertainment, travel, and even savings. However, the President by using the word "bread" intended to reduce the meaning of income to only covering food. In other words, it does not imply any other qualities of a good life including welfare.

There is a reason why President preferred to use "bread" among many other terms to refer to income. Iran has been under a weight of international sanctions for some decades and this has caused its economy to shrink every year. After US maximum pressure campaign and the coronavirus outbreak, Iran's economy has faced its worst challenges in 40 years. This has translated into a high inflation rate which itself means a severe decline in the Iranians' purchasing power and quality of life. Knowing all this, the President could not find any better word for expressing his intention.

(2) "Praise to God, this bipolarity was not created. It means that everyone understood that both life should be saved and bread should be prepared. It is not possible to let people be hungry."

The word "everyone" indicates the use of a common political strategy called 'consensus'. "To claim or insist on cross-party or national consensus is a well-known political strategy in situations where the country is threatened, for instance by outside attack" (van Dijk, 2005, p. 736). The President feels that the bipolarity is a threat to the country and attempts to persuade audience that all the nation supported his decision.

Furthermore, to show what would have happened if the bipolarity were created, the President exploited another strategy, namely 'counterfactuals'. Counterfactuals is used to show how the present would have been if some action were taken or not taken in the past. In simple words, the translation of "it is not possible to let people be hungry" is "If we had not reopened the businesses, people would have been hungry". The President wants to highlight the significance of his decision by showing the fact that if he had not made that decision what negative consequences people would have to suffer.

(3) "According to the leader of the country whom I was talking with a couple of days ago, we were talking about coronavirus (Rouhani does not mention who); He said "I am not worried about coronavirus. some people have lost their lives and some people will lose their lives. I am worried about the poverty of my people. A lot of people are dying of hunger, more than those who are dying of the coronavirus. I am worried about this."

In this part of his talk, Rouhani attempts to justify his decision about the reopening of the economic activities through the discursive strategy of illustration and examples. According to van Dijk (2005) "a powerful move in argumentation is to give concrete examples, often in the form of a vignette or short story, illustrating or making more plausible a general point defended by the speaker" (p. 737). By resorting to illustration and examples, the President attempts to draw the attention of audience to the fact that there are 'leaders of some countries' who are greatly concerned about the adverse economic effect of the COVID-19 pandemic while at the same time subtly projecting his own views.

It is obvious that President gives a high priority to the economy, but he cannot directly mention the dire effects of business shutdown since it can primarily threaten his face. If he says the continuance of business shutdown will cause people to die of hunger, this will undermine its government's authority. For a country like Iran whose political leaders describe it as powerful, wealthy, and strong, even under sanctions, mentioning this is not a face-saving act. Therefore, by quoting an anonymous leader of some country, the President can be more persuasive before the general public and justify his decision on resuming the economic activities.

Besides, the President combines the illustration and examples with vagueness strategy. In political language, vagueness is a common strategy. In his speech, there is no clear reference to the name of the leader whom he talked to. According to Gruber (1993), there are several reasons for the use of vagueness in political communication including avoiding face-threatening acts (FTAs) before other politicians. He suggests that politicians have a public positive face (PPF) and try to observe the principle when dealing with one another in public. Therefore, he observes the basic principles of courtesy by not mentioning the name of the leader whom he talked to. At the same time, one can argue that the leader and the talk could be fictional altogether!

(4) "Praise to God, this was done well. both our Ministry of Health and our Ministry of the Interior, all our organizations, our armed forces, all the people, and all the political factions; no one allowed this bipolarity to take place; this is one of the great achievements of our country."

In the excerpt above, the President makes use of another common strategy in political discourse, namely 'hyperbole'. Van Dijk (2005) defines Hyperbole as "a semantic rhetorical device for the enhancement of meaning" (p.737). Hyperbolic terms can be used as an effective tool for positive self-presentation. Rouhani highlights the achievement of avoiding bipolarity through the use of hyperbolic element "great achievement". Also, numerous use of the possessive pronoun "our" is to create a polarized account of us i.e. Iran vs. others i.e. other countries especially the US. The following excerpt illustrates the point clearly.

(5) "Now you see in the United States that what a <u>peculiar bipolarity</u> is happening….what a <u>major bipolarity</u> has been created [in the United States]. Praise to God, <u>these bipolarities were not created in our country and things were done well and in a considered manner</u>."

In the excerpt above, there is a case of comparison strategy leading to positive Self-presentation and negative Other presentation. This comparison is used to emphasize the success of Rouhani's government in managing the reopening of economic activities compared to a country like the US. It is particularly important as it is showcasting the success of a developing country (Iran) to the failure of an economic super-power which happens to be Iran's political adversary as well.

In addition, the President employed Hyperbole to make the comparison of negative-Other presentation and positive-self presentation more effective. Here, Hyperbolism is used for ideologically biased polarization of 'us' and 'them'. Hyperbolism is achieved through the uses of such words as "peculiar" and "major" to negatively present the United States and "well" and "considered manner" to positively present Iran.

4.1.2. DHM Iraj Harirchi

(1) "Our policy is maximum [business] reopenings in order to secure people's livelihoods. All businesses can log into the health ministry system and receive their barcode."
(2) "Guilds can receive the [health] protocols relevant to their businesses. The guilds which have not received the barcodes are not allowed to reopen."
(3) "Event venues and kindergartens are closed. Cafes and traditional coffee houses will be reopened but are not allowed to offer hookah. Pools in cities with red condition are not allowed to reopen. And some of the high-contact sports such as wrestling and karate are not allowed to reopen. However, most of the businesses are allowed to reopen."

In this talk, without using any rhetorical device, the DHM, matter-of-factly, conveys the decisions made by the national task force. One possible explanation is that since he is the DHM, there is no political aim for him to achieve; Therefore, he makes his points directly without trying to impress the people.

4.2. Costs of Coronavirus Test and Medical Care

4.2.1. President Hassan Rouhani

(1) "<u>A physician in New York City</u> went to the hospital to take a coronavirus test. First of all, he wrote that I was in a long line. It took me four or five hours to take the test. Then, he was waiting for the result. He wrote that it took him six days to get the result. Well, see <u>what a situation the world is facing with</u>. Besides, the test came with a bill. He said I paid a lot of money for the test. <u>The test is expensive; the lines are long; the results of the test come with delay;</u> and <u>they</u> are <u>arrogant</u> too. Praise to God, we see that we <u>do not pay attention to whether the patient is Iranian or foreigner; we do not pay attention to the religion of the patient; we do not pay attention to where the patient is coming from; we consider all the people equal. We even treat the foreign nationals for free</u>. But, in that meeting, <u>it was said</u> that <u>they differentiate between the whites and the blacks, among those who are natives and those who came to the United States of America during this period. They are being treated differently</u>. It is <u>very important</u>."

The issue related to the costs of coronavirus test and treatment is a hot topic around the world. It is especially of high importance in Iran. Since Iranians are already under high economic pressure, any further expenses imposed on them due to the COVID-19 pandemic can have catastrophic consequences. Given its importance, the President decides to make his points about the costs of

coronavirus test and treatment 'in other countries' through the use of Example and Illustration. To do so, he quotes an American physician who shared his experience of how he got tested for coronavirus in New York City. This way, he exaggerates the hardships people in Other countries are going through and demonstrates that his administration has been more successful even in comparison to some developed countries.

But, why did President decide to narrate the experience of a physician? In fact, being a physician can make the impression that he or she is in a fair position to judge the health system. Hence, the President recourses to the rhetorical strategy of 'Authority' through quoting from a physician. By mentioning an expert view, he is able to support his claim which comes later in his remarks as a form of comparison between Us versus Others. In fact, in his following remarks, he boasts about his administration's humanitarian treatment of patients, regardless of race, nationality, and residential status, implying Others' treatments were not bias-free. In the meantime, the President avoids mentioning the name of the physician or the source through which he read the story. Rhetorical strategy of vagueness was frequently used when the President narrated stories or quoted from authorities.

Soon after the story is narrated, the President employs another rhetorical strategy called Generalization. According to Schwandt (2007) Generalization refers to "a broad, encompassing statement or proposition made by drawing an inference from observation of the particular." (p.126). Here, the President *generalizes a* particular situation experienced by *a physician in New York* to the whole world. In other words, he uses a single account of a physician about the poor management of testing for corona-virus, the cost of test, and the delay in receiving the result so as to convince Iranians that the entire world is facing the same difficulties. It can be considered as a strong example of Generalization in that a simple account of a person in a health center in one city in a country is generalized to the whole world. There is one possible hidden intention in making such a generalization by the President. In fact, generalization was used to create a polarization between in-group i.e. Iran and out-group i.e. the World through so that he can say positive things about the in-group and negative things about the out-group. This way, the President makes the impression that his administration took good care of the pandemic while other countries failed to do so.

Generalization sets the ground for Rouhani to make use of another effective rhetorical device named Comparison. Based on the generalization that shows a world experiencing shortcomings and deficiencies in dealing with the pandemic, the President attempts to emphasize negative characteristics of the out-group and positive characteristics of own group. Statements such as the test is expensive; the lines are long; the results of the test come with delay, and they are arrogant are used to negatively present the out-group. The adjective arrogant, which is a case of Lexicalization, is used to negatively label the out-group. As van Dijk (1998) maintains opinions may be conventionalized and codified in lexicon (p. 205). Therefore, Lexicalization or word choice can be a major dimension of ideologically controlled meaning (Van Dijk, 1995, p. 259).

But why does the President use the word "arrogant" all of a sudden without any prior explanation that shows they are arrogant. In analyzing this sentence, one important thing should be considered. In fact, the reference of the pronoun "they" is not clear. On the surface, one might think that the pronoun refers to the world's officials. However, it is not reasonable to think that the President refers to the whole world. As he quotes from an American physician, there is a high chance that the word "they" might refer to the US healthcare officials or political officials. This is further supported as the President exclusively addresses the US Statements such as they differentiate among the whites and the blacks, among those who are natives and those who came to the US during this period, and they are being treated differently are used to negatively present the US.

There is also a case of passiveness when the President emphasizes the negative points about the US. The President through the use of passive construction "it was said" hides the agency of who exactly said those negative points about the US. Normally, if speakers cite authorities to support their claim, argumentation will be more persuasive. However, the President decided to hide the agency that makes his argument weak. One possible reason for this is the fact that there might have not been an authoritative source to cite, but he did not want to project a personal view directly, therefore he decided to use a passive construction to hide the agency.

Positive self-presentation manifests itself in sentences such as we do not pay attention to whether the patient is Iranian or foreigner; we do not pay attention to the religion of the patient; we do not pay

attention to where the patient is coming from; we consider all the people equal. We even treat the foreign nationals for free.

4.2.2. DHM Iraj Harirchi

(1) "It should be noted that the coronavirus test is expensive. Taking the test in a state hospital without any extra fee can cost about 250.000 Tomans and in private sectors the cost can be up to 700.000 Tomans."

In the excerpt above, the DHM uses numbers to represent a rough estimate of the cost related to coronavirus test in both state and private hospitals. In deploying number game, the DHM indirectly makes an attempt to advise the people to avoid any high-risk behavior that forces them to get tested for the coronavirus, because it can impose on them a large sum of money.

Interestingly, a contradiction between the President and the DHM can be observed. Although the President said the coronavirus test is completely free, here the DHM states that not only is not the test free but also is expensive.

(2) "During the COVID-19 pandemic, some direct expenses such as costs of taking the test, the treatment in the hospital, the intensive care, in-home care, personal protective equipment, drug, and others like consuming excessive vitamins C and D are added to the household expenditure."

Contrary to the President, the DHM tries to state the facts clearly. In this excerpt, he directly and without any use of rhetorical devices mentions the potential expenses that a person who tested positive for coronavirus might have.

(3) "In the health system, we made some decisions in order to prevent imposing backbreaking and impoverishing expenditures on the households. For instance, coronavirus patients who do not have health insurance coverage will get it on the day of hospitalization; their expenses will be imposed on the insurance companies and the health system. Furthermore, poor patients will be treated for free; and foreign patients will either be treated for free or should pay 5 to 10 percent of the costs."

There are two cases of lexicalization in this paragraph. First, the DHM chose the adjectives "backbreaking" and "impoverishing" to describe how catastrophic the expenditures related to coronavirus treatment are. In deploying lexicalization, the DHM wants to emphasize the importance of the steps that the government has taken to assist people during the pandemic. The second case of lexicalization is when the DHM uses the verb "imposed on" to refer to the fact that the expenses are covered by the insurance companies and the health system. The verb impose has a negative connotation and it can mean that the government has been forced to accept the expenses.

Overall, the DHM does not make use of many rhetorical strategies and attempts to state the facts as they are when talking about different issues. With regard to the cost of treatment, the DHM states clearly who can benefit from the free treatment and how much of the cost should be paid by the foreign nationals. It is in contradiction with what the President said regarding the free test and the treatment for all Iranians and foreign nationals.

4.3. Development of Coronavirus Vaccine

4.3.1. President Rouhani

(1) "Everybody is doing their best for [producing Coronavirus] vaccine. I read in an article that more than 80 important and well-known international institutions are making efforts to produce the vaccine. Well, many including major universities, and major scientific institutions are involved. We hope this vaccine will be produced as quickly as possible and it will inshallah (God willing)."

In this talk, many rhetorical devices have been employed. Evidentiality is the first rhetorical strategy the President recourses to. He cites facts about the development of coronavirus vaccine from an article. According to van Dijk (2005) "evidentials are an important move to convey objectivity, reliability, and hence credibility" (p.736). In a similar vein, the President attempts to show reliability of the claims he makes about coronavirus vaccine. Furthermore, evidentiality is combined with vagueness. As is almost the case, the President does not provide any information to clarify the exact article he is referring to.

Number game, as a manipulative tool, is also foregrounded in this excerpt where numbers are employed to represent the total number of institutions that are working on coronavirus development.

Furthermore, the adverb "more than" is used to hype the number. In fact, 80 is amplified through the use of the adverb "more than" to emphasize the large number itself. The President also uses some other hyperbolic items including "many" and "major" to achieve the same goal. By mentioning a large number of institutions, the President attempts to give hope to the people that all the hardships will be over soon.

(2) "For the treatment too, I read in the same article that 130 major institutions are making attempts to produce medicines that can cure the disease. Well, a lot of institutions are making attempts to produce the medicine. This medicine may be produced too."

As in his statements about the vaccine, the President uses the same rhetorical strategies to talk about the production of the medicine for coronavirus. First, he mentions an unknown article in an attempt to create objectivity and increase the reliability of his claims. In the meantime, the President makes use of number game when mentioning 130 institutions as a means of representing facts against opinions. In this way, the President adds more credibility to his statements. And finally, to create the impression that a huge number of institutions are working to produce coronavirus medicine, the President decides to use the hyperbolic adverb of "a lot of".

4.3.2. DHM Iraj Harirchi

(1) "In the past few decades, production of a vaccine has taken seven years on average. For example, some of the vaccines took 28 years to be produced. Mr. Bill Gates has a foundation which one of its main plan is to produce AIDS and Malaria vaccines. They have failed to do so until now."

To state directly that there is little hope for the production of the vaccine in the short run can lead to frustration of the people and consequently put them in great distress. Therefore, the DHM through the use of implication decides to let people infer the intended meaning from the discourse. Thus, when he says "production of the vaccine on average has taken seven years" or "some of the vaccines took 28 years to be produced", he is in fact implying that there will be no vaccine in the near future; therefore, people must observe the health protocols.

Number game is another discursive strategy that the DHM recourses to. He states that a vaccine requires 7 to 28 years to be produced. This way, the deputy minister can be more specific and objective in telling people how much time it takes for a vaccine to be produced and convey this claim that there will be no vaccine in the short run. In order to increase the credibility of his claim, the DHM employs another strategy namely, example/illustration. By mentioning an authoritative figure i.e. Mr. Bill Gates who has a foundation whose aim is to produce vaccines for AIDS and Malaria and his failure to do so, the DHM attempts to be more persuasive in his arguments about the time-taking nature of coronavirus vaccine production.

(2) "Meanwhile, fellow Iranians should consider that vaccine is not cheap. In fact, it is expensive and may cost more than ten dollars."

Here, DHM through such phrases as "vaccine is not cheap", "it is expensive", and "it may cost more than ten dollars" implicitly conveys the meaning that even if a vaccine will be produced, most of Iranians cannot afford it. Therefore, the people must follow the protocols in any case. Furthermore, he uses number game i.e. ten dollars combined with hyperbolic phrase i.e. more than in order to create objectivity and emphasize the high price of the vaccine, respectively.

4.4. Medical supplies, accommodations, and Medical Staffs' Needs

4.4.1. President Rouhani

(1) "Today, we can say that the number of ventilators in our healthcare centers and in our hospitals is very different compared to the month of Esfand (February-March). One thousand ventilators were added. This means at least one thousand intensive care beds can be added for this disease. Intensive care beds are added. More than 400 intensive care beds are added."

When it comes to the actions the government has taken to provide medical supplies and equipment, the importance of quantification is undeniable. Therefore, President employs number game to objectively states how many ventilators and beds were provided by the government. However, He does not mention any number that shows how many medical supplies were needed and how many of them

were provided. This way, the President avoids giving a clue to the people so as to find out how well the government did in this regard. In addition, he combines numbers with vague phrases i.e. "more than" and "at least".

(2) "You saw all of those hospital beds that armed forces provided, <u>4000 hospital beds</u>. Well, of course, not all of them were used. There was no need. But this preparation was an assurance. This preparation was a source of confidence. When people see that hospitals have empty beds, there are mobile hospitals, and convalescent homes, they get confidence. We examined the situation with pessimism and we benefited from it. We saw that it was beneficial. You saw that <u>some countries got into problems, however, we didn't get into any problem due to this prediction.</u>"

Similar to his previous talks, the President continues the use of 'Comparison' as a rhetorical strategy positively describing the in-group while negatively depicting the out-group. Here, positive self-presentation manifests itself as an emphasis on Iran's preparation, having empty beds, mobile hospitals, and convalescent homes. Furthermore, positive self-presentation is achieved through the use of number game. The phrase "4000 hospital beds" is used to objectively highlight the positive things about in-group. On the other hand, the out-group's weak performance is highlighted when the President states that "You saw that some countries got into problems". In fact, he brings into focus the lack of prediction and preparation of the Out-group.

Vagueness is the last discursive strategy used by the President in this excerpt. Logically, if the President had used proof or evidentials, his claims could have been more powerful and persuasive. However, for negative other-presentation, the President uses an expression that lacks a well-defined reference. In other words, he uses determiner "some" in order to avoid mentioning the names of the countries that he claims their performances were weaker than those of Iran.

(3) "During this period, that now we are approaching one and a half months, our medical staff did what they needed to do. They <u>tried their best</u>. They <u>did a great job</u>. They <u>made a great sacrifice</u>, and they are making so."

During the pandemic that the pressure on the medical staff is at its highest level, their specific needs must be a reasonable concern of any government. However, the President decides not to talk about the needs of the medical staff and just uses hyperbolic elements to thank them.

4.4.2. DHM Iraj Harirchi

(1) "After all, it is not possible to fight coronavirus with bare hands. <u>Soldiers</u> come to the frontline, they are being <u>martyred</u>, and you expect victory from them. Victory requires equipment and supplies."

In the excerpt above, the use of euphemism and analogy is evident. The DHM highlights the significant role of the medical staff in fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic through the use of such euphemisms as "soldiers" and "martyred". Furthermore, when he states that "victory requires equipment and supplies", he implicitly mentions that the health system faces a shortage of equipment in dealing with the pandemic.

(2) "You cannot tell those who are in the frontline, who insert breathing tubes in the mouth of coronavirus patients, who patients cough at their face, who are at the risk of coronavirus infection, if you want to continue your responsibilities, you have to prepare your lunch and dinner, in the case of infection you have to buy your medicines, you should beg to this man and so on. It cannot be this way. Our healthcare personnel <u>are not being paid</u> for their extra work, and their salaries, which are lower than the minimum wage, they <u>have not been paid</u> for <u>3 or 4 months.</u>"

The Statement above is a case of irony. "Accusations may come across as more effective when they are not made point blank (which may violate face constraints), but in apparently lighter forms of irony" (van Dijk, 2005, p. 737). Here, the DHM, through the use of irony, emphasizes the difficulties that the medical staff is going through and at the same time criticizes the authorities in a completely face-saving manner.

Employment of passiveness is also obvious in the DHM's speech. He most often uses passive sentences to avoid naming those who are responsible for solving the medical staffs' needs (e.g. they are not paid). This might be considered as a face-saving act on the part of the DHM. Although we all know the government is supposed to pay the medical staff and support them.

At the end, the DHM uses Number game i.e., "3 or 4 months" to objectively state how many months the healthcare personnel have not been paid. This way, he might have a stronger impact on the audience, helping them understand the medical staff's condition.

(3) "How is it possible to take care of our personnel's health? They work, take sample from mouths of the patients, and pose themselves at risk of getting infected only for <u>1.8 million Tomans</u>. And they have not been paid for <u>three months</u>."

In the excerpt above, number game is employed by the DHM. He uses numbers to show the severity of the problems faced by the healthcare staff. Furthermore, number game is accompanied by passiveness so as to avoid mentioning the name of the responsible authorities.

4.5. Observance of Health Protocols by People

4.5.1. President Rouhani

(1) "I would like to thank the great and dear people for their cooperation. Today, <u>the health ministry stated</u> that on average <u>83 percent of the people and the guilds</u> observed the protocols in the country. In some cities, the protocols have been observed by <u>92 percent of the people</u>. And in other places, it was <u>80 percent</u>. Because Tehran is a big city, the percentage was a little lower. But, on average, <u>83 percent of the people</u> observed the protocols; this shows the cooperation of the people with the healthcare officials and their attention to the health of the society."

One of the major goals of politicians is to convince their audience that what they express is credible. Citing 'Authority' is a well-known strategy for increasing credibility and objectivity. When reporting about the degree of the health protocols observance, the President uses the health ministry as a recognized source to cite from. In addition, Authority is accompanied by Number game. The President uses percentage to show that what he says is fact and not his personal opinion. In general, he seems to be satisfied with the percentage and thanks people for their observance. As it is obvious from the following statements, the DHM sees the situation in a completely different way.

4.5.2. DHM Iraj Harirchi

(1) "Let me say this directly, in our opinion those who tested positive for coronavirus and move around in the city are <u>felons</u>. They are <u>serious</u> <u>criminals</u>. They <u>are committing crimes</u>. Because they might be near a patient and suddenly cough. That patient gets infected. Or they might infect old men and old ladies."

Expressing views and opinions on a hot topic as the health protocol observance requires specific lexicon. As van Dijk (2005) states, "Similar meanings may be variably expressed in different words, depending on the position, role, goals, point of view, or opinion of the speaker, that is, as a function of context features" (p.737). In the DHM's discourse, lexicalization shows itself in blatantly negative expressions. For example, the lexis "felons" and "criminals" are deployed to describe the people who are infected with coronavirus and do not observe the protocols. Furthermore, the noun "criminals" are accompanied by the hyperbolic item "serious" to emphasize the negative deeds of those who do not observe the protocols. The DHM, in a direct and clear way, criticizes the people who do not observe the health protocols. Such a position is highly unlikely to be taken by a political figure like the President.

(2) "One of the points that was mentioned by <u>the Health Minister Dr. Namaki</u> recently was the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be controlled only by giving advice and democracy. Look, the government cannot say things like: I beg, I humbly request. We use such words because we are health ministry. Protocols must be observed."

In this excerpt, the DHM recourses to the rhetorical device of Authority to give his statements more credibility. He cites a short quotation from the Health Minister on a matter that he intends to talk about. Since enforcing the health protocols and restricting people is a highly sensitive matter, he uses implication to make his point clear. When the DHM says the pandemic cannot be controlled by giving advice and democracy, he implicitly criticizes the government for its lack of seriousness in enforcing the protocols.

(3) "We requested the guilds to observe [the protocols]. They said we monitor the protocols' observance ourselves. Give me an example that they reported a violation of the protocols, they closed a factory or a workshop! Unfortunately, it is the case in governmental sections too."

In this statement, there is no obvious use of rhetorical devices. The DHM directly criticizes both the private and governmental sectors for not observing the health protocols. He is not satisfied with the government's lack of intervention when the health protocols are violated in many workplaces.

5. Conclusion

As Jorgensen et al. (2002) explains "With language, we create representations of reality that are never mere reflection of a pre-existing reality but contribute to constructing reality." (p.8-9) This does not mean reality doesn't exist but it gains meaning through discourse. In fact, the language used by leaders can perform a critical role in shaping individual behavior and the tone of the message can instil confidence and offer reassurance to the wider public (Burdett 1999). Thus, language and tone help frame a shared reality, enabling a shift in sense making for followers in terms of how they collectively perceive a critical and changing situation (Whittle et al. 2015).

The present analysis revealed a wide gap between the Covid picture in Iran as depicted by the President as a top political figure and the one described by the DHM as a health authority. The critical discourse analysis of the speeches revealed that the most prominent of strategies employed by the President were Hyperbole, Vagueness, Comparison, Number Game, Example and Illustration, and Negative Other-presentation and Positive Self-presentation. Furthermore, he utilized other discursive strategies including Metaphor, Consensus, Counterfactuals, Generalization, Passiveness, Evidentialilty, and Authority. On the other hand, the DHM Iraj Harirchi had a tendency to state his views directly and in most blatant way. He occasionally used such discursive strategies as Number Game, Lexicalization, Implication, Authority, Irony, Example and Illustration, and Passiveness in his speeches.

The analysis demonstrated that the President's speech at the meeting of the national task force against Coronavirus was a means to assure people of the government's preparedness in dealing with the pandemic. Through certain rhetorical strategies, the President attempted to convince Iranians that the pandemic is under control and there is nothing to be worried about. In this regard, this finding aligns with the results of a study conducted by Chepurnaya (2021) which suggested that the macro goal underlying the strategies used by President Trump is to present his administration's efforts to address the pandemic as hard and effective.

Furthermore, Rouhani's speech was heavily loaded with Comparison and Example and Illustration strategies. He constantly compared the out-group i.e. the US negatively, and in-group i.e. Iran positively. By illustrating how the world, especially the US, is struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic, the President intended to justify the shortcomings of its government in fighting against the disease and to highlight its achievements.

Finally, the President through the deployment of Number Game and Evidentiality attempted to create a sense of hope in people that coronavirus vaccine will be produced and everything will be over in the near future. In total, the President's speech was meant to influence the audience with specific discourse patterns to gain their support and appreciation.

By contrast, the DHM took the pandemic very seriously and elaborated on the issues without much recourse to rhetorical devices. However, the DHM occasionally used discursive strategies including Number Game, Authority, Implication, and Lexicalization to demonstrate the severity of the situation, to criticize governmental sectors, and to warn people of the COVID-19 pandemic's adverse consequences.

To conclude, this study showed that even in catastrophic times like the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, politicians tend to make use of various discursive strategies to highlight their efficiency in handling the situation and mitigate the seriousness of the disastrous conditions. Therefore, CDA can be a useful tool in discovering the realities which according to Fairclough (1995) have been distorted as "non-ideological common sense" (p.27).

References

[1] Rauchfleisch, A., Vogler, D., & Eisenegger, M. (2021) Public sphere in crisis mode: How the COVID-19 pandemic influenced public discourse and user behaviour in the Swiss Twitter-sphere. *The Public*, 28, 129-148.

[2] Chepurnaya, A. (2021) Modeling public perception in times of crisis: discursive strategies in Trump's COVID-19 discourse, *Critical Discourse Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/17405904.2021.1990780

[3] BBC News (2020a, January 3). *Qasem Soleimani: US kills top Iranian general in Baghdad air strike*. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50979463

[4] BBC New (2020b, January 11). Iran plane crash: protesters condmn 'lies' on downed jet. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51079965

[5] BBC News (2020c, August 3). Coronavirus: *Iran cover-up of deaths revealed by data leak*. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53598965

[6] Burdett, J. (1999). Leadership in change and the wisdom of a gentleman. *Participation and Empowerment: An International Journal* 7 (1): 5–14.

[7] Castro Seixas E (2021) War Metaphors in Political Communication on Covid-19. *Front. Sociol.* 5:583680. doi: 10.3389/fsoc.2020.583680

[8] Watkins, D. & Clevenger, G. (2021) US political leadership and Crisis Communication During COVID-19. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 7:1.

[9] McGuire, D. , Cunningham, J., Reynolds, K., & Matthews-Smith, G. (2020). Beating the virus: an examination of the crisis communication approach taken by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Human Resource Development International*, 23, 361-379.

[10] Fairclough, N. (1995). Critical Discourse Analysis: The critical study of language. New York: Longman

[11] Fassihi, F. (2020, march 17). *Power struggle Hampers Iran's coronavirus response.* The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/world/middleeast/coronavirus-iran-rouhani.html

[12] Feng, F., & Xiaoping L. (2020). Facing the pandemic of 2019 novel coronavirus infections: the pediatric perspectives [J]. *Chinese Journal of Pediatrics*, 58, 81-85.

[13] Gallotti, R., Valle, F., Castaldo, N. ,Sacco, P. , & De Domenico, M. . (2020). Assessing the Risks of 'Infodemics' in Response to COVID-19 Epidemics. *Nature Human Behaviour* 4 (12), 1285–1293.

[14] Gruber, H. (1993). Political language and textual vagueness. *Pragmatics Quarterly* (IPrA), 3 (1), 1–28.

[15] Haroon, O. & Rizvi, S. (2020). COVID-19: Media coverage and financial markets behavior – A sectoral inquiry. *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Finance* 27. 1–5.

[16] Jia, W., & Lu, F. (2021). US media's coverage of China's handling of COVID-19: Playing the role of the fourth branch of government or the fourth estate? *Global Media and China*, 6(1), 8–23.

[17] Jørgensen, M. & Phillips, L. J. (2002). The field of discourse analysis. In *Discourse analysis as theory and method* (pp. 1-23). SAGE Publications Ltd, https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781849208871

[18] Lakoff, G., & Johnson (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

[19] Lin, A. (2014). Critical Discourse Analysis in Applied Linguistics: A Methodological Review. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 34*, 213-232.

[20] Liu R., Han H., Liu F., Lv Z., Wu K., Liu Y., Feng Y., Zhu C. (2020). Positive rate of RT-PCR detection of SARS-CoV-2 infection in 4880 cases from one hospital in Wuhan, China, from Jan to Feb 2020. *Clinica Chimica Acta,* 505, 172-175. doi: 10.1016/j.cca.2020.03.009

[21] Martikainen, J., & Sakki, I. (2021). Boosting nationalism through COVID-19 images: Multimodal construction of the failure of the 'dear enemy' with COVID-19 in the national press. *Discourse & Communication*, 15(4), 388–414.

[22] Park, H., Park, S. & Chong. M. (2020). Conversations and Medical News Frames on Twitter: Infodemiological Study on COVID-19 in South Korea. Journal of Medical Internet Research 22 (5).

[23] Prieto-Ramos, F., Pei, J., & Cheng, L. (2020). Institutional and news media denominations of COVID-19 and its causative virus: Between naming policies and naming politics. *Discourse & Communication*, 14(6), 635–652.

[24] Rassouli , M., Ashrafizadeh, H., Shirinabadi Farahani, A., & Akbari, M.E. (2020) COVID-19 Management in Iran as One of the Most Affected Countries in the World: Advantages and Weaknesses. *Frontiers in Public Health* 8, Article 510. doi: 10.3389/fpubh.2020.00510

[25] Richardson, J. (2007). *Analyzing newspapers: an approach from critical discourse analysis.* Basingstoke: Palgrave.

[26] Sun W. (2021). The virus of fear and anxiety: China, COVID-19, and the Australian media. *Global Media and China*.6(1), 24-39.

[27] Tylor, D. (2020, February 13). *A timeline of THE Coronavirus Pandemic*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-timeline.html

[28] van Dijk, T. (1997). *Discourse as social interaction*. London: Sage Publications.

[29] van Dijk, T. A. (2005). Politics, ideology, and discourse. In Wodak, R. (ed.), *Elsevier Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* (pp. 728–740). Amsterdam: Elsevier publication.

[30] van Dijk, T.A. (2008). *Discourse and context: A Sociocognitive approach.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

[31] Wicke, P. ,& Bolognesi M. (2020) Framing COVID-19: How we conceptualize and discuss the pandemic on Twitter. *PLoS ONE* 15(9). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0240010

[32] Whittle, A., Housley, M., Gilchrist, A., Mueller, F. ,& Lenney, P. (2015). "Category Predication Work, DiscursiveLeadership and Strategic Sensemaking." *Human Relations* 68 (3): 377–407.

[33] World Health Organization (2020a, March 11). WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020. https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020

[34] Zhang, X., & Shaw, G. (2021). The UK media coverage of China's handling of the coronavirus outbreak. *Global Media and China*, *6*(1), 40–61.