

# INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATION CONCERNING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC A Critical Discourse Analysis of WHO Director- General's Speeches

STEFANIA D'AVANZO  
UNIVERSITY OF CAMPANIA "L. VANVITELLI"

**Abstract** – During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, institutional communication has been playing a crucial role. For instance, WHO (World Health Organization) has been involved in criticism concerning information related to the origins of the pandemic delivered or not in due time.<sup>1</sup> Starting from this assumption, the study is aimed at investigating the WHO Director-General communication concerning news related to the pandemic through the analysis of speeches delivered by Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO Director-General, from 22nd January to 29th May 2020. From a methodological perspective, the approach of Critical Discourse Analysis will be adopted with particular emphasis on semantic / syntactic relations. Furthermore, the representation of social actors will be explored in order to better understand the roles played by both WHO and China in the news concerning the pandemic. In short, this work will try to explore the processes involved in the communication concerning the pandemic and the representations of the roles played by both WHO and China in order to understand legitimation strategies enacted by these two social actors.

**Keywords:** discourse; power; legitimation; pandemic; social actors.

## 1. Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) has been involved in criticism concerning information related to the origins of the pandemic. Some accusations came from Human Rights Watch director Ken Roth, who said WHO was responsible for "institutional complicity" when it gave credence to some of Beijing's early claims about the outbreak: "WHO has absolutely refused as an institution to say anything critical about China's cover-up of human-to-human transmission, or its ongoing refusal to provide the basic evidence, [...]. What we need is an honest, vigorous inquiry rather than further deference to China's cover-up efforts"<sup>2</sup>). One diplomatic observer in

<sup>1</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/02/china-coronavirus-who-health-soft-power/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210329-who-and-china-a-healthy-relationship>.

Geneva said that WHO had let China do the preliminary investigative work on its own, and then control the terms of the investigation while some Member States decided not to criticize this situation. Former US president Donald Trump famously slammed WHO over its relationship with Beijing. He accused the WHO of being a "puppet of China" and even covering up the initial outbreak of the virus. Based on these assumptions, this study is focused on the analysis of speeches delivered by Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO Director-General, from March to May 2020. In particular, the corpus includes 76 speeches delivered from 22<sup>nd</sup> January to 29<sup>th</sup> May 2020. Specifically, attention will be devoted to the sections of speeches where involvement of China in the outbreak of the pandemic along with the measures adopted by Chinese institutions are mentioned. In section (2), a literature review concerning the relationship between persuasion and discourse will be introduced along with reference to studies on power entangled with discourse (Van Dijk 2006; Fairclough 2000; Van Leeuwen, Wodak 1999; Fowler 1991). In section (3), corpus and methodology will be specified. The focus will be on the detailed features of discourse including the semantic and syntactic dimensions along with lexical choice.

In the Analysis section, the investigation of speeches will be provided from a CDA perspective. In short, the study will attempt to answer two main research questions: 1) How is the relationship between WHO and Chinese institutions operationalized through discourse?; 2) How are social actors – WHO and Chinese institutions – represented through discourse?

## 2. Literature review

The pandemic is not only a biological and a social reality, or even a health reality that combines the biological and the social, it is also a discursive reality (Maingueneau 2021, p. 146). In particular, crisis is viewed as a complex phenomenon that – in its prevalence, disruptiveness and (appearance of) inevitability – is both socially produced and discursively constituted (De Rycker, Mohd Don 2013). Discourse and power relations have been previously investigated in the institutional communication related to the pandemic. For instance, press conferences have been explored and defined as standard platforms for institutional representatives to communicate all the news concerning the pandemic crisis through the media. Thus, starting from the assumption that press conferences clearly represented explicit political intentions (Bhatia 2006; Fairclough 2000), ideologies and power relations between World Health Organization vs. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs were explored in previous studies when the news concerning the pandemic were communicated (Tay 2022). It is necessary to point out that what mainly deals with power relations and the relationship between

persuasion/manipulation and discourse is legitimation, intended as the most relevant procedure enacted to legitimate actions and persuade or manipulate people's minds. Four categories of legitimation have been identified in the literature (Van Leeuwen, Wodak 1999; Fairclough 2003). In particular, authorization is legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom, law, and of person in whom some kind of institutional authority is vested.

Rationalization, instead, is legitimation by reference to the utility of institutional action, and to the knowledge society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity (Fairclough 2003, p. 98). Furthermore, legitimation can be enacted by moral evaluation, which means reference to value systems. Finally, mythopoesis is legitimation conveyed through narrative. In a previous study on crisis discourse related to the pandemic (Musolff *et al.* 2022), legitimation was investigated in relation to public health management, which was conceptualized as a war. A further point under discussion was the relevance of information management entangled with the discourse of Authority. This point is fundamental in this study. During the pandemic, the most relevant news concerning the pandemic was released through speeches. Thus, WHO Director-General was the most reliable institution committed to deliver the correct information about the COVID-19 pandemic. From this perspective, it is possible to assert that Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus had the power to communicate the most relevant and updated news about the spread and the origins of the virus. Thus, previous studies concerning the relationship between discourse and power in the media (Fowler 1991) will be taken into account with particular attention to transitivity (Halliday 1994; Fairclough 2003). Transitivity has been analysed in terms of syntactic variations underlying involvement of actors (e.g. their responsibility, agency, etc.). This concept necessarily involves the representations of social actors who can be activated or passivated in the texts. In particular, they may be Actors in processes or the Affected or Beneficiary. Furthermore, they may be included or excluded or, more simply, mentioned somewhere in the text. Finally, they can be represented personally or impersonally, by name or in terms of class or category (Fairclough 2003, pp. 145-146). Starting from these theoretical assumptions, a further point investigated in the study will concern strategies through which social actors are represented.

### 3. Corpus and Methodology

The corpus includes 76 speeches delivered from 22<sup>nd</sup> January to 29<sup>th</sup> May 2020. (<https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches>). The choice of the time span was due to the need to focus on the actual attitudes and actions

communicated by WHO from the very beginning of the spread of the pandemic. It is important to point out that all the speeches concerning the pandemic delivered during this time span have been investigated. Methodology is based on Critical Discourse Analysis (Van Dijk 2006; Fairclough 2012, 2003; Van Leeuwen, Wodak 1999). In particular, discourse structures and moves at various levels of discourse will be applied to the examples reported. More specifically, attention will be focused on semantic macrostructures, local speech acts, local meanings, local syntax, lexical choices and rhetorical features. More specifically, semantic relations including Causal, Conditional, Temporal, Additive, Elaboration, Contrastive / Concessive ones will be explored in order to analyse legitimation in a more detailed way. As Berger and Luckmann (1996) assert, legitimation provides the explanations and justifications of the main elements of the institutional tradition. Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, transitivity will be investigated through the analysis of the roles played by social actors as activated or passivated in the text.

#### 4. A qualitative investigation according to a CDA perspective

The analysis mainly focuses on excerpts of relevant speeches where it is possible to focus on the actual 'viewpoint' held by WHO concerning the involvement of China in the pandemic from a general perspective. In particular, semantic and syntactic patterns will be investigated. More specifically, as asserted in the previous sections, the investigation concentrated on those phrases where China is explicitly mentioned. The following example is an extract from the 22<sup>nd</sup> January speech delivered by WHO Director:

- 1) I was very impressed by the detail and depth of China's presentation. I also appreciate the cooperation of China's Minister of Health, who I have spoken with directly during the last few days and weeks. His leadership and the intervention of President Xi and Premier Li have been invaluable, and all the measures they have taken to respond to the outbreak. There was an excellent discussion during the committee today, but it was also clear that to proceed, we need more information. For that reason, I have decided to ask the Emergency Committee to meet again tomorrow to continue their discussion, and the Chair, Dr Houssin, has agreed with that request. The decision about whether or not to declare a public health emergency of international concern is one I take extremely seriously, and one I am only prepared to make with appropriate consideration of all the evidence. Our team in China is working with local experts and officials to investigate the outbreak. (22<sup>nd</sup> January 2020) (emphasis added).

The speech starts with a macro speech act (e.g. *I was very impressed by the detail and depth of China's presentation. I also appreciate...*) consisting in putting a strong emphasis on China's 'effective actions'. Firstly, he is referring to the online presentation made earlier by China representatives on the same day. Appreciation of China's Minister of health is also mentioned by the Director whose leadership and measures adopted to face the outbreak are defined as 'invaluable', which is an adjective with a very positive connotation in its superlative value. A superlative adjective (e.g. *excellent*) is also employed to refer to the discussion that occurred between the Director and the Emergency Committee. If the semantic / syntactic patterns are observed, a causal relation is introduced by '*for that reason*', which focuses on the decisions made by the Director concerning the need to put off the declaration of a public health emergency of international concern. This decision is motivated by the fact that the Director needs more information about the situation everyone is living in. It is interesting to note that this decision should have derived from the discussion that occurred with the committee on the same day, which has been defined as 'excellent'. The superlative seems to refer to the implicit efforts made by both the Director and the Committee to try to come up with a solution. An intensifier is also applied to commitment by the Director to make the right decision (e.g. the decision [...] is one I take extremely seriously). Furthermore, Additive relations alternate with some Contrastive ones (Fairclough 2012, 2003). In particular, the Director emphasizes positive values applied to Chinese leadership while focusing on the measures taken ("[...] the intervention of President Xi and Premier Li have been invaluable, and all the measures they have taken to respond to the outbreak").

Conversely, contrastive relations are found when WHO expresses uncertainty concerning further decisions to be made in the future (There was an excellent discussion during the committee today, but it was also clear that to proceed, we need more information). From a semantic perspective, a clear instance of semantic relation of purpose is observable. The purpose mentioned in the speech above – not making a decision concerning the declaration of a public health emergency of international concern – is legitimated through Authorization. The extract shows a clear reference to people involved in that decision, who adopted the most appropriate and precious measures to face the outbreak of the pandemic. Authorization is frequently found along with superlatives in the following speech delivered by the Director on the following day:

- 2) Good evening once again to everyone in the room, and to everyone online. Once again, I'd like to thank Dr Didier Houssin, who has done a superb job of leading the Emergency Committee through what was a very complex deliberation. My thanks again to all the members of the committee for their time, expertise and full commitment. I am not declaring a public health

emergency of international concern today. As it was yesterday, the Emergency Committee was divided over whether the outbreak of novel coronavirus represents a PHEIC or not. Make no mistake. This is an emergency in China, but it has not yet become a global health emergency [...]. Let me talk about what we know. We know that this virus can cause severe disease, and that it can kill, although for most people it causes milder symptoms. We know that among those infected, one quarter of patients have experienced severe disease. We know that most of those who have died had underlying health conditions such as hypertension, diabetes or cardiovascular disease that weakened their immune systems. We know that there is human-to-human transmission in China, but for now it appears limited to family groups and health workers caring for infected patients. At this time, there is no evidence of human-to-human transmission outside China, but that doesn't mean it won't happen. There is still a lot we don't know. We don't know the source of this virus, we don't understand how easily it spreads, and we don't fully understand its clinical features or severity. WHO is working with our partners night and day in China and the other affected countries, at the regional level and here at headquarters to fill the gaps in our knowledge as quickly as possible. It is likely that we will see more cases in other parts of China and other countries. China has taken measures it believes appropriate to contain the spread of coronavirus in Wuhan and other cities. We hope that they will be both effective and short in their duration (23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020).

The speech starts with appreciation of Dr Houssin's job, which is defined 'superb'. The Director also emphasizes commitment, expertise and time devoted to the management of the pandemic by the committee. Then, parallelisms consisting in repetitions concentrating on what the Director knows in contrast with something he doesn't know are found. They are aimed at justifying the absence of decision concerning the declaration of a public health emergency of international concern. From a semantic and syntactic perspective, a contrastive relation (Fairclough 2003, pp. 89-90) is built up through paratactic constructions, as contrasting coordinate sentences (we know [...] / we don't know [...]) express the amount of knowledge about the pandemic in terms of human transmission, spread of infections outside China but also a more substantial lack of knowledge concerning the source of the virus, its detailed features, the way it spreads. Thus, syntactic parallelism seems to put the emphasis on the reason why the decision to declare a public health emergency of international concern has not been made yet. Contrastive relations are also found when the Director focuses on the 'emergency' situation more explicitly (This is an emergency in China, but it has not yet become a global health emergency) or when human-to-human transmission is discussed (We know that there is human-to-human transmission in China, but for now it appears limited to family groups and health workers caring for infected patients). Later, the Director reassures the hearer about the efforts made in collaboration with China thanks to partners on site. Finally,

commitment by China to contain the spread of the virus is emphasized. The following speech is the third one from the beginning of the pandemic:

- 3) As you know, I have just returned from China. Yesterday we had the opportunity to meet with President Xi Jinping, Minister of Health Ma Xiaowei and Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi. Prior to my visit I was in almost daily contact with Minister Ma, to discuss the response to the outbreak and how WHO can support it, because we need to focus on the epicentre of the outbreak. Managing the epidemic at the epicentre helps to prevent the outbreak spreading to the rest of the world. During my visit, we had a series of very candid discussions, based on mutual understanding. Our discussions focused on continued collaboration on containment measures in Wuhan, public health measures in other cities and provinces, conducting further studies on the severity and transmissibility of the virus, and sharing data and biological material. I was very encouraged and impressed by the President's detailed knowledge of the outbreak, and his personal involvement in the response. This was for me very rare leadership. In his words, the measures they have taken are good not only for China but for the rest of the world. Premier Li has also been on the ground in Wuhan to understand the outbreak and direct the response. China's efforts to contain the outbreak at the epicentre have been essential for preventing the further spread of the virus. China identified the pathogen in record time and shared it immediately, which led to the rapid development of diagnostic tools. They are completely committed to transparency, both internally and externally. And they have agreed to work with other countries who need their support. For example, the cases in Germany reported yesterday originated with a Chinese woman who travelled from Shanghai to Germany for professional purposes. She was asymptomatic on arrival but became ill shortly before taking her return flight to China. After her return to China she was tested and found to be positive, as were her parents, who had visited her from Wuhan prior to her departure. Chinese authorities immediately notified their counterparts in Germany, who were able to take prompt action. (29<sup>th</sup> January)

Authorization and lexical choice with a positive connotation are the most relevant discourse features employed by the Director in the speech above. It is particularly interesting to note the use of the adjective 'candid' to define the discussions that occurred during the Director's visit in China. 'Candid' usually refers to something related to honesty. (<https://www.collinsdictionary.com>). This value is confirmed by 'mutual understanding' during the talk he had with Chinese institutions. In particular, the Director is mentioning meetings with authorities and contacts with relevant institutions involved in the management of the outbreak. The main semantic relations found in the speech are mainly related to Addition and Elaboration. For instance, while focusing on discussion he had with Chinese authorities ([...] we had a series of very candid discussions, based on mutual understanding), the Director needs to provide further clarification about them

(Our discussions focused on continued collaboration on containment measures in Wuhan, public health measures in other cities and provinces, conducting further studies on the severity and transmissibility of the virus, and sharing data and biological material). A similar Exemplification strategy is found when he focuses on ‘Chinese efforts to contain the outbreak’ as the latter are specified by the next sentences (China identified the pathogen in record time and shared it immediately, which led to the rapid development of diagnostic tools). Addition is found, instead, when collaboration with other countries is mentioned, (And they have agreed to work with other countries who need their support). In short, through the exploration of the processes found in the speeches, it is possible to infer that the processes of ‘doing’ mainly emerge as the most relevant ones. Both WHO and China are represented as social actors committed to do as much as possible to fight the spread of the virus. Semantic and syntactic patterns revealed the need by WHO to communicate exhaustive news concerning the pandemic including active cooperation with China, transparency related to discussions with China and Chinese commitment to fight the spread of the virus and share information with WHO. In particular, an explicit reference is made to the moral behaviour adopted by China in terms of ‘transparency’ and cooperation with other countries. Furthermore, Authorization in terms of appreciation of actions provided by people involved in the management of the pandemic is found. In short, it is possible to assert that legitimation is mainly conveyed here in terms of Authorization and Rationalization. As mentioned in the ‘Literature section,’ the latter expresses legitimation by reference to the utility of institutional action, (Van Leeuwen, Wodak 1999; Fairclough 2003, p.98).

In his speeches, the Director tries to convey that WHO is an institution committed at fighting the pandemic in a very efficient way through constant relations and discussion with China and detailed exchange of information with public Authorities.

#### **4.1. The representation of social actors**

As mentioned above, in this section, the representation of social actors will be explored with attention to the Process Types and circumstances found in the corpus under scrutiny (Halliday 1994; Fairclough 2003). In particular, with regard to Circumstances, Process Types fall into two main groups: Material and Verbal Processes. The following table summarises these concepts:



Process type	Key participants	Circumstances
Material	Actor, Affected	Time, Place; Purpose, Reason, Manner, Means
Verbal	Actor	
Mental	Experiencer, Phenomenon	Time, Place, Reason
Relational (1)	Carrier, Attribute	
Relational (2)	Token, Value	
Existential	Existent	

Table 1  
 Representation of processes, participants and circumstances (adapted from Fairclough 2003: 141).

In all the examples investigated so far, cooperation between WHO and Chinese institutions is strongly emphasized. In particular, through his speeches, WHO-Director general represents Chinese institutions as very active social actors ready to make any effort to manage the pandemic and stop its spread. Moreover, they are seen as excellent and honest communicators, who disclose relevant information to WHO-Director clearly and honestly with no difficulty related to mutual understanding. On the other hand, WHO-Director self-represents himself as a social actor committed to his active role as a co-operator with China to face the pandemic but also as a representative of an institution which is not always aware of what is happening. He communicates uncertainty concerning the right decision to be made and knowledge of detailed information about the virus. What it is repeatedly communicated by WHO is surely the constant cooperation with China and its institutions, as can be easily observable in the short extracts from the following examples:

- 4) Finally, our advance team in China has made good progress in working out the composition of the team and the scope of its work. We hope to have more news to announce soon (12<sup>th</sup> February)
- 5) We're working with our Chinese counterparts on these issues, and this is also part of the scope of work for the WHO-led joint mission with China (14<sup>th</sup> February)
- 6) The international team of experts now on the ground in China is working with Chinese counterparts to better understand those gaps and improve our understanding of the outbreak (17<sup>th</sup> February)
- 7) Twice a week we have a call with clinical experts who are treating patients with COVID-19, including front-line workers in China (20<sup>th</sup> February)
- 8) I would like to thank the People's Republic of China, Portugal and Viet Nam for their recent contributions to WHO's Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan. (27<sup>th</sup> April 2020)

The processes involved in the examples above can be classified as some Material ones. In particular, they are represented by the active role played by WHO Director and WHO members or experts in terms of work and cooperation with Chinese counterparts. In particular, in (4) the main structure of the examples above is represented by the pattern (ACTOR (our advance team) + MATERIAL PROCESS (has made good progress)). This process is better specified by a further MATERIAL PROCESS (working out) followed by an AFFECTED participant (the composition of the team. In (5), instead two main ACTORS are found, represented by ‘we’ and ‘our Chinese counterparts’. The process here is mainly intransitive. Similar structures are found in (6) and (7) where the two main ACTORS are represented by ‘The international team of experts’ cooperating with ‘Chinese counterparts’ (example 6) and by ‘clinical experts’ working with WHO. Conversely, in (8) the structure found corresponds to ACTOR (I)+MATERIAL PROCESS (would like to thank) + AFFECTED (the People’s Republic of China, Vietnam and Portugal).

In the following example, ACTORS are represented by both WHO and CHINA, who are committed to ask for and provide information respectively:

- 9) The following day, New Year’s Day, WHO asked China for more information under the International Health Regulations, and activated our Incident Management Support Team, to coordinate the response across headquarters, and our regional and country offices. [...] China provided information to WHO through a face-to-face meeting in Beijing, and through WHO’s Event Information System established under the International Health Regulations. (8<sup>th</sup> May 2020)

In this case, the typical structure is ACTOR+VERBAL PROCESS+AFFECTED (WHO asked China for more information; China provided information).

A further structure commonly found in the corpus under scrutiny is represented by China as the main ACTOR followed by a MATERIAL PROCESS+ AFFECTED:

- 10) China reported 143 cases. Most cases continue to be reported from Hubei province, and 8 provinces have not reported any cases in the last 14 days. Outside China, 2055 cases were reported in 33 countries. Around 80% of those cases continue to come from just three countries. (5<sup>th</sup> March 2020).

As can be observed above, ‘reporting’ is the main MATERIAL PROCESS referred to communication of data concerning some new infections. Some other MATERIAL PROCESSES are represented by verbal phrases denoting an active participation by China in terms of introduction of emergency

measures:

- 11) China, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the United States of America and many others have activated emergency measures. (9<sup>th</sup> March)
- 12) [...] the measures China and other countries have taken have given us a fighting chance of containing the spread of the virus (21<sup>st</sup> February 2020)

In (12), the activation of emergency measures by China has contributed to fight the spread of the virus, as asserted by WHO. This is a further example of collaboration between WHO and China.

Thus, through the investigation of processes and participants found in the conversation between WHO and China, it is possible to assert that cooperation with China seems to be the feature mostly emphasized by WHO in terms of factual cooperation and constant communication with Chinese experts and institutions.

## 5. Concluding remarks

In order to summarize the main points investigated in the paper, it would be useful to come back to the research questions mentioned in the Introduction section. The first one mainly concerned the discourse representation of the relationship between WHO and Chinese institutions. From the investigation described in the sections above, it is possible to observe a macro speech act enacted by WHO consisting in putting a strong emphasis on China's 'effective actions.' The latter mainly consist in making any effort to face the pandemic and conducting a constant and honest communication in cooperation with WHO's Director. Authorization is a further category frequently used to legitimate decisions made (or not made) or to communicate lack of detailed information concerning the pandemic. The second research question was related, instead, to representation of social actors through the speeches. WHO had the power to represent Chinese institutions as some very active social actors committed to manage the pandemic and communicate with WHO clearly and honestly. On the other hand, the Director represents WHO and himself as actors committed to their active role as co-operators with China. Notwithstanding, insecurity concerning the right decision to be made and knowledge of detailed information about the virus are further features found in the speeches. In short, starting from the outcomes of the study, it is surely possible to assert that all the strategies found in the speeches including the use of Material Processes and Actors actively involved in managing the pandemic along with Authorization seem to enhance credibility in the audience and legitimate WHO - Director's actions.

**Bionote:** Stefania D'Avanzo is Associate Professor of English Language and Translation at University of Campania 'L. Vanvitelli'. She earned a PHD in English for Special Purposes from the University of Naples 'Federico II'. Her main research interests and publications focus on Corporate, Legal, Institutional and Popularization Discourse. Methodology and theoretical approaches include, among others, Critical Discourse Analysis, Cognitive Linguistics, Corpus Based Approach, Multimodality. She has been member of some relevant national projects (COFIN Prin Project; F.A.R.O Project) promoted by the University of Naples 'Federico II'.

**Author's address:** [stefania.davanzo@unicampania.it](mailto:stefania.davanzo@unicampania.it)

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