



Coronavirus Outbreak in Mexico: A Critical Discourse Analysis of AMLO's Speech

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Received: 11 June 2020 ▪ Accepted: 30 October 2020 ▪ Published Online: 9 December 2020

Abstract

A recent pandemic called coronavirus (Covid-19) has been spreading rapidly around the world this year, 2020. While some countries have confirmed cases and deaths, others as Mexico start to see far approaches of what is likely to be a large coronavirus outbreak. A video posted in YouTube by Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, known by his nickname AMLO, portrayed his opinion regarding the coronavirus and the security measure. This paper, based on Critical Discourse Analysis theory and Systematic Functional Linguistics, explore AMLO's speech by analyzing focused on transitivity and modality to discover what is behind the Mexican president's speech and its social consequences. The findings suggest that AMLO's speech has a different intention than convince the Mexican population that everything is fine.

Keywords: coronavirus, systematic functional linguistics, transitivity, modality, opaque meaning.

1. Introduction

In Mexico, two cases of infected people have appeared and there have been no announcements by the government to take the necessary security measures. This paper aims to know what is behind this political speech to understand the hidden meaning and ideology of this speech. Moreover, this study seeks to highlight the social impact of AMLO's speech. The video presented the Mexican president' speech regarding the announcement of the two main cases of people infected in the country. The transparent objective of this speech was to invite society not to fear the situation and to continue with their daily activities. To provide an analysis of the speech, I will use Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) proposed by Halliday (1985). To begin with, an introduction of the coronavirus background will be presented. Then, a general overview of the methodology implemented in this analysis will be addressed. To finish, I will provide a general conclusion of the results.

1.1 Coronavirus pandemic

According to BBC News (2020) "the virus, which causes the respiratory infection Covid-19, was first detected in the city of Wuhan, China, in late 2019" (para. 3). Coronavirus is a new type of pandemic that has caused thousands of infection cases, and unfortunately, deaths.

This is a type of virus that causes disease in animals. Seven types of viruses, including the Covid-19, are transmitted from animals to humans (Newey and Gulland, 2020). It is believed that this problem was first originated in December 2019 in a market located in Wuhan, China, which sold dead and live animals of different types. According to the ICM Anaesthesia COVID-19 (2020), the symptoms are “fever, fatigue, and dry cough is likely in the early stage of illness. However, some patients may not progress to more severe illness” (para. 5). This virus has been rapidly spreading around the world, according to the Center for Systems Sciences and Engineering (2020) there are over 3,596,142 confirmed cases and 251,718 deaths. The countries more affected are France, Italy, Spain, and the UK. The worst number of places that reported cases are in Europe. Thus, considering the increase in numbers of confirmed cases and deaths, the measures to avoid spread the virus is to stay at home if you have the opportunity. The World Health Organization (2020) it is essential to follow some precautions to reduce the possibilities of being infected or spreading COVID-19. The suggestions are presented as follows: regularly cleans and wash your hands with alcohol-based hand rub or with soap, maintain at least 1 meter of distance between you and others, avoid going out to public and crowded places, avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth.

With several cases confirmed in different countries and causing the death of thousands of people, this virus turns in a health worldwide problem in the first months of the year 2020. Countries follow strict lockdown restrictions to prevent the increase of infected people, nonetheless in Mexico the case security measures are not being respected. This country is one of the places which is about to see far approaches of what is likely to be a large coronavirus outbreak. In fact, Mexico has reported the first cases of coronavirus. Unfortunately, despite all the global warning and recommendations, AMLO states that everything is fine in México. It seems that he is skeptical regarding this worldwide health crisis. This situation is truly alarming because he is the representative of a country, and he is acting irresponsibly by not considering the security measures. Ward (2020) affirms that “he continues to hold political rallies, kiss supporters, and request that Mexicans go out shopping to prop up the country’s sputtering economy during a global slowdown” (para. 2). This type of decisions can have severe consequences in the country because the outbreak of the virus can reach a breaking point. This situation has caught the attention of national and international media, they condemn the position of the Mexican president. Citizens are the ones who have taken the security measures that international health organizations have given.

Takin into account the previous overview, my motivation to conduct this analysis is to understand AMLO’s speech and ideology regarding this serious situation. AMLO’s speech is surprisingly alarming, considering that by the time he made this speech, the situation was a global health crisis and there were confirmed the first cases in Mexico. Thus, the results of the outbreak in Mexico could cause a breaking point in the society and in the health system. I ponder that politicians or anyone who has a public office must not forget that they represent the population’s well-being and they need to take the most suitable choices. In the next section, I will provide a summary of the methodology.

2. Methodology

2.1 *Critical discourse analysis (CDA)*

This analysis seeks out to explore what is behind the AMLO’s speech posted in a YouTube channel of a national newspaper name “El Universal” about the first security measure of the Coronavirus pandemic. Van Dijk (2015) claims CDA mainly, it is used to explore the way social-power, hegemony, and disparity are implemented, reproduced, hint, and endured by texts and conversations in political and social contexts. This approach is linked between language studies and social theory (Fairclough, 1992). This type of technique allows us to explore the hidden

meaning of discourses and ideologies and the power of politicians. CDA is a method that can be used to analyze political speech to explore their ideologies and power. Wodak (2011) affirms that through this framework it can be understood the relation between the concept of power and ideology and their use for dominance and discrimination.

2.2 Systemic functional linguistics

People express their opinions and thoughts using the language either written or spoken as a tool to communicate something. Halliday (1978) states that “through language, individual human beings becomes a part of a group” (p. 14). It seems that is not possible to communicate without the language. To conduct and explore an analysis of the spoken and written language is a complex. Numerous approaches have been proposed to understand the diverse aspects of the language. One of the most suitable approaches is Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which is commonly implemented in areas such as linguistics and applied linguistics.

SFL was selected as the most suitable framework to carry out this analysis which is constituted by three levels: (1) ideational, (2) interpersonal, and (3) textual. In the analysis section, I will provide a description of the levels within. SFL is a theory that was mainly developed by M. A. K. Halliday in 1960 in the UK. According to Zhunglin (1988) “functional language is a tool for interaction based on this idea that language forms are inevitably specified by the functions or uses that they provide” (p. 307). In addition, Halliday and Hassan (1989) stated that text is a tool to study the meaning and use of phrases and words. This study considers two perspectives: (1) the text as a product, and (2) the text as a process. Sharififar and Rahimi (2015) state that “a text is considered as a product when it studies the linguistic structures. Simultaneously it is a process in terms of a semantic component or encoding the meaning. These grammatical systems provide a basis for explaining the meanings of different kinds” (p. 344). The text itself is a media that could be a product and a process that encodes the meaning; thus it is required to implement an analysis to understand the codification from the text.

3. Analysis

In this section, I will describe of the three levels from Halliday’s framework, and I will analyze the next aspects: transitivity and modality. Then, as mean to reinforce the analysis I will include the social aspects.

3.1 Ideational function

The ideational function refers to the process and functions that offer an understanding of the real world (Halliday & Webster, 2003). Having this in mind, this function provides new elements and knowledge that are unfamiliar to the listener. This function is represented by the transitivity process. In Hallyday’s (1985) terms, transitivity concerns with the expression of ideas “representing ‘processes’ or ‘experiences’: actions, events, processes of consciousness and relations” (p. 53). According to Zhunglin (1988), these processes “determines the accessible options in meaning as well as specify the nature of their structural awareness (p. 312). Transitivity encompasses six processes: (1) material, (2) relational, (3) mental, (4) verbal, (5) behavioral, and (6) existential.

Table 1. Transitivity analysis

	No.	%
Material	13	36.11
Mental	3	8.33
Relational	3	8.33
Verbal	3	8.33
Behavioral	1	2.77
Existential	13	36.11

The most outstanding results of the analysis are material and existential processes, represented with an equal percentage (36.11 %). I will present both processes in the following sub-sections.

3.1.1 Material process

Material process involves the following elements: (1) actor, (2) process, and (3) goal. Table 2 shows examples from AMLO’s speech.

Table 2. Material process

Actor	Process	Goal
(you)	do not anticipate	Anything
You	do not	go out
You	continue	taking your family
We	will continue	doing our normal life
We	can continue	doing our normal activities
It	may escalate	the problem

As it can be seen in these expressions, the Mexican president affirms that the pandemic’s situation is not difficult in Mexico as in the rest of the world. The actors’ in AMLO speech is we that refers to the whole Mexican nation. Additionally, he remarks that his government will inform us when it is necessary to take the security measures. He mentions continuing to do our everyday activity.

3.1.2 Existential process

The existential process is defined as something that exists or happens. Rashid and Jameel (2017) “existential clauses are not regular in discourse, but they provide an important contribution to different types of texts. In narrative, for instance, these clauses are used to introduce different participants” (p. 6). Holliday (2004) mentions that this process can be understood as “representative constructions” (257).

Table 3. Existential process

<u>We are</u> in the first phase.	Estamos en primera fase
<u>We are</u> paralyzed without reason in an exaggerated way.	Estamos paralizados sin ninguna razón de una manera exagerada
<u>There are</u> two cases in Oaxaca.	Hay dos casos en Oaxaca
<u>There are</u> just two cases of people infected with coronavirus	Hay solo dos casos de personas infectadas de coronavirus

Rashid and Jameel (2017) affirm that “the word ‘there’ when used in existential clauses enables the addressee to prepare for something which represents new information that is about to be introduced” (p. 6). Moreover, the authors remark that the word ‘there’ “is neither a participant nor a circumstance, but it is used to indicate the feature of existence” (p. 6). As stated above, existential clauses are not regular in discourse; however, in the present analysis this process was one of the most representative with a 36%. From the above samples, there is a sense to make references to the phase the country is and to the people infected. At the last minutes of the interview, the Mexican president introduces new information, making reference to the people infected. Moreover, the above sentences are examples of showing that Mexicans are alarmed by the coronavirus situation.

3.2 Interpersonal function

Interpersonal function is the second level of Halliday’s (2013) framework, which is defined as “the interpersonal function embodies all uses of language to express social and personal relations” (Zhuanglin, 1988: 313). This level is related to the relationship between the speaker and the listener. It embodies how the speaker introduces himself to a setting in a specific situation. Halliday (1978) stated that “both expressing his attitudes and judgments and looking for to influence the attitudes and behavior of others” (p. 112). The term to communicate the interpersonal function is a modality, which is defined as “the expression of the speaker’s attitude or opinion regarding the contents of the sentence” (Palmer, 2001: 14). In other words, the modality reflects the speaker’s position or judgment of a specific situation or topic. According to Martin and David (2003), modality is “a resource for grading polarity, for setting up positivity and negativity (p. 49).

3.2.1 Modality analysis

Modality concern with the attitude of the writer or speaker towards their level of certainty or confidence. Table 4 depicts the position of the speaker, either positive or negative, and it includes levels that are classified from low to high politeness.

Table 4. Modal verbs

	Low politeness	Median politeness	High politeness
Positive	Can, may, could, might have	Will, would, should, shall	Must, ought to, need, has/had to
	3	5	
Negative	Needn’d, doesn’t/didn’t, + need to, have to	Won’t, wouldn’t, shouldn’t, isn’t/wasn’t to	Mustn’t, oughtn’t to, can’t/couldn’t, mayn’t, mightn’t
	9	1	

As showed in the previous table, modals verbs are used to express negativity. The modality in raked in the low politeness. It is essential to highlight that modality is also positive, and it is ranked in the median politeness. This aspect is interesting because negative aspects portrays a lack of authority and confidence from the speaker, in this case, the Mexican president. But the median politeness illustrates that AMLO has a degree of certainty in their speech.

Table 5. Personal pronoun

Personal pronouns		Sample speeches
First person	I	3
	We	14
Second person	You	1
Third person	He	
	She	
	It	5
	They	2

From Table 5, we can see that the pronoun “we” is the most used. The employment of this pronoun is implemented to share the responsibility, and it has a sense of collectivity. The use of the pronoun “we” in political speech is used mostly to refer to the President. Furthermore, “we” is employed to create a separation between the speaker and the audience. In this case, AMLO uses the “we” in both sides. In the first place, AMLO includes himself as part of the Mexican population, leaving aside his role as president. On the other hand, AMLO uses “we” to refer to him and his cabinet, by doing so he establishes a distance between him and the Mexican population. Lopez Obrador uses “we” to emphasize that the Government cabinet members are doing their best to control the pandemic in the Mexican context.

3.3 Textual function

The third level is the textual function, that is the way the text is organized to guide the reader or listener to understand the language. According to Halliday (1971) “language makes links between itself and the situation, and discourse becomes possible because the speaker or writer can produce a text and the listener or reader recognize one” (p. 334). In this section, I will explore the textual function to understand the organization of the speech. The following sample is the first part of the speech:

“We are preparing [the government], but we should not be scared. We do not anticipate anything; that is what I have been saying. The Mexican culture is very resistant to all the calamities, we always have got ahead, and in this situation, we will do it”.

AMLO’s speech addresses for the first time the pandemic situation. He mentions that Mexicans are more concerned than normal, and that society should not worry about the first phase. Also, he portrays a positive image of the government, considering that they are prepared to manage the pandemic. The whole speech is not organized, logical, or accurate. Throughout the whole speech, he continues to persuade society to go to restaurants and continue with everyday activities:

“Don’t panic, we are going forward, and do not stop going out; we are in the first phase. I will tell you when do not go out, but If you’re able and have the means to do so, continue taking your family to the restaurants-eateries because it strengthens our families and our economy.”

Beyond this calming message, this speech portrays control and dominance by the government. It seems that it is more important to keep the economy than public health. Furthermore, it is highlighted that the central message of the speech is to cover the real situation of the pandemic by diminishing (1) the worldwide health crisis, and (2) the security measures.

3.4 Social aspect

In this section, I will address the social impact of AMLO's speech in the Mexican context is addressed to uncover the power use throughout the language. To begin with, I share a quote from O'Neil (2020):

Only now, two weeks later, has the president finally addressed the nation. His speech revealed his limits as a leader, and leaves Mexico unprepared to face the pandemic, rescue the economy or bring the nation together. This failure threatens not just his once sky-high approval ratings, but also the viability of his ambitious economic and political project (para. 3)

The previous quotation was published two weeks after AMLO's recommendations to the Mexican population to continue with their normal activities. Thus, this reinforces the hidden intention of AMLO's speech to reduce the importance of taking security measures. Instead of giving importance to the first phase, it seems that the most important is to maintain the economy of the country. Unfortunately, the social impact was severe because after two weeks from the first speech, the cases of people infected increase enormously. By hiding the real message, the people are uninformed and unprepared to confront this situation, and the social consequences will be severe.

4. Conclusion

Through Halliday's three levels framework of critical discourse analysis, I was able to uncover the hidden message from AMLO's speech. To sum up, the Mexican president portrays a negative position regarding the social distancing program and suspending all nonessential activities. His positive position concerns with social behavior to maintain the calm and careless because he considers that the situation in Mexico is controlled. Also, the real message from the speech was to maintain the economy of the country; that is the reason why he invites the people to work because, as he mentions people's work is the strength of the economy. Unfortunately, there is an impact on society because they are not prepared and informed to face this current situation. Coronavirus is a disease in the world; thus, we are not prepared for this worldwide health crisis, but we can follow the security measure to handle and overcome this situation.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.

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