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“I’m upset with China”: Evaluation of President Donald Trump’s Stances on Coronavirus Pandemic

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Abstract

The outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19) in 2019 claimed so many lives in Wuhan City, Hubei province, China, where it was first discovered and assumed the status of epidemic. In 2020, its status was upgraded by the World Health Organisation to a pandemic and as at April 2020, it has claimed over 95,000 human lives across the world. In the battle against the virus and concerted attempts to produce vaccine(s) that will cure those infected, the president of the United States of America, Donald Trump, did not fail to register his displeasure for the outbreak of the diseases and position that the virus’ identity cannot be separated from China, being the location of the first outbreak. The stances that Trump about Coronavirus in relation to China is the focus of this study. The remarks by President Donald Trump at the Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing which held at James S. Brady Press Briefing Room between March 17 and March 26, 2020 formed the data for this study. Hyland (2005) theory of stance and engagement was used to identify the opinions of Trump. The stances identified are COVID-19 is not an act of God, China is the source of COVID-19, Chinese government refused to warn the world, and America is at war with a Chinese virus. Trump’s ability to deploy stance tools effectively to present his opinions and judgment against China, vindicates him from being tagged racist even though the utterances appear racist.

Keywords: *Coronavirus pandemic, Stance and engagement, Chinese virus, China, Donald Trump, Media discourse*

1.0 Introduction

On March 11, the World Health Organisation (WHO) upgraded the status of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak from epidemic to pandemic (UN News, 2020). The virus, which has proven to be contagious by not just becoming a threat to public but global health, necessitates the upgrade. The implication for this is to create an awareness of its global spread, in a bid for governments to create measures of containing or controlling it. Thus, in such situation, it is easy to see different kinds of labelling, just as it was in the case of the 1918 influenza pandemic which was tagged “Spanish flu”, all because it was Spain that first announced the disease (Barrett and Brown, 2008). It is not uncommon to have countries come up with different measures, such as evacuation of its citizens from other countries, closure of borders, restriction of movement and social distancing, in order to protect its citizens. As helpful as these measures are, they still affect relationships among humans. This leads to different levels of stigmatization such as labelling and name calling, and even panic among individuals. These issues, when not properly handled and presented when addressing them in the media, can degenerate to xenophobic issues, war, racism, discrimination, leading to hampered relationship among nations of the world. Donald Trump’s remarks during press briefings on Coronavirus have been tagged racist and having the possibility of engendering

people’s stigmatization against Asians across the globe. Therefore, this study evaluates Donald Trump’s stances on the Coronavirus pandemic in relation to China.

1.1 *Coronavirus*

At the end of December 2019, Chinese public health authorities reported several cases of acute respiratory syndrome in Wuhan City, Hubei province, China. Later, Chinese scientists soon identified a novel Coronavirus as the main causative agent. A novel Coronavirus (CoV) is a new strain of Coronavirus that has not been previously identified in humans. It is linked to the same family of viruses as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and some types of common cold. This disease, formerly regarded as 2019 novel Coronavirus or 2019-nCoV, has now been named COVID-19; CO (corona), VI (virus) and D (disease), and 19 from 2019.

The disease is transmitted through direct contact with respiratory droplets, from coughing and sneezing, of an infected person and touching surfaces that are contaminated with the virus. The symptoms include fever, cough and shortness of breath; in severe cases, it can cause pneumonia or breathing difficulties. Preventions are frequent washing of hands and respiratory hygiene (UNICEF, 2020). Also, it is important to note that there has been no vaccine yet for this disease and no particular treatment, the best way to treat is to prevent it. Though it

started in Wuhan, WHO as at March declared it a pandemic, not because it has become deadlier but because of its global widespread. Thus, we cannot ignore its effect, especially on the world economy and relations. In just about five months of existence, 1,188,489 people have contracted it while 64,103 people have died as a result of the disease (Worldometers, 2020).

1.2. Media discourse and political discourse

The media is an important medium of transmitting happenings, especially global crises around the globe. O’Keeffe (2006: 1) sees media discourse as “a broad term which can refer to a totality of how reality is represented in broadcast and printed media from television to newspaper”. It deals with the representation and transmission of issues to the general public. Political discourse, according to Sajjad, Malghnai and Khosa (2018: 201), refers to “the different ways in which political actors perform political actions”. In a different perspective, Ferree *et al* (2002: 9) conceive of political discourse as “public communication about topics and actors related to either some particular policy domain or to the broader interests and values that are engaged”. In essence, they view political discourse as public discourse. For any public discourse to be regarded as political discourse, it must be linked to “political actors”, “political institutions and organisations” that are involved in “political processes or events” with great attention to

the “context” (Dijk 1997). Thus, it means that not every discourse made by political actors could be considered a political discourse. It revolves round discussions that pertain to public goal, and made by a politician, citizen or an authorized head. Politicians, while delivering speeches or involved in one political process or the other, employ several “linguistic strategies” so as to “connect with their audience” (Jalilifar & Savaedi, 2012).

2.0 Situating current study

World leaders have always been on the spotlight, especially when issues that border on the politics and security of lives are concerned. Several studies have been carried out on world leaders, like Donald Trump, the president of United States of America. This is not surprising because since his campaign, he has become a controversial political figure based on his unique way of delivering speeches and making his opinion known, on not just issues bothering his nation, but the world at large. Also, scholarly researches have been carried out using stance and engagement theory. Mohammadi & Javadi (2017) carry out a critical discourse analysis of Donald Trump’s language use in US presidential campaign, 2016. The study uses Critical Discourse Analysis as a tool to examine the use of power and hidden strategies in language use in the selected speech. It also explores the interrelation of discourse structures and ideological structures of his acceptance speech. The data was subjected to a descriptive-

analytic method of research based on critical discourse analysis model presented by Norman Fairclough (1989, 1995, 2001 & 2010) and the ten-question model of Norman Fairclough (1996) and also van Dijk's ideological discourse analysis framework (2004). Their findings reveal that Trump made use of short and emphatic sentences along with topicalisation and nominalisation to emphasise his ideologies. This study is different from current study on data and theoretical selection.

In a similar but slightly different vein, Siyou & Zhongwen (2018) explore a contrastive analysis between Xi Jinping's and Donald Trump's speeches at World Economic Forum in 2017 and 2018 respectively using Martin's Appraisal Theory. Their aim is to explore how they convey ideology in their speeches, and how they make use of language resources to reflect emotions, judgments and appreciation. The findings reveal that positive words as regards emotions are more than negative words. Also, Xi Jinping's speeches are more on globalization, issues that concern the world at large while Trump's speeches are more on United States of America. They conclude that language and power are mutually constructed and influenced. This study differs from the current study, though appraisal is a closely related theory to stance, in terms of selected data and theoretical anchorage, which is stance and engagement.

Osisanwo (2017) examines readers' comments on former president Goodluck Jonathan administration's war against Boko Haram

terrorism in Nigeria. The discourse strategies deployed by readers through their comments on the e-punch newspaper reports were subjected to analysis using stance and engagement theory on interaction. 751 comments which constitute a corpus of 22,512 words from six news items on 2014 e-Punch Newspaper websites were purposively selected and sampled for data. The study reveals that most of the comments implicated and condemned the administration while some suggested solutions (2017: 143). Their stances were fueled by ethnicity, religion while the engagement elements include the use of questioning, shared knowledge, directives, among others. Though a study anchored on stance and engagement, the study differs from the current study in the choice of selected data.

3.0 Theoretical anchorage

Stance and engagement, also known as stance and appraisal, stance and evaluation, is a model of interaction developed by Ken Hyland (1999, 2005). His argument is that in a bid to pass information, "writers adopt interactional and evaluative positions" (Hyland 1999: 99). That is, writers do not only inform their audience, they reflect their "commitments to what they say", pass "judgements", show surprise, and even "address readers or audience directly" (Hyland 1999:99). Therefore, stance, to Hyland (1999: 101), is "the ways writers project themselves into their texts to communicate their integrity, credibility, involvement, and a relationship to their subject matter and their readers". He highlights the three main components of stance to be evidentiality, affect and relation.

Evidentiality shows the confidence of the writer in what he or she is saying, it is the “writer’s commitment to the truth of the proposition presented” (Hyland 1999: 101); affect deals with the writer’s attitudes and disposition to the issue presented (1999: 102) while relation involves how the writer engages the audience in the interaction (1999: 102).

The latter is what evolves as engagement (Hyland, 2001). Engagement is the “alignment dimension where writers...connect and recognize the presence of their readers pulling them along with their arguments,...including them as discourse participants...” (2005: 176). Elements of stance include hedges (using words like possible, perhaps to present information as opinion, rather than as an authority), boosters or emphatics (words like clearly, certainly to show certainty), attitude markers (use of subordination like luckily, unfortunately to show writer’s disposition) self-mention (the use of pronouns I, we, my) while those for engagement are reader-mention (use of you to familiarize and use of we to reflect inclusion), directives (use of imperatives and modal obligators like note should, ought to so as to instruct readers), questions (to make it dialogical it could be rhetorical too), knowledge reference (appeal to shared knowledge) and personal asides (to offer view based on what has been said). Stance and engagement work hand-in-hand because they are two sides of a coin; one is writer-oriented while the other is reader-oriented (Hyland 1999, 2005).

4.0 Methodology

The remarks by President Donald Trump at the Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing which held at James S. Brady Press Briefing Room between March 17 and March 26, 2020 formed the data for this study. This period was purposively selected because it was the period Trump started using and defending the use of the term “Chinese virus” when referring to Coronavirus before WHO intervened. Full transcripts of the press briefing were retrieved from the official website of The White House (www.whitehouse.gov/) and they were subjected to a top-down qualitative analysis. Hyland’s (2005) Stance and Engagement theory was used to categorise the stances of Trump on Coronavirus as it relates to China.

5.0 President Donald Trump’s projected stances against China

Stance, according to Hyland (2005), expresses voice that can be attitudinal, suggesting how one presents self and convey opinions, commitments and judgment. It is pertinent to know that in the data gathered, president Trump aired his opinions and positions on many issues but for the sake of the study, only his opinions and judgment about Coronavirus as relating China are considered. The President Donald trump stances on COVID-19 are; COVID-19 is not an act of God, China is the source of COVID-19, Chinese government

refused to warn the world, and America is at war with a Chinese virus.

5.1 COVID-19 is not an act of God

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in China in 2019 leading to the death of many people who reside in China, there have been speculations as to whether it is a natural occurrence or an act of God to punish humanity. Another class of people strongly believes that the virus is manmade. Trump aligns with the latter opinion, as he feels putting the blame on God is an attempt to hold no one accountable for the outbreak of the pandemic, thereby, shifting away attention of people from criticising the negligence of the Chinese government in informing the world on time.

Excerpt 1: This was something that happened that was, some people would say, an act of God. I don't view it as an act of God; I would view it as is something that just surprised the whole world. And if people would have known about it, it could have stopped — been stopped in place. It could have been stopped right where it came from — China — if we would have known about it, if they would have known about it.

In the excerpt above, president Trump, through an appeal to the shared knowledge of the

American citizens acknowledges that people would often refer disaster of great magnitude as an act of God. He does not look down on such claim by 'people', nevertheless, by the use of repeats first person pronoun "I", he presented his personal view that God is not responsible for COVID-19. By saying "I don't view" is an adoption of hedges to suggest that he is not asserting. This view he presents, becomes the booster for his next statement that the virus could have been stopped in China where he asserted it originated from. His expressed regrets that the disease has gone out of China to affect the world because 'people' are not aware that something this enormous could hit the world.

5.2 China is the source of COVID-19

There are so many conspiracy theorists that have offered diverse answers as to where the virus was produced before the outbreak in Wuhan, China. Rumors hold that COVID-19 is an international political biological weapon by first world country to subdue other nations, others claim that some terrorist organisations may be responsible. Amidst all these conspiracy theories, President Donald Trump strongly believes it comes from and originated from China.

Excerpt 2: Q: China and others have criticized you for using the phrase "Chinese virus." How do you feel

about that? Are you going to continue using that phrase?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, China was putting out information, which was false, that our military gave this to them. That was false. And rather than having an argument, I said I have to call it where it came from; it did come from China. So I think it's a very accurate term. But, no, I didn't appreciate the fact that China was saying that our military gave it to them. Our military did not give — give it to anybody.

Excerpt 3: THE PRESIDENT: No, I have a great — I have great love for all of the people from our country. But, as you know, China tried to say at one point — maybe they stopped now — that it was caused by American soldiers. That can't happen. It's not going to happen — not as long as I'm President. It comes from China.

In excerpt 3 and 4, Trump disagrees with assumptions that the American soldiers are responsible for the emergence or spread of Coronavirus, therefore, he asserts that the virus is from China. As a result of this information, in excerpt 2, Trump expresses disappointment through an attitude maker (“I didn't

appreciate...”) and which leads to his judgment to name the virus after China, and labelling the country as the source. Naming COVID-19 as “Chinese virus” is a hit back at China, and his opinion is that China is to be blamed, not the American soldier. He uses the personal pronoun “I” to assert his opinion and support his position of calling it the Chinese virus. In excerpt 3, Trump expresses his commitment and compassionate affection for American citizens including Asian Americans, nevertheless, judgment is that he will never allow China to accuse American soldiers as long as he is president. As a result of his displeasure, he concludes that the virus comes from China.

Sometimes, the president in his briefs tries to go soft on China because of global collective responsibility to tackle the virus. He does not seem to accuse China for being responsible for the virus. Nevertheless, he feels strongly that China is the source.

Excerpt 4: THE PRESIDENT: I don't know if you'd say China is to blame. Certainly, we didn't get an early run on it. It would have been helpful if we knew about it earlier. But it comes from China, and there's not a question about that. Nobody is questioning that.

As indicated in excerpt 4, there is a self-mention using the pronoun “I” to present the president's

opinion that though the virus came from China, they may not be held responsible for being the cause of COVID-19. Trump expresses that his regret is that America did not know about the virus on time, to be able to prepare well. However, his judgment that China is the source of the remains a fixed stance.

Trump would not stop referring to COVID-19 as “Chinese virus”, though not as a racist term or a term for stigmatisation but, as descriptive term to show where the virus came from before becoming a pandemic. This can be seen in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 5: Q: Okay. Why do you keep calling this the “Chinese virus”? There are reports of dozens of incidents of bias against Chinese Americans in this country. Your own aide, Secretary Azar, says he does not use this term. He says, “Ethnicity does not cause the virus.” Why do you keep using this? A lot of —

THE PRESIDENT: Because it comes from China.

Q: — people say it’s racist.

THE PRESIDENT: It’s not racist at all. No. Not at all. It comes from

China. That’s why. It comes from China. I want to be accurate.

Excerpt 6: THE PRESIDENT: I think it was time though, because, you know, I talk about the Chinese virus and — and I mean it. That’s where it came from. You know, if you look at Ebola, if you look at all — Lyme. Right? Lyme, Connecticut. You look at all these different, horrible diseases, they seem to come with a name with the location. And this was a Chinese virus. But I don’t have to say it, if they feel so strongly about it. We’ll see.

The president, in excerpt 5, posits that the using the term “Chinese virus” is simply describing the location where the outbreak began. When told the term is racist, Trump justifies his opinion that the term is not racist by saying he only named the virus after the place it came from. He sees it as descriptive and not racist. In excerpt 6, he was able to boost his opinion, by making references to other deadly diseases that got their names from the places where they emerged from. Trump is able to survive being labelled a racist by hedging and at the same time thriving on appeal to shared knowledge of previous diseases as boosters to support his judgment. He is able to do this by an excellent appropriation of rhetorical question.

5.3 *America is at war with a Chinese virus*

The president while addressing his nation to give updates about the situation of the country and how the pandemic has been managed expresses not just a personal voice, he assumes the collective voice that projects the virus as an enemy of the American people and positioning him as a war commander seeking to defeat the enemy at all cost. This he tries to do by still attributing the virus to another nation. Here, the term “Chinese virus” builds a cognitive picture as though the virus is some terrorist group from China that America is fighting really hard to defeat.

Excerpt 7: THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. I would like to begin by announcing some important developments in our war against the Chinese virus.

Excerpt 8: Thank you all for being here. And we continue our relentless effort to defeat the Chinese virus...

Excerpt 9: THE PRESIDENT: As we continue to marshal every resource at America’s disposal in the fight against the Chinese virus, we’re profoundly grateful to our nation’s state and local leaders, doctors, nurses, law

enforcement, and first responders who are waging this battle on the ground.

Excerpt 10: Today, I’m also announcing the launch of a new public-private consortium organized by the White House, the Department of Energy, and IBM to unleash the power of American supercomputing resources to fight the Chinese virus. The following leaders from private industries, academia, and government will be contributing, and they’re going to be contributing a lot of different things, but primarily computing resources to help researchers discover new treatments and vaccines. They’ll be working along with NIH and all of the people that are working on this.

In all the excerpts 7, 8, 9 and 10, the use of lexical items like “war”, “against”, “fight”, “battle”, “waging” and “unleash” are strong indicators of Donald Trump’s warfare attitude towards COVID-19. His judgment is that the virus is a great enemy of the nation that requires every resource available. Trump’s use of words phrases and words like “relentless effort”, “marshal every resource”, portrays a never dying commitment to ensure that the Chinese virus is totally eradicated. Unlike battles a nation would

fight with an enemy, the personnel, American government deploys in fighting the war include medical practitioners, law enforcement agencies, information technologists and other persons that would ensure that things remain under control till the vaccine (the weapon) that will defeat the virus is produced.

5.4 Chinese government refused to warn the world

We have indicated in the earlier stances that American president's opinion is that Coronavirus would have been dealt with if the world had been aware of its unimaginable tendencies of becoming a pandemic. Trump in some of his utterances believes that the reason the world is caught unaware is because the Chinese government refused to divulge information that could make others better prepared and equipped to stop the virus while was still an epidemic in China.

Excerpt 11: THE PRESIDENT: Well, it would have been much better if we had known about this a number of months earlier. It could have been contained to that one area in China where it started. And certainly, the world is paying a big price for what they did and the world is paying a very big price for not — for not letting them come out. Everybody knows that.

Excerpt 12: THE PRESIDENT: I wish — again, our relationship with China is a very good relationship. I wish they told us three months sooner that this was a problem. We didn't know about it. They knew about it and they should have told us. We could have saved a lot of lives throughout the world. If you look at what's happening in Italy and Spain and a lot of other countries, we could have saved a lot of lives throughout the world.

Excerpt 13: ...But I'm a little upset with China, I'll be honest with you, because — ...

THE PRESIDENT: ... I like President Xi and as much as I respect the country and admire the country...But they should have told us about this. And I did ask him whether or not we could send some people, and they didn't want that — out of pride. I think, really, out of pride. They don't want — they don't want us sending people into China, to help them. You know, China is a strong country. They have — they have their scientists and they

have their doctors — very smart. A lot of people.

Trump in excerpt 11 blames China for putting every country on earth in trouble by pretending they have the disease under control and leaving others unprepared. He accuses the Chinese government for being responsible for the spread across nations by not allowing its citizens to warn the world. While using modal verbs to suggest the assumption that the virus might have been contained in China if news about it gets out, Trump maintains his judgment that China's concealment of information is a wicked act. The attitudinal posture of Trump in excerpt 12 is full of regret, his opinion is that China is responsible for the loss of many lives across the globe, his opinion hinges on the assumption that if the American government had known about the danger early enough, lives could have been saved.

In excerpt 13, Trump employs the word “upset” as an attitude marker of the way he feels about the Chinese government and the nation. He justifies his anger by recalling his conversation with President Xi of China. The booster for the stance that China refused to warn the world was that he offered to help China, but his request was turned down because China is proud. This opinion is responsible for his angry attitude at China.

Excerpt 14: We got very lucky when we made a decision not to allow people in from China at a very early date. I say that because some people don't want to accept it. But this was a great decision made by our country, or there's — the numbers that you're talking about — we're a big country; they'd be far greater, far bigger.

America was the first country to close its borders to China because of the fear that people coming China may be carriers of the virus, thereby infecting people and putting the lives of American residents at risk. This step which later became adopted by many other countries is according to Trump, one of the best decisions taken towards overcoming the pandemic on the American soil.

6.0 Conclusion

The study reveals that press briefing is a good platform for political leaders to express their stances on national and international issues. Personal voices and institutional voices are reflected, and certain stance tools are used to present opinions, commitment and judgements.

President Donald trump presented four stances to predominantly pass negative judgments on China over the Coronavirus pandemic, they are COVID-19 is not an act of God, China is the source of COVID-19, Chinese government refused to warn the world, and America is at

war with a Chinese virus. The study reveals that while Trump knows some people believe that the disease is God's making, he believes that God is not involved. Thus, China should have informed the world earlier, but they refused to and the world is losing many people on that account. Trump fully asserts that by all measures, China will always be the source of the disease. The American president sees Coronavirus pandemic as an enemy of the nation and has therefore declared war against it.

President Trump employs hedges, attitude markers, appeal to shared knowledge, boosters, self-mentions and question to justify his opinions, commitments and judgments in order to present his stances. Trump's appropriation of these tools would in no way lessen the possibilities of his utterances being tagged as racist or as precursor to stigmatization against Asians. However, Trump has been able to deploy these tools effectively to present his opinions and judgment in ways to vindicate him from being tagged racist.

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