

The Implied Power through the Use of Personal Pronouns in Obama's Speeches: Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract: This is a qualitative study with descriptive data presentation. It is aimed at investigating the tendency of abuse of power in exploiting personal pronouns of Obama's political speeches. The employed grand theory in this study is social cognition theory introduced by Teun, A. Vandijk. There are three aspects that need to be empowered: textual, social cognition and social context in disclosing the implied meanings of the use of personal pronouns in Obama's political speeches. The data of this study were gathered by means of speech transcript collections of Obama's speeches: 2010, 2011 and 2014 concerning terrorism issues. These transcripts obtained from online media which had been spread worldwide. The objective of this study is to describe which personal pronouns frequently exploited by Obama in his political speeches and discover the hidden meanings of the adopted personal pronouns. The findings demonstrate that: (1) Obama, tends to use personal pronouns 'we' and 'our', (2) Obama seems to have been selective in exploiting personal pronouns by referring to both certain contexts and situations before and after the speech was delivered, (3) The features of Obama's speeches are rhetorical, persuasive and manipulative. In terms of cognition and social context, these speeches indicate that intelligence, personal and social experiences do influence towards the emergence of a discourse. The implicitly conditioned and engineered dominance and hegemony are not considered as a force or coercion. Rather, it is thought as a common and justified when being exposed frequently.

Keywords: *Critical discourse analysis, textual, social cognition, social context,*

INTRODUCTION

Language that we have always employed on a regular basis in any social intercourse is basically not a neutral medium. In many cases, a language exploited by someone, due to the interest and engagement either in a group or an institution is always likely to be influenced by certain plan, interest, and agenda (Alvi and Baseer, 2012). In an interaction process, under any circumstances, one of the involved parties seems to have a tendency of demonstrating their power by virtue of the social status, knowledge and perception, age, etc.

Fairclough (1989) states when using language, those who gain access to the power: prestigious occupation, high social rank, an important political position will be one-sided. People with higher status generally dominate and become active in the course of the interaction process. On the other hand, those with lower status seem passive as a listener. Van Dijk (2002) further explains that dominance, hegemony, inequality or unneutral in social intercourse often occur though they have been hidden using nice and elegant words. The phenomenon of dominant and less dominant parties through language usage in social reality may be observed in the interaction between teacher-student, doctor-patient, -community leader-community, and boss-staff.

For most politicians, with the power they possess, the capability of exploiting language has a significant role in attracting attention and gaining support from the public. Acquiring and empowering linguistic units which adapt to both numerous contexts and communication events is perceived to be essential and is required by politicians in achieving certain plans, targets, and interests. Delivering speech is one of the monologue practices usually applied by certain groups, including politicians and those whose top positions: governor, minister, president for implicitly doing abuse of power. Manipulation, dominance, and hegemony practices are deliberately performed by politicians during delivering a speech. Such implied abuse of power has made possible as speech is a monologue by nature and it is rare if any for the communicant to interrupt or put forward an argument in the course of the speech. The one-way communication is, therefore, usually used by politicians to indirectly develop a good image and at the same time promote and introduce certain agenda, plan, and ideology.

American former president, Barack Hussein Obama was one of the state heads who likes taking advantages of his power to secretly bear both certain interest and ideology in his political speeches using various communication strategies. The statements made in his speeches are always related to the latest development of undergoing issues and take into account of the listeners' background. Upon consideration of both condition and situation, communicants' age, educational background, occupation, as well as publics' expectations and wishes, each politician usually enables to prepare and presume styles and linguistic units which attract both interest and sympathy of the public.

By observing and acquiring sensitivity of the public needs, politicians will be easier to gain sympathy and support from the public and effectively conceal their dominance and hegemony practices. One of the strategies of politicians to obtain the public support and to maintain the power of his administration is by exploiting personal pronouns. At the first glance, observing manipulations in language use of politicians is a complex undertaking since we are usually stunned and lured by politicians whose competence in public speaking, including Obama. One of the ways of scrutinizing and criticizing both language exploitation and manipulation is by acquiring critical discourse analysis knowledge of any texts including political speeches (Van Dijk, 2016). The emergence of texts, including political speeches are always loaded with certain missions, goals, and rationales behind them which have been designed in such a way by the text producers.

This study, therefore, is an attempt to criticize the personal pronoun usage through the application of critical discourse analysis as it is one of the strategies used by most politicians to attract public attention. It seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the personal pronouns frequently used by Obama in political speeches?
2. What are the implicit meanings that can be analyzed in every personal pronoun of the Obama's speeches?

Critical discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary field that combines both social and linguistic practices. Furthermore, it explores how societal power relations are established and reinforced through language use. The aspects of communication and psychology are therefore also involved. This study seeks to provide an impact on the educational sphere in anticipating and criticizing the implied meanings and language manipulation of numerous texts used, particularly the text produced by agents and institutions which can afford to get access of power: mass media, politicians, and government institutions.

Some definitions of critical discourse analysis basically share the same point of views that such analysis puts the emphasis on the critical studies related to the social practices. Blommaert (2005) points out that critical discourse analysis contains the relevance of produced texts to the practices of social relations. It is caused by the critical discourse analysis which is concerned with the disguised issues and the structural transparency and that domination, discrimination, hegemony, power, and control practices are actualized in the language.

Van Dijk (2005) provides his own definition of critical discourse analysis:

“Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context.” (p. 466)

D. Jupriono (2010) explained that critical discourse analysis is a discipline that focuses on an activity in seeking further details of a text by referring to the social facts, and is analyzed by someone or a group of people that has a likelihood of having special purposes. The point here is that, in any discourse, we are to bear in mind that there has been an interest and target which is being fought for. In critical discourse analysis, we are to investigate the hidden meaning of a speaker which is not expressed explicitly. Nevertheless, when being comprehensively analyzed, we will know the true intention. The point here is that in every discourse context, we should be aware of an interest being struggled which have always been secretly kept by the discourse producer.

Van Dijk (2008) claims that critical discourse analysis can be employed in examining the implied meanings of any issues: race, gender, social rank, and hegemony. Furthermore, Fairclough and Wodak (1997, pp 271-280) make a summary in regards to the underlying principles of critical discourse analysis as follows: 1. Addressing social issues, 2. Power relations are discursive, 3. Constituting society and culture, 4. Seeking ideological nations, 5. Having historical characteristics, 6. The link between text and

society is mediated, 7. It is interpretative and explanatory, 8. It is a form of social action.

Baker and Sibonile (2011) argued that language in the critical discourse analysis is thought as a social practice which is associated with ideology and power relations. In addition, Van Dijk (2010) emphasized that when a speaker or a writer enables to influence the mentality, knowledge, behavior, and ideology of the communicants, he/she is easy to control their mind. Such mentality control is a form of power abuse.

The application of personal pronouns is closely related to both identity and ideology. They represent either collectivity or individuality (Fairclough, 2003). Furthermore, they are frequently adopted when referring to a certain persons or the others even have been misused to split a coalition either inside or outside of a certain group (Van Dijk, 2002). The confidential meanings in the personal pronouns usage are largely affected by growing issues both in the social and political corridor so that certain individual or groups have been positioned or position themselves (Chilton & Schaffner, 1997). Interpretation and options are generally mediated by several personal and social factors, including formality and informality, status, power access, social rank, and race. In terms of the personal pronoun usage, Van Dijk (ibid) argued that the personal pronouns *we* and *our*, can be adopted either inclusively or exclusively. They are inclusively adopted as a strategy to say solidarity. Meanwhile, they are exclusively used to share responsibility, so that any decided and agreed upon actions and policies are not merely imposed on an individual. On the other hand, the personal pronouns are often exploited by politicians as a strategy to gain support and develop trust.

Van Dijk (ibid) had arrived at a conclusion in analyzing political speeches of John Major that the undergoing political and social issues have influenced the use of personal pronouns. The application of the personal pronouns 'I' and 'my' for example, is a manifestation of both integrity and strictness of a state head. The study also explains that the choice of personal pronouns of political speeches is an effective indicator and is a part of political strategy acted by politicians. Alrasam (2010) conducted a study on the use of personal pronouns as a part of the discursive strategy in the speeches delivered by Malawi president, Dr. Bingu Wamutharika in the General Assembly, United Nation. The findings demonstrate that there had been consistency in the use of personal pronouns *we* and *our*, where the president wanted to develop empathy of the world community over the tragedy of humanity which had been occurred in some parts of the world.

From the aforementioned statements and studies, it has been observed a significant role of personal pronouns which had been secretly exploited by politicians to gain support from the public and develop positive image about them. Politic is a word that had been part of social life, particularly in a democratic country. According to Hague and Harrop (2001), "politics is an activity which is engaged in the ways of certain groups achieve collective decisions and are bound through the efforts to bridge differences of their members." (p.89). Furthermore, Heywood (2003) argued that politics is an activity of a nation which is aimed at defending and amending general regulations to rule the life. In general, politics has been a forum to make certain decisions which have been a

compromise among institutions. Consequently, the compromise and agreement automatically have established a power that is formed and is divided into a coalition (Schmidt, 2004; Harold and Kaplan, 1965).

Political discourse by nature has specific features in its own rights. Van Dijk (2008), Chilton (2004), and Alrasam (2010) share the same perception saying that political discourse depends on what and who get involved in the discourse production. The political campaign, press conference, cabinet meeting, are some examples of political discourse as they are attended by politicians, talk about issues in politics and any decision and policy which have been made related to the public interest. Van Dijk (2010) has already set up explicit limitations about political discourse by providing some key characteristics of political discourse: (a) The global domain: politics; (b) The global act(s) being implemented: legislation, policy making, etc.; (c) The global setting (House of Parliament, session of parliament, etc.); (d) The local political acts being accomplished: Tabling a motion, 'doing' opposition, etc; (e) The political roles of the participants: MP, representative, party member, member of the opposition, etc; (f) The political cognitions of the participants: Political beliefs and ideologies; aims and objectives.

To sum up, political discourse largely depends on both situation and condition the discourse is being produced.

METHOD

This study applies critical discourse analysis approach in processing the data. It refers to the main objective of critical study which bears a mission to uncover all of the aspects of hidden power abuse in the political speeches of Obama.

Data Collection Technique

The data collection technique in this study is in the form of collecting and analyzing Obama's speeches on terrorism issue in 2011, 2010 and 2014 which had been spread in online media. The cycles involved in this part are reducing, presenting the data and drawing a conclusion. Data reduction was the process of grouping the data based on categories. After the reducing process, the data were presented by referring to the topic and subtopic. All of the collected data were arranged and informed in the form of narrative account. Finally, a conclusion was drawn as the final process of data collection.

Data Analysis Technique

The adopted technique analysis consists of qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis. The rationale for using these two techniques since both of them allow closeness to the text and provide a useful for analyzing any data related to the document and scripts. A conventional qualitative content analysis was adopted in this study.

Qualitative Content Analysis

The applied content analysis in this study is conventional qualitative content analysis. In this respect, the data had been highlighted according to the category which had been directly and inductively obtained from the document (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Below are the stages lie in this analysis:

Preparing the data

In the preliminary process, selecting and sorting of the existing texts in regards to the decided categories were undertaken. Such process is not time-consuming as both data and category had been previously prepared by the researcher. In this data analysis of Obama's speeches, after collecting the political speeches, the speeches which discuss the terrorism issues were collected covering three aspects unit analysis: micro (textual), social cognition and social context where the inductive development of categories and deductive application of categories are worked out.

Selecting the analysis units

After preparing both the data and categories, the next stage is determining analysis units of each category: in the textual category, the observed linguistic unit is the use of pronouns of the speech. In terms of social cognition category, the abuse of power, inequality, and dominance were the units that need depth examination. Meanwhile, in the social context analysis, the undergoing social development before and during the speeches was delivered had been investigated.

Discussion of each analysis unit

Once the analysis units have been decided, the last stage is the discussion of each unit. In this study, the discussion of each analysis unit in accordance with the stipulated formulation of the problem was conducted. The discussion of each analysis unit refers to Vandijks' model analysis.

Critical Discourse-based- Analysis

After completing the stages of conventional content analysis, the next stage is the application of Vandijks'discourse model analysis in order to gain findings, conclusion, and recommendation. As aforementioned, such analysis model is practiced to examine the practices of the implied abuse of power, dominance, and inequality in Obama's speeches, particularly in the exploitation of personal pronouns.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis

The analysis results of the speeches are as follows:

Data I: (7 January 2010)

This speech was delivered regarding the terror attack attempt in the aircraft of the Northwest Airlines, Flight 253, on 24 December 2009.

Following are some transcripts and the use of personal pronouns:

(1) *I believe it's important that American people understand the new steps that **we're** taking to prevent attacks and keep **our** country safe. In **our** ever-changing world, America's first line of defense is timely, accurate intelligence that is shared, integrated, analyzed and acted upon quickly and effectively. That's what the intelligence reforms after the 9/11 attacks largely achieved. That's what **our** intelligence community does every day.* (1.4)

In this transcript, there are a variety of pronouns used by Obama. In the first sentence, Obama frequently seems to adopt personal pronouns I and we. He implicitly urges the American public to fully support his programs and plannings in maintaining security and order of their nation from either threat or attack of terrorist groups. In the next sentences, "*the new steps that we are taking to prevent an attack and keep our country safe*", Obama quickly changes with personal pronouns 'we'. It is observed here that he is very conscientious in exploiting the personal pronouns. Personal pronouns of we and our do not represent himself but the collectivity on behalf of government institutions: president and his aids, congress or acting for both government and American people.

This is a part of a hidden strategy to dispose of individual accountability when there is a risk or an unexpected thing occurs, he is not the only person to be held accountable. The exploitation of personal pronouns "our" and "we" is also an effective way of engaging the nation apparatus and people to have a sense of care and sympathy towards their nation. The use of the personal pronoun "our" in the next scripts indicates a communication strategy applied by Obama to build a sense of belonging, pride, and appreciation of American people towards the nation intelligent agent and national security team who have made the utmost efforts for the sake of national security and order. It also to take advantage of the access that Obama posses as president to reduce

pressure and complaints from the American public towards the work performance of his intelligent and security team whenever threat and terror made of certain groups, particularly the terrorists occur.

Viewed from both social cognition and social context domain, the attempt of a bomb attack on the Northwest Airlines craft, 253 is one the hardest trial for his administration as the tragedy happened in one year of his office. Through the use of personal pronouns *our* and *we*, Obama, therefore, would like to build sympathy and develop the trust of American people towards his administration who has been trying hard to improve the defense and security system in countering the threat and attack of terrorists.

(2) I have repeatedly made it clear in public with the American people and in private with my national security team that I will hold my staff, our agencies and the people in them accountable when they fail to perform their responsibilities at the highest levels. As president, I have a solemn responsibility to protect our nation and our people, and when the system fails, it is my responsibility. (1.5)

In these scripts, Obama indirectly exploit his power to apply strategy in developing good image in order to get sympathy and positive impressions from American public as a sportive, brave president who is ready to be held accountability of his weaknesses even the failure made of his aids in maintaining the stability of security and defence of US.

In the first use of personal pronouns ‘I’, ‘my’, and ‘our’ Obama emphasizes that the seriousness and responsibility to take any consequences of the mandate imposed on him has been repeated many times to the American public in raising the awareness that in implementing the national duties-even though high professionalism and capability have been shown- weaknesses and deficiencies are normal things that can not be avoided. In the second scripts, Obama stresses again that he will be ready to accommodate criticisms and any risks arise as a consequence of planning and actions were taken in keeping the stability of national security.

In terms of both social context and social cognition, as a president and politician, Obama has learned and fully understand the personality traits of American who expect assertiveness, integrity, discipline, and loyalty of a leader. The variety of personal pronouns is one of the efforts made by Obama to develop a good image and convince American people of his capability as a president.

DATA 2 (2 Mei 2011):

The transcripts of Obama speeches delivered in the East Room, White House, regarding the death of Alqaeda Leader, Osama bin Laden who had been killed in a military operation in his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Following are some of the scripts:

(3) Tonight, I can report to the American people and to the world that the United States has conducted an operation that killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda, and a

terrorist who's responsible for the murder of thousands of innocent men, women, and children. (1.6)

The death of Osama as a result of America's military operation is one of the greatest moment and achievement for Obama during his administration. In this script, Obama only uses personal pronoun I who speak on behalf of both as a president and an American citizen. In this scripts, Obama only uses pronomina I deliver an official announcement the death of al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden. He straightforward and proudly says that the military operation to the compound military of Osama is the biggest achievement of USA government. Obama makes use of his power in this script by indirectly inform to the public that Osama deserved to get such punishment for everything he had committed to killing innocent civilians through the terrorist networks he had organized.

Implicitly, Obama wants to increase his popularity who has successfully given a command to dismantle and kill the al-Qaida leader. Indirectly, he makes a claim that since the September 11 attack, his administration is the only one which the capability of overcoming the worries and anxiety of Americans against the terrorist threat.

*(4) On September 11, 2001, in **our** time of grief, the American people came together. **We** offered **our** neighbors a hand, and **we** offered the wounded **our** blood. **We** reaffirmed **our** ties to each other and **our** love of community and country. On that day, no matter where **we** came from, what God **we** prayed to, or what race or ethnicity **we** were, **we** were united as one American family. (1.8)*

Personal pronouns 'our' and 'we' in this transcript are exploited by Obama to represent his administration and American people. Obama expresses his pride as a president for the strong feeling of empathy, sympathy, and care of American people to their countrymen and women who had suffered from the September 11th tragedy. Obama keeps endeavoring to build a sense of solidarity, togetherness, and unity of Americans. In this respect, he has hidden strategy implicitly expects a complimentary as a president who does love his people and demand Americans who never underestimate each other and respect the pluralism. Furthermore, Obama indirectly said that How heavy the burden and challenges as well as tragedy facing America, they can be coped with the loving spirit of Americans.

DATA 3: 10 September 2014

10 September 2014, the National Defense University, Obama delivered a speech regarding the prevalence of violence committed by terrorist group ISIL and its affiliates which has been spread in some countries. Following are the personal pronouns which indicate power abuse:

*(10) As Commander-in-Chief, **my** highest priority is the security of the American people. Over the last several years, **we** have consistently taken the fight to terrorists who threaten **our** country. **We** took out Osama bin Laden and much of al Qaeda's leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan. (1.17)*

In this quotes, Obama uses personal pronouns ‘my’, ‘we’, and ‘our’. In the first sentence, speaking on behalf of personal and the state head, Obama reemphasizes his primary duty as a president is to protect the nation and all of the American people. This is a part of his strategy to obtain an image from the American public as a trustful, integrated, and loyal and never forget his commitment and promise a few months after being inaugurated as president. In the next sentence, Obama makes use of personal pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’. In this respect, he acts for both nation and people of America urging to dismantle the terrorist group with endless effort. He expects that the American people think that he is optimistic, self-confident in combating all of crimes and threats towards the security and unity of American people.

In the last statement, Obama still exploits personal pronouns ‘we’ to speak on behalf of both administration and American people. He stressed that the military operation to the military compound of Osama bin Laden has been made possible due to the cooperation between government and American people

(11) **We’ve targeted al Qaeda’s affiliate in Yemen, and recently eliminated the top commander of its affiliate in Somalia. We’ve done so while bringing more than 140,000 American troops home from Iraq, and drawing down our forces in Afghanistan, where our combat mission will end later this year. Thanks to our military and counterterrorism professionals, America is safer.** (1.18)

In this script, Obama uses personal pronouns *we* and *our*. In using these two personal pronouns, at the beginning, at a glance, Obama seems to speak on behalf of both government and American people. Actually, if the statement is learned comprehensively, Obama only represents himself as president and his aids. Any policies and actions made by Obama’s administration including the military operation to the terrorist compound affiliated with al-Qaida in Yaman, and the withdraw of American troop from Iraq, is of course not based on the approval of American people. Rather, they had been decided by the government led by Obama. It is implied strategy of Obama in keeping his good name and popularity.

In the last statement, Obama explicitly calls on American citizens to have pride and appreciated the hard work of both intelligent and military team who have been serious and professional and shown their high dedication to their duty for the sake of national security and defense.

Discussion

The sensitivity towards the undergoing issues and delivered statements has greatly influenced the use of personal pronouns in the transcripts of Obama's speeches. As a politician and a president, Obama seemed very cautious in selecting the personal pronouns as they may have impact or impression to the communicants.

As a whole, from the use of personal pronouns in the above speech transcripts, it is observed that Obama applied strategies in utilizing miscellaneous personal pronouns that meet with the delivered information (Beard, 2000:46).

In using personal pronouns I and my for example, from the above transcripts, Obama has taken advantages of these two personal pronouns in different statements which do not spark controversy. In expressing personal views and opinions, showing a sense of dignity, responsibility and personal commitment as a state head, as well as informing his achievements under the reign of his office, Obama usually uses these two pronouns. It is in line with Karapetjana (2011) who argued that most of the politicians who have been familiar with the communication strategies and communication techniques, tend to adopt personal pronouns I and my for statements regarding loyalty, integrity, commitment, views and their personal perceptions.

Unlike the use of personal pronouns I and my, in these speech transcripts, the personal pronouns of 'we' 'our' and 'us' are used by Obama to build a sense of unity, belonging, and togetherness of American people. They are also served as a strategy to avoid personal accountability when making a statement in issuing a policy or decision. Such applied communication approach to reduce and release from both the pressure and criticism of the public, particularly when the made decisions result in negative effects and spark controversy. Even though the public still blames and imposes responsibility on his shoulder, Obama still enables to argue that the decisions and policies had been agreed by legislative and judicative bodies as well as all parties involved in the administration.

Developing nationalism, sympathy, and deciding and making various policies, decisions are crucial for each of politicians, including a president. One of the ways of inspiring feeling and attracting the attention of communicants is through the use of these two personal pronouns. In this regard, personal pronouns 'we' and 'our' is thought as a lethal weapon for politicians in responding and anticipating both effects and consequences (De Fina, 1995; Bramley, 2001). In this script, it is clearly seen that Obama implicitly try to gain public sympathy by the frequently exploiting pronoun 'we' and 'our' when informing achievements in countering the terrorist acts.

The use of personal pronouns 'they', 'their' and 'them' in this script is varied enough referring to situation and condition as well as issues being discussed. These three personal pronouns refer to a series of element and a group of community, and in other occasions, also refer to the terrorist groups as well as politicians, particularly the Congress member of Republic who tend to give less support to any plannings, policies and decisions made in an effort to anticipate and combat the threats and acts of terrorism. Proctor and I-Wen Su (2011:2) emphasized that a variety use of personal pronouns 'they', 'their' and 'them' and 'you are not difficult to analyze as it is clearly observed from a series of statement to whom the statements.

CONCLUSION

In the use of personal pronouns in his speeches related to issues of terrorism, Obama always uses personal pronouns 'we' and 'our'. It is a part of a strategy to use his power in gaining support and positive image from the American public in the form of developing a sense of togetherness and belonging of American people to their nation and reduce tension and pressure whenever something bad occurs because of the policies and acts made related to the terrorism. Furthermore, compared with the other personal pronouns, both of these personal pronouns possess the high aesthetic value and rhetoric which may attract the communicant attention.

Personal pronouns 'I' and 'my' were used by Obama for statements in the form of personal views and light issues which do not need full responsibility. Obama also uses personal pronouns 'I' and 'my' to show responsibility and self-confidence before the American public. The other personal pronouns: they, you, their, your and it, were exploited by Obama referring to certain condition and situation. For instance, in developing optimism and self-confidence of American people, Obama made use of personal pronouns 'you' and 'our'. On the other hand, when revealing the bad characters of terrorist groups, Obama used personal pronouns 'they' and 'their'. Nevertheless, personal pronouns 'they', 'their', 'you', and 'your' were also adopted for positive things when referring to the American public.

Critical discourse analysis is one of the strategies to disclose the language use adopted by most politicians to implicitly incorporate ideology, planning and certain targets. The exploitation and abuse of power through the use of personal pronouns is thought as a persuasive strategy applied by Obama in order to practice hegemony and domination towards American public.

This study is expected to provide enlightenment, particularly in linguistics and social that the discourses produced by institutions: media, politic, and relevant parties related to public interest should be deserved to criticize. The critical view is not demonstrated in displeasing phrases and blaming certain parties. Rather, it attempts to analyze each of statements informed to the public, using critical discourse analysis approach.

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