

# **Crisis communications at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic: A case study of the Ghanaian president's fourth update on coronavirus**

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## **Abstract**

The Covid-19 pandemic was a testbed for crisis communication, leading to recommendations on how to meet communicative goals and several individual case studies. This paper contributes to the latter by engaging in a detailed three-level analysis of an early, pivotal address to the nation by Ghana's president Nana Akufo-Addo. In terms of infection rates and deaths, Ghana has been much less severely impacted by the pandemic than other countries, making it worthwhile to look at the role of official communications. This study investigates how the president addressed the public at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, in what ways the linguistic features of his address reflected the specific political context, and what potential impact his language use had on the behaviour of the public. Findings show that linguistic and, to a lesser extent, visual elements represent the president as powerful, authoritative, but somewhat detached from the audience. However, this is balanced by direct appeals to the same audience, whose cooperation he seeks to win rather than enforce. This balance reflects the political and socio-cultural context of the text, as further evidenced by comments on the address on Akufo-Addo's Facebook page.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, crisis communication, Ghana, language use, legitimization

## Introduction

In this paper, I analyse a public address by Ghanaian president Nana Akufo-Addo, which he delivered in March 2020. At the start of the pandemic, he had proclaimed various measures to contain the virus, like calling on citizens to stay at home, explaining contact tracing and requiring people to wear masks; the address analysed here was selected because in it, the president announced the most severe Covid 19-related restrictions to date. It therefore marks a pivotal moment in the Ghanaian government's crisis management, with potentially far-reaching consequences for public health. My focus is on what tools of crisis communication he uses to inform and convince the public and what linguistic form these take.

To this end, I apply a three-level framework of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010), which starts with a data-driven text analysis at the micro-level to see what tools from crisis communication the speaker has used and how he employs language and, to a lesser degree, visual features to represent actors, events and entities, and to position himself in relation to his audience. Findings from the textual analysis are then interpreted with recourse to the meso-level of the discourse practice context, asking who produced, distributed and received the text and under what conditions. Finally, the macro-level of the wider socio-political context allows the analyst to understand how features of the text are influenced by factors such as culture and system of governance.

Whether measures to control the spread of Covid-19 are successful depends on compliance by the general public. The address analysed in this paper therefore has the two-fold purpose of informing and persuading the audience, and it is important to analyse what crisis communication tools and language features the speaker employs to meet these purposes. Understanding the possible consequences of his words has implications for the linguistically oriented study of crisis communication beyond the case study presented here.

At the time the address was delivered, the first two deaths from Covid-19 had been confirmed in Ghana. This led to the government imposing a ban on gatherings and international travel, while the Bank of Ghana implemented financial measures. As of 21 March 2023, 44 people per million had died of Covid-19 in Ghana. Although countries around the world recorded Covid deaths differently and more or less exhaustively, one list (Mathieu et al., 2020) sees Ghana as 209th among the world's countries and territories, i.e., indicating remarkable success in crisis management. Nevertheless, the measures and communication by the Ghanaian government have attracted a mixed response, ranging from a cautiously positive evaluation (Zhang et al., 2020) to criticisms about misusing presidential addresses on Covid-19 for election campaign purposes and about neglecting rural communities and minority indigenous language (Nyarko et al., 2021).

In view of these different evaluations, this paper will seek to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How did Nana Akufo-Addo address the public at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic?

RQ2: In what ways do the linguistic features of his address reflect the specific political context?

RQ3: What potential impact did his language use have on the behaviour of the public?

Covid-19 communications have been studied for several individual countries, and there are a few multi-country studies as well (see section 2, Crisis communication and Covid-19). The present study engages in a detailed linguistic and legitimation analysis of one pivotal address to the public.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: in the next section, I review the main tenets of crisis communication and how it relates to Covid-19, both in general and in terms of what we know from case studies of individual countries. In reviewing the latter, the focus is on democracies, including Ghana's. That

section is followed by an introduction to the data and the methods to analyse them. The penultimate section presents the findings of the analysis, while the research questions are answered and conclusions drawn in the final section.

## **Crisis communication and Covid-19**

### ***Crisis communication: goals and tools***

According to Coombs (2019, p. 156), crises can be divided into three clusters depending on how much responsibility an organisation has for them. In what he calls the “victim cluster”, the organisation (here: government) finds itself having to manage a crisis that is not of its making, such as a natural disaster or indeed a pandemic. In the “accidental cluster”, only low responsibility can be attributed to the organisation; examples are accidents and harmful products due to technical errors, e.g., faulty personal protective equipment for healthcare workers. In the “preventable cluster”, however, the organisation does bear responsibility for crises, due to human error or misdeeds of its members.

Whatever type of crisis an organisation deals with though, the objective of its communication should be to “ensure the physical safety and psychological well-being of stakeholders affected by the crisis” (Coombs, 2019, p. 137). In the case of a global pandemic, those stakeholders are the general public, and it is the task of the World Health Organisation and national governments to keep citizens safe from infection while preventing negative mental health consequences of measures such as lockdowns. Governments also need to cushion the economic and social effects of the restrictions they impose. For Covid-19, the scope of the crisis, and hence crisis communication, was huge, ranging from preventing the spread of the virus to pivoting healthcare systems and workers to dealing with sometimes large numbers of cases and deaths. In addition, officials had to communicate non-medical interventions such as travel bans, develop test-and- trace systems and later vaccine rollouts, and

confront mis- and disinformation (the so-called “infodemic”). In analysing a central public address by the Ghanaian president, this paper focuses on the role of crisis communication strategies and related language features in informing citizens about restrictions and persuading them to comply with them.

Crisis communication needs to be effected through available, accessible and appropriate channels, considering the media use, literacy and language proficiency of various parts of the population. Moreover, communication teams during a crisis need to consider what type of spokesperson may best convey a message. For example, the Taiwanese president, Tsai Ing-wen, made sure to have the media present when she was vaccinated against Covid, while the director-general of health in New Zealand, Ashley Bloomfield, became an almost cult-like figure in his country (de Bres & Dawson, 2021). In Italy, the government appointed General Francesco Paolo Figliuolo as Covid commissioner, who appeared in public wearing military fatigues, thus embodying the WAR metaphor that was so popular in the early stages of the pandemic (Olza et al., 2021).

At the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, a positive effect of the WAR metaphor may have been to convey the severity of the situation and make drastic measures more acceptable to the public (Castro Seixas, 2021, p. 4). Indeed, perceiving a threat to be severe and relevant to oneself are two factors needed in making sure that people engage in behaviours to control the danger. In addition, the addressees of crisis communication messages need to believe that they can act to reduce the threat and that proscribed or recommended actions will be effective (Coombs, 2021, p. 992). Within these parameters, the Covid-19 pandemic presented various demands on crisis communication. According to published recommendations (Coombs, 2021; Hyland-Wood et al., 2021), messages needed to convey the threat and discredit low risk beliefs, e.g., by choosing communication channels used by young people. At the same time, however, communication also had to persuade the public that measures taken by the

government work and that everyone can contribute to them. In this respect, particular behaviours had to be established as social norms.

Crucially, messages had to be short, clear and simple, not least because people were likely to receive them in a state of heightened anxiety. Further, communicators are required to be credible, which explains why health officials such as chief medical officers or scientific advisors took part in press briefings in many countries. Another demand on communicators was to balance empathy, i.e., showing understanding for people's concerns, with honesty, including about uncertainty being inevitable during a developing pandemic. Lack of certainty breeds disinformation and conspiracy theories; these continue to be rife for aspects of Covid-19 such as vaccination, meaning that communication must also debunk such beliefs. A pandemic is a long drawn-out and dynamic context – a marathon rather than a sprint, as many politicians put it (Collins and Koller, forthcoming) –, which can lead to message fatigue, a phenomenon that calls for creativity and variation (Pérez Sobrino et al., 2022). Finally, any crisis communication, including on Covid-19, needs to acknowledge diverse audiences and their specific needs by choosing the right media mix, engaging community leaders (e.g., through the National Commission for Civic Education in Ghana), accounting for different languages and levels of (health) literacy and numeracy, and tailoring messages to how severe an impact a community faces.

The following sub-section reviews case studies from Europe, New Zealand and Africa to see how crisis communication guidelines have been applied in both official and unofficial messaging.

### ***Covid-19 case studies***

Several studies on individual countries have applied a crisis communication lens to describe, assess and interpret government communication during the Covid-19 pandemic. For

example, Christensen and Læg Reid (2020) identify a paternalistic communication strategy in how the Norwegian government met the task to “formulate and communicate a convincing [message] and enabling understanding of what has happened and what should be done” (p. 715) at the beginning of the pandemic. Their particular interest is in the government’s reputation management, i.e., how policy makers convey that they are competent and effective as well as compassionate and honest. In the context of a “transboundary mega crisis” (ibid., p. 716), the reputation of the communicator is important, as a good reputation is linked to legitimacy for, and trust in, measures to contain the spread of the virus. Looking at press briefings by ministers and health officials along with media interviews and articles, the authors, writing in summer 2020, state that the Norwegian government was effective in controlling the pandemic. They relate this to a form of crisis communication “characterized by rather clear, timely and repeating messages and [advice] ... informed by expert knowledge and delivered by credible political and administrative executives and experts” (ibid., p. 725). Three important factors were a) the public’s high pre-pandemic trust in the government, which further increased in the early weeks of the pandemic, b) frequent appeals to solidarity, and c) a collaborative approach which saw central government work with opposition parties, central and local government, and public and private sectors alike. Despite some disagreement between policy makers and experts and notwithstanding some unpopular measures, the government’s paternalistic communication strategy was largely successful.

Given its low rates of viral transmission, the crisis management of New Zealand has attracted much media and scholarly attention. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s communication strategy during the first two months of the pandemic, i.e., March and April 2020, is the focus of a content analysis of her statement to the nation, statements in parliament, daily briefings, press conferences, live broadcasts on Facebook

and podcasts (McGuire et al., 2020). The New Zealand government imposed lockdowns and international travel bans early on, and the prime minister's communication during the first three weeks of March 2020 was realised through formal genres, "focus[ing] on a proactive decisiveness and reassurance to the public that expert advice ha[d] been taken" (ibid., p. 368). Right from the start, Ardern emphasised shared responsibility, "the importance of unity and ... strong communitarian values" (ibid., p. 370). This communicative strategy was encapsulated in the phrase 'team of five million' to refer to New Zealand's population and backed up by all members of the government and public service workers taking a 20 per cent pay cut. Starting in late March, Ardern added more dialogic and informal media channels, taking part in live broadcasts on Facebook to update citizens and answer their questions. Like the Norwegian government (see above), New Zealand's prime minister emphasised social solidarity and set store by kindness and compassion. In late April, some restrictions were eased but the public was reminded why it was still important to comply with the remaining rules to continue to keep transmission of the virus very low. Overall, Ardern's "person-centred approach" (ibid., p. 372) shifted from early decisiveness to positioning herself as being on one level with other New Zealanders.

While the works reviewed so far engage in the analysis of content and communication strategies, Hunt (2021) employs corpus-assisted discourse analysis to study the language used in the televised addresses to the nation by the South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa, between March and December 2020. Those addresses, metaphorically referred to as 'family meetings', were afterwards uploaded to the state broadcaster's YouTube channel and the president's Facebook page. In contrast to Ramaphosa's use of media more generally, there was no interaction with the public or journalists. Nevertheless, his language use minimised both power asymmetry and social distance between himself and citizens, not least through the

FAMILY metaphor, by means of which Ramaphosa cast himself as “a protective authority figure in the form of a father” (ibid., p. 4). Metaphoric references to ‘family’ were particularly frequent in the openings and closings of his speeches as well as in their “cohortative” section, which serves to “secure compliance by constructing a shared nationhood, a unity of identity and of purpose” (ibid., p. 7). Interestingly, this section became longer as the crisis continued, perhaps to counter “pandemic fatigue” (Bernard et al., 2021, p. 6). By contrast, the section providing news and statistics had an informative function and as such featured lexis related to the disease and pandemic, along with comparisons with other countries. This was followed by announcing new measures. Although the function of that section was to direct or even command, Ramaphosa avoided verbs such as ‘prohibit’ or ‘ban’, preferring ‘call upon’ and ‘encourage’, or opted for nominalisations and passive voice “to play down power differences between state and citizenry, and to replace them with a relationship of care and protection” (Hunt, 2021, p. 6). The author moreover establishes that the first-person plural pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ were used with higher frequency in Ramaphosa’s Covid-19 addresses to the nation when compared to both general written South African English and speeches by his predecessors. A slight majority of the uses of ‘we’ referred to the South African government, especially in the sections of the speeches providing news and numbers or new measures, where the focus is on what the government did and decided. First person plural pronouns were used to refer to South Africa in the cohortative parts of the president’s addresses and were mostly followed by modal verbs indicating what the nation will, can and must do. This inclusive ‘we’ sits alongside noun phrases like ‘our country/people/society/nation’ and ‘our efforts’ as well as uses of ‘let us’ “to emphasise group membership ... and spur individuals on to act in concert with others in the interests of their country” (ibid., p. 11). Hunt (2021) concludes that “[b]y positioning himself as one with the rest of the country, Ramaphosa increases the sense of

unity in the group” (p. 10) while at the same time issuing quasi-parental guidance. She interprets this discursive reduction in power and distance as an attempt to ensure compliance despite social control measures, e.g., curfews and travel bans, being associated with the apartheid past of South Africa. South Africa is thus an example of how crisis communication is influenced by “individual countries’ histories, their collective memories and traumas and national traditions of governmental rhetoric” (Wodak, 2021, p. 326).

Not all communication during a public health crisis comes from official channels. While it is important that citizens further disseminate public communications privately, unofficial messaging bears the risk of misinformation. In contrast to malignant disinformation, misinformation is inadvertent and often well-intended. In the Nigerian context, for example, fake news on Covid-19 was mostly shared for altruistic reasons (Apuke and Omar, 2021), because people wanted to warn or inform friends and family. However, the panic that doing so can cause undermines the efforts of governments and health care officials, who, while needing to convey a sense of threat, also have to reassure the public. In their online survey of just under 400 social media users in Nigeria, Apuke and Omar (2021) found that seeking information was another motivation to engage with Covid-related misinformation on social networking sites and messaging services. This is indirectly corroborated by a survey of 200 young social media users in the Greater Accra region in Ghana (Eyifah, 2021): more than 80 per cent of respondents turned to the government’s and health service’s social media platforms for information, but also reported challenges with finding sufficient, reliable and non-contradictory information.

No such problems have been identified for a different form of unofficial crisis communication, namely songs (Thompson et al., 2021). As a communication channel for public health messaging, music has been used across the African continent to inform about HIV/AIDS, Ebola and Covid-19 alike. In a

thematic analysis of 28 songs by Ghanaian artists, Thompson et al. (2021) show how the musicians educate the public about the symptoms of Covid-19 and inform their audience about safety and preventive measures. Indeed, public health guidelines were the most frequent theme, followed by the notion that the disease needs to be taken seriously, its infectious nature and the need for a collective effort to overcome it. Acknowledging that the pandemic triggers difficult emotions while still inspiring hope were additional themes, as were calls to prayer and verbally expelling the virus. Together with the fact that the lyrics came in a variety of languages – mostly English, Ghanaian Pidgin English, Akan, Ga and Dagbani –, songs and other forms of edutainment thus have “relevance for the development of culturally appropriate health messaging” (Thompson et al., 2021, p. 10).

Finally, Berrocal et al. (2021) note that the Covid-19 pandemic has led to official crisis communications in which heads of government worldwide constructed in-groups, out-groups and affiliated groups in line with their country’s historical and geopolitical context. In their analysis of the statements by 29 presidents and prime ministers from Europe, North and South America, Asia and Africa, delivered within two weeks of the WHO’s official declaration of a pandemic on 11 March 2020, the authors set out to “test how this macro-event has been translated into local micro-events” (ibid., p. 2). They observe that solidarity was a central concept, between individuals and between groups – and, one could add, within groups – as well as between government and citizens. Crucially, solidarity could both bolster and contrast with nationalism. Next to constructing the Covid-19 virus as an enemy through the WAR metaphor and as a threat through spatial proximation (Cap, 2013), out-groups were non-compliant members of the public, as they were presented as violating in-group solidarity, norms and values. Those spreading disinformation could also be cast as out-group members as could, in some cases, people

who questioned government policy. In-groups, “discursively constructed by means of personal and possessive pronouns, noun phrases, and metonymic references” (Berrocal et al., 2021, p. 7) were the nation, often referred to metaphorically as a team (see also McGuire et al., 2020). The values associated with these ingroups were responsibility, generosity and solidarity. More specific in-groups were often healthcare workers as well as national medical and scientific experts. Lastly, transnational solidarity was invoked in many speeches by constructing certain other countries as affiliated groups; these could be neighbouring countries and/or those severely affected by the pandemic or, conversely, managing it particularly well. The authors conclude that “the crisis situation has not only strengthened national geopolitical identifications but has also reinforced pre-existing geopolitical alliances in terms of affiliated groups or in-groups” (Berrocal et al., 2021, p. 9).

The above literature review has summarised what we know about communication during health crises in general and what insights have been gained through studies of individual governments’ communication strategies. The next section will introduce the data against their background and the analytical parameters used to further contribute to understanding the language aspects of Covid-19.

### **Data and methods**

By the end of March 2022, Ghana’s president Akufo-Addo had given 28 televised addresses to inform citizens about measures taken against the spread of the coronavirus causing Covid-19. These updates were arguably the most important part of a communication strategy that also involved press briefings by ministers along with the director of the Ghana Health Service, a dedicated website, social media campaigns and English-language billboards (Antwi-Boasiako & Nyarkoh, 2021; Nyarko et al., 2021). Citizens further spread announcements and updates through messaging services (Tandoh, 2021). As was the case for

the South African president (Hunt, 2021), the addresses were afterwards uploaded to the national broadcaster's YouTube channel as well as Akufo-Addo's Facebook page. The address analysed in this paper was delivered relatively early in the pandemic, on 27 March 2020. By then, the WHO had declared Covid-19 a global pandemic (11 March) – a declaration that prompted Akufo-Addo's first address to the nation on the same day – and the first two (imported) cases were discovered in Ghana a day later. By mid-March, public gatherings had been banned and visitors from abroad were no longer permitted to enter Ghana. On 21 March, the first death from Covid-19 in Ghana had been reported, leading to the closure of beaches and borders and the disinfection of markets. On the day of the fourth update, which is analysed below, 137 cases of the disease were recorded, including the first outside the Accra region, and Parliament enabled a bespoke fund.<sup>1</sup> In his fourth address, Akufo-Addo announced the most severe restrictions to date, namely lockdowns in the cities of Accra and Kumasi. While this means that the address marks a pivotal point in the government's crisis management, the success of the measures relies on compliance by the public. It is therefore important to analyse what crisis communication tools the speaker uses and how he realises them linguistically in order to understand the potential impact of his words.

The analysis of the selected address follows the tri-partite model of discourse analysis proposed by Fairclough (2010; see also Koller, 2012). Its three levels and guiding questions for the analysis are represented in Figure 1.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_the\\_COVID-19\\_pandemic\\_in\\_Ghana\\_\(March%E2%80%93July\\_2020\)#](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic_in_Ghana_(March%E2%80%93July_2020)#)



Figure 1: Levels and guiding questions of discourse analysis (adapted from Fairclough, 2010, p. 133)

Starting at the text level, the analysis in the next section will focus not so much on the content of the address but identify if and how Akufo-Addo uses language and, to a lesser extent, visuals to realise the seven tools of crisis communication outlined above: convey a threat, convince the audience that the announced measures work, be clear, be credible, balance empathy and honesty, be creative, and acknowledge diversity in the audience. That part of the analysis helps answer the first research question (How did Nana Akufo-Addo address the public at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic?). Drawing on and supplementing previous studies, I first give an overview of the different parts of the address and their respective communicative purpose, before identifying the linguistic features that realise the crisis communication tools. This is done in a data-driven way, i.e., rather than starting with a pre-defined set of analytical parameters, the text is examined for all relevant features, including some that may not have been anticipated (Norris, 2019, p. 123).

The analysis then proceeds to the meso-level of the discourse practice context. This part of a discourse analysis asks who produces what kind of texts, who distributes them and via what medium, what audiences a text is designed for and who can receive it under what conditions. Certain conditions give some discourse participants preferred access, or block access, to means of production and distribution on a large scale. Moreover, speakers are endowed with a greater or lesser degree of credibility and power. An additional focus will therefore be on how the speaker positions himself vis-à-vis his audience, especially through speech acts and legitimation strategies. That part of the analysis draws on speech act theory (Austin, 1962) and on taxonomies of legitimation developed for political discourse (van Leeuwen, 2007; Reyes, 2011). The latter comprise the following strategies:

1. Authorisation: reference to tradition, custom and law, experts and role models
2. Moral evaluation: reference to positive values
3. Rationalisation: reference to the goals that are seen as valid
4. Mythopoiesis: narratives whose outcomes reward (punish) (non-)legitimate actions
5. Emotions: eliciting emotions in the audience, especially fear
6. Hypothetical future: reference to possible outcomes if an action is (not) taken
7. Altruism: constructing the speaker as acting in the interest of others

Legitimation serves persuasive purposes and as such is highly relevant for instances of crisis communication in which the audience needs to be convinced to comply with a course of action.

The second research question (In what ways do the linguistic features of [Akufo-Addo's] his address reflect the specific political context?) relates to the macro-level of how

the address reflects the wider cultural and political contexts in which it was delivered. As the three levels of text and contexts are interrelated, the analysis of the macro-level context also needs to be taken into account to interpret the findings of the textual analysis. Questions at this level ask about the situation in which a text is embedded, any institutional factors that impact on it and details of the social formation and what roles it allocates to people. Finally, the third research question asks what potential impact Akufo-Addo's language use has on the behaviour of the public. The second and third research question are both interpretative and as such will be discussed in the final section of this paper.

## **Analysis**

### ***Structure of the address***

Nana Akufo-Addo's fourth update on the Covid-19 crisis in Ghana was broadcast at 11pm on 27 March 2020. It lasted around 21 minutes and ran to 2,314 words. After greeting his audience and stating the topic of his address, the president reviews the Covid-19 situation in Ghana. This is followed with another informative section on measures taken so far, before he argues why additional measures are now necessary. These are then announced in a long and detailed informative section. For the remainder of the address, Akufo-Addo alternates between persuasive sections in which he appeals for compliance and informative sections on, briefly, the consequences of non-compliance and, in more detail, financial relief, before closing his address. Just over 60 per cent (61.45) of the address is informative, while 20.4 per cent have a persuasive function, with the remainder accounted for by the opening and closing and one argumentative section.

### ***Micro-level analysis: Language and visual features***

The president opens with the greeting 'Fellow Ghanaians',<sup>2</sup> and this phrase is repeated throughout, functioning

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the analysis, shorter quotes from the public address will be reproduced within single quotation marks, while longer quotes are numbered and indented without quotation marks.

as a discourse marker to start a new section. (In fact, the phrase took on a life of its own, being used as a hashtag on Twitter to metonymically refer to the president's updates.) In doing so, he echoes fellow presidents Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa (Hunt, 2021, p. 6) and Alassane Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire, as well as the then heads of government of Austria, Italy and the United States (Berrocal et al., 2021, p. 8). While such demonymics, i.e., references to the citizens of a country, help build national solidarity, they exclude people of other nationalities living in the country. Elsewhere, new sections start with adversative or cause-effect conjunctions to develop an argument ('However, prevailing circumstances mean that stricter measures have to be put in place'; 'So ... I have imposed ... restrictions on movement').

In terms of pronoun usage, it is worth distinguishing between informative and persuasive sections. As shown in Figures 2a and 2b, the pronouns that Akufo-Addo used most frequently when passing on information are first person singular ones ('I', 'me', 'mine/my'), followed by inclusive 'we' (and 'our', 'us'), 'you' and exclusive 'we'. It has been observed that "[s]tronger group identity, where behavior is about 'we' and 'us' rather than 'I' or 'you', will make more public-spirited responses likely" (Lunn et al., 2020, p. 5). Indeed, the inclusive 'we' is most often used in persuasive sections, before 'I' and 'you', with exclusive 'we' again coming last. Overall, it is noteworthy that the overall occurrence of first and second person pronouns per one hundred words is three times higher in the persuasive than in the informative sections (9.32 compared to 3.16), suggesting that the speaker is doing more interpersonal work when appealing to the audience to comply with restrictions.

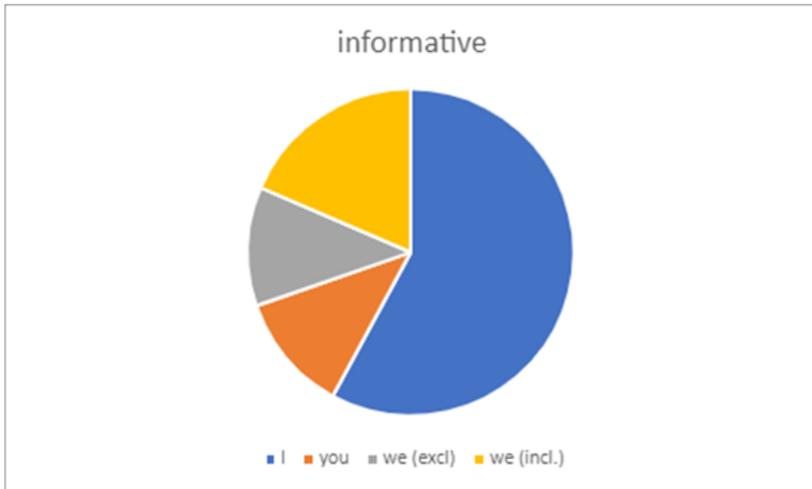


Figure 2a: Akufu-Addo's pronoun use in informative sections of his address, based on occurrence per one hundred words

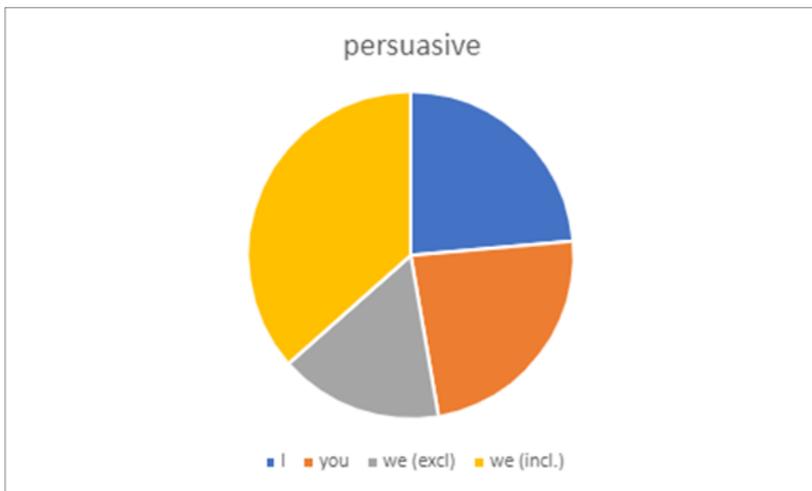


Figure 2b: Akufu-Addo's pronoun use in persuasive sections of his address, based on occurrence per one hundred words

Qualitatively, the speaker presents himself as active throughout, only once acting on himself ('I dedicate myself to the service and well-being of you') and otherwise acting either on the audience (e.g., 'I am urging all of you to bear with these additional measures') or on other officials, or engaging in actions without a goal (e.g., 'I am confident that Ghanaians will comply'). The exclusive 'we', referring to the government, is likewise almost always active, but, in contrast to the speaker, mostly in material processes, which make an impact on the physical world, e.g., acting, using, providing. Together, these two patterns cast the president as exerting power through his words and the government implementing his decisions and orders. The inclusive 'we', which "represents the speaker as a central in-group member speaking on behalf of the whole group" (Berrocal et al., 2021, p. 8), features as a beneficiary of the government's actions and God's blessings.<sup>3</sup> Where the wider in-group is presented as active, it is mostly in what it is (united, together) than in physically impacting on the world. The least active group is the audience ('you'), who is mostly positioned as the recipient of the president's verbal processes (e.g., 'I assure you', which is repeated three times) and otherwise discouraged from defying the Covid-19 restrictions.

Akufo-Addo makes ample use of deontic modality in his address to convey obligation. Indeed, this type of modality is predominant in both the informative and the persuasive parts of the speech (Figures 3a and 3b).

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<sup>3</sup> The deeply religious nature of Ghanaian society is reflected in formulaic phrases from religious discourse throughout Akufo-Addo's address, e.g., 'God richly bless them', 'by the mercies of God'.

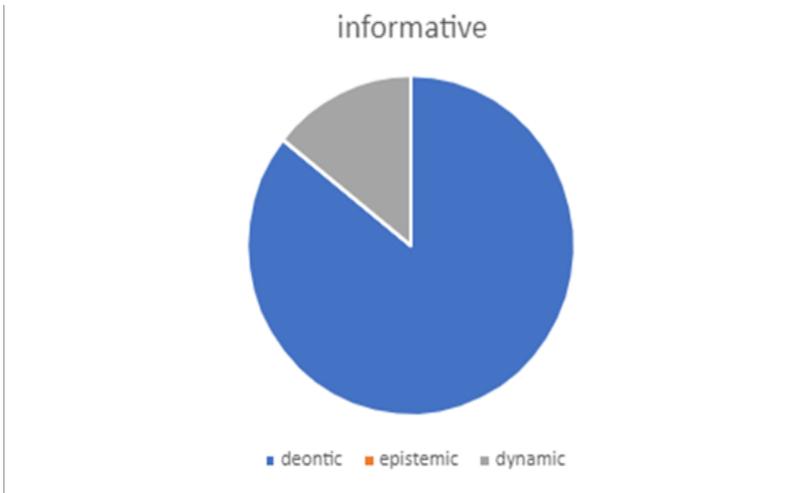


Figure 3a: Akufu-Addo's use of modality in informative sections of his address, based on occurrence per one hundred words

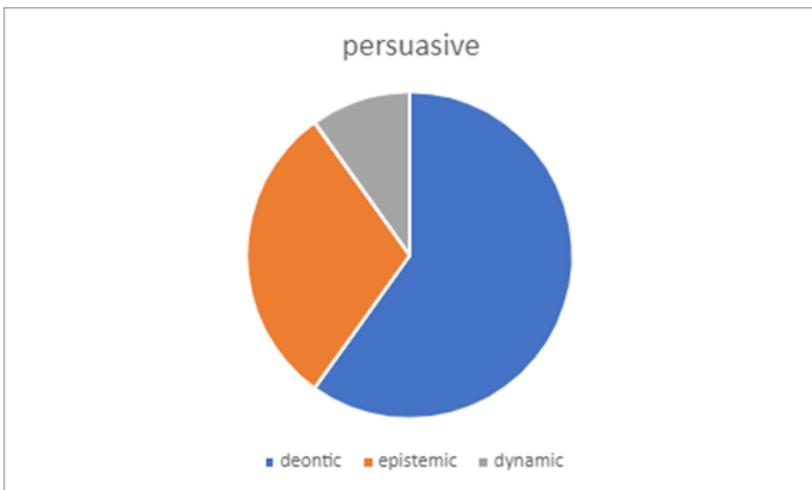


Figure 3b: Akufu-Addo's use of modality in persuasive sections of his address, based on occurrence per one hundred words

In the informative sections, deontic modality markers account for 86 per cent of all modality, followed by dynamic modality, i.e., references to ability, at a mere 14 per cent. In comparison, the percentage of deontic modality markers in the persuasive parts of the address is 60, followed by epistemic modality, i.e., expressions of likelihood, at 30 per cent and dynamic modality at 10 per cent. As with pronouns, we can see that Akufo-Addo uses more modality markers overall when trying to persuade the audience (2.12 per one hundred words compared to 0.98 for informative sections), thereby emphasising interpersonal meanings. Deontic authority rests overwhelmingly with the president and is directed at the audience and other members of government (e.g., ‘I urge all of you ... to be reminded ... that the frontline of the fight against Coronavirus is your front door’, ‘The Minister for Finance has been directed by me to prepare ... a Coronavirus Alleviation Programme’). In the informative sections, deontic modality can also be presented as an agentless rule (e.g., ‘Riders of motorbikes are not allowed to carry any additional person’), whereas the persuasive parts feature obligation directed at the inclusive ‘we’ (e.g., ‘we must be united in our determination’). Epistemic and dynamic modality are mostly found in appeals to the audience, where they function to either paint hypothetical futures (‘should the virus continue to linger for the rest of the year, the effects on our economy would be dire’) or convey self-efficacy (‘We can defeat this virus’).

The attentive reader will have spotted a few instances of the WAR metaphor in the preceding paragraph, which is indeed the most frequently realised one in Akufo-Addo’s fourth update. However, it is restricted to the persuasive parts of the address, where it can function to alert people at the early stage of the pandemic, make them take action and – possibly – create solidarity. In the context of Covid-19 though, the problem is that the required “action” is not to do something; some uses of WAR metaphors can therefore discourage restraint where such behaviour would lead to better health outcomes (Hendricks et

al., 2018). In addition, the WAR metaphor has the potential to increase anxiety and divide a society, which may be why the president reminds his audience that ‘[t]he enemy is the virus, and not each other’.

The linguistic analysis of Akufo-Addo’s address has shown him as an active leader imbued with the authority of his office. This image is reinforced through the visuals and music of his televised update, which begins with a lead-in of almost a minute during which the national anthem can be heard. Viewers first see the presidential emblem and then follow the path of an airborne camera moving slowly towards the presidential palace. The movement becomes faster and the image blurred as the camera seems to move through a corridor in the palace. The lead-in ends with a stylised image of the palace and the line ‘President addresses the nation’. The image then cuts to Akufo-Addo standing at a rostrum between the national and presidential flags, with the low angle of the now stationary camera reinforcing his status and the medium long shot creating some distance between him and the audience (Figure 4). While delivering his address, he looks directly at the viewer, a “demand gaze” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2021, p.117) that complements the deontic authority he invests himself with in his language use. He does not gesture during the speech – perhaps so as not to interfere with the sign language interpreter – and only leans forward slightly when greeting his audience. The insignia of the nation and his power are again invoked in the final 15 seconds, during which the camera slowly moves away from the palace and the closing bars of the anthem are played.



Figure 4: Still from Nana Akufo-Addo's address to the nation, 27 March 2020

This set-up is reminiscent of the Covid-19 “family meetings” convened by South Africa’s president Cyril Ramaphosa (Hunt, 2021, p. 2), except that Akufo-Addo wore shirts with West African patterns rather than formal suits for his updates.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, linguistic and visual elements, especially patterns of agency, speech acts, modality, symbols and camera angle work together to represent Akufo-Addo as powerful, authoritative and somewhat detached from the audience. However, that position is balanced by direct appeals to the same audience, whose cooperation the speaker seeks to win rather than enforce.

### ***Meso-level analysis: The speaker's self-positioning***

The text under analysis was, if not written, then certainly commissioned by the speaker, making him both its principal and its animator (Goffman, 1981), i.e., the person in whose name the speech is delivered and the person to deliver it. Coming from the president of Ghana, Akufo-Addo's words are imbued with authority, and he enjoys immensely privileged access to discourse distribution: his updates on the Covid-19 pandemic were broadcast on national television before they became available on social media channels. While a countrywide

<sup>4</sup> For an example, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LegaUR1A0Jg>. Ramaphosa announced a national lockdown in the same week as his Ghanaian counterpart gave the update analysed here.

broadcast ensures a broad reception, its timing at 11pm has been criticised as being too late to reach a maximum number of Ghanaians. As a result, later addresses were moved to an earlier time in the evening (Antwi-Boasiako and Nyarkoh, 2021, p. 1181), while press briefings were always held in the morning (Tandoh, 2021, p. 59). Finally, a televised address is an example of a monologic genre, with citizens' reactions being limited to comments on the subsequent online video.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the speaker positions himself in relation to the audience to achieve interpersonal goals.

While most of the address at hand is informative, the persuasive sections show a higher density of interpersonal markers such as pronouns and modality. The appeals also include several legitimation strategies that position the president as reliant on the audience's acceptance of, and co-operation with, the restrictions, and thus complicate his position of power. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the final persuasive section, in which the president pleads with the people in the indigenous languages Akan and Ga.<sup>6</sup> Legitimation even spills over to otherwise informative sections. Thus, he introduces information on previous measures as follows:

- (1) Fellow Ghanaians, the oath of office I swore on 7th January, 2017 demands that I dedicate myself to the service and well-being of you, the Ghanaian people. It is my job to protect you, and I am determined to do just that.

Here, it is the president who is under obligation, namely, to act for the benefit of the audience. Measures curtailing the freedom of the public are thus legitimated through moral evaluation and altruism (van Leeuwen, 2007; Reyes, 2011). When arguing for and announcing the partial lockdown, Akufo-Addo invokes the authority of the Ghana Health Service and

<sup>5</sup> All but one of the comments available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WljbO7yHok&t=3s> are positive, and many repeat the request to comply with the lockdown restrictions. The one exception is a factual question.

<sup>6</sup> My thanks go to Dr Gladys Nyarko Ansah for translating this passage.

the law, respectively. On occasion, appeals are developed in persuasive sections and carried over to the beginning a subsequent informative part:

- (2) Fellow Ghanaians, I am urging all of you to bear with these additional measures. They are being done in the interest of all of us. They are, hopefully, only for a short while. These additional measures, together with those earlier announced, are what will help us defeat the virus. And, we must be united in our determination and efforts to overcome this challenge.

In this appeal, the president uses a performative speech act ('urging') that puts the audience under obligation but recognises that compliance can only be sought, not forced. Other speech acts include announcing, assuring, directing, ordering and thanking. Due to its semantic profile, the verb 'bear' in example (2) implicitly acknowledges hardship, and the measures are further justified as being beneficial for the in-group ('in the interest of all of us', 'will help us') and minimised as being time limited. The appeal is completed with a call for unity. Similar themes re-occur at the beginning of the next informative section:

- (3) Fellow Ghanaians, we are in this together, and Government will stand by you. We are aware that there will be discomfort and difficulties for all of us over the next couple of weeks. As a responsive Government, we will continue to implement bold measures to mitigate the impact of the Coronavirus on businesses and households and ensure that job losses are minimised.

An appeal to solidarity among the in-group ('we are in this together') echoes the earlier appeal to unity and while hardships are now made explicit, they again pertain to all of the in-group. However, the inclusive 'we' alternates with third-

person references to the government that interacts with the audience ('stand by you'), making for a lesser or greater distance between the government and those it represents.

Another persuasive strategy used by Akufo-Addo is to create a national in-group. This is not only realised through the repeated phrase 'Fellow Ghanaians', but also by appeals to a shared patriotism ('The love of country is deeply embedded in all of us') and self-reliance during the pandemic, and by setting the nation apart from others:

- (4) [W]e cannot afford to copy blindly and do all the things some other well-developed countries are doing. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to this pandemic. We have a unique situation in our country, and we must take it into account in dealing with the disease.

Throughout the address, the speaker strikes a balance between enacting authority and seeking to persuade. That balance is tipped towards the former when the president invokes fear, for example, by referring to negative hypothetical futures (e.g., 'if we act now purposefully, we have a chance of preventing an escalation of our numbers') that can be averted by adhering to the restrictions. Occasionally, there are even veiled threats to those who are not 'the overwhelming majority' but refuse to follow social norms: 'I am confident that Ghanaians will comply with [the measures], and the security services will not have to intervene, with extraordinary means, to enforce them.' Since negation is frame-preserving, the second clause evokes the very intervention that is declared unnecessary. Earlier in the address, the speaker had affirmed the consequences of non-compliance: 'Anyone ... who is found to be flouting them will be dealt with fully in accordance with law. The security services have been clothed with the necessary power to enforce these measures'. While the overall aim of government communications was to 'spread calm, not fear' of Covid-19, the president partly relied on fear of law enforcement to secure compliance.

### ***Macro-level analysis: the wider context***

As mentioned above, Akufo-Addo's public address on 27 March 2020 came at a point in the pandemic when infections were rising. In reaction, the government decided on the most severe restrictions so far to avoid a possible public health disaster of the kind that had already been witnessed in other parts of the world at that time. Uncertainty and anxiety would have been high, making clear information and reassurance two central goals of official crisis communication. Institutionally, a nationwide address by the president is an example of asymmetrical communication from one speaker to a potential audience of millions, delivered as a monologue and invested with authority. Powerful though he may be, the president is bound by a democratic system of government. Indeed, Ghana was the first African colony (south of the Sahara) to gain independence and is often celebrated as "a vibrant multiparty democracy, [with] some of the most robust liberal-democratic institutions on the continent" (Paller, 2019, p. 12), especially since the start of the Fourth Republic in 1992. However, the diverse socio-cultural fabric of the country also includes strands of "traditional views of authority" (ibid.), together with a rather formal public discourse that sets store by symbols of power and appreciation. Within that context, Akufo-Addo is part of an elite family of politicians and son of a former president. This privileged background may further contribute to a certain elevation of himself. Finally, he is the leader of the centre-right New Patriotic Party, whose liberal-conservative ideology is more likely to uphold than question tradition.

The final section summarises the findings of the three-level analysis, answers the research question and provides an outlook on further research.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Crisis communication scholars have recommended seven tools for use during the Covid-19 pandemic (Coombs, 2021; Hyland-Wood et al., 2021); namely, convey a threat,

convince the audience that the announced measures work, be clear, be credible, balance empathy and honesty, be creative, and acknowledge diversity in the audience.

Checking the language use in the Ghanaian president's fourth update on coronavirus against those recommendations, it can be said that he manages to convey the threat inherent in the situation during which he gave the address. He does so by invoking a negative hypothetical future and drawing on the WAR metaphor. However, the latter also shows that the speaker has a fine line to tread between communicating how serious the situation is and increasing fear in his audience. He seeks to ward off any fatalism by assuring citizens that the government's measures work. Importantly, he also conveys a sense of efficacy, using language features such as pronouns and modality to suggest that everyone can help in the effort against Covid-19. Grammatically, however, this is at odds with the fact that the audience is the least active group in the address. It should also be noted that the long and detailed address, while clear, is the opposite of a short and simple message. It may have been more advisable to stick to the key points to be communicated and open channels for further detail, e.g., online platforms and community leaders.

On the plus side, President Akufo-Addo represents himself as an active, credible authority both linguistically and visually. In addition, he refers to the dual authority of the Ghana Health Service and the law; law enforcement is even invoked in veiled threats to ensure the public's compliance. However, the asymmetrical communication of the updates, along with the president's elite background, risk turning credibility into aloofness. Countering that risk is the fact that the speaker conveys both empathy and honesty by acknowledging, at least implicitly, the hardship that the anti-Covid restrictions will bring.

A study of all the updates could establish how much variety and creativity featured in later addresses to counter "pandemic fatigue", while a broader study across different

communication channels could establish if different parts of Ghana's diverse society were accounted for (see Nyarko et al., 2021 for a critique). In his fourth update at least, the president does use indigenous languages for his key message, but otherwise seems more intent on creating a national in-group to overcome political partisanship during the crisis.

This leaves the question what potential impact the president's language use can have on the behaviour of the public. While it is notoriously difficult to establish a causal relation between public discourse and people's (lack of) compliance, a brief look at the comments on Akufo-Addo's Facebook page next to a video of the address allows for some insights.<sup>7</sup> One caveat is that comments are likely to be from followers rather than detractors of the president and indeed, most of the comments positively evaluate the address, congratulating the president and wishing God's blessings upon him (see also footnote 5). Deferential forms of address like 'Excellency' and 'Daddy/Papa' chime with his self-presentation as powerful yet protective. As one communications expert put it, the presidential addresses during the pandemic conveyed the impression that "the father of the nation was with us" (quoted in Tandoh, 2021, p. 56). Although there are a few comments lambasting the president for incompetence and corruption, most criticism is prefaced by positive appraisal and framed as a 'humble request'. Importantly, positive comments also reiterate the appeal to follow the Covid-19 measures, even if commenters express some concern that not everyone may do so. A comparison with how the address was received by followers of Samuel Ofose-Ampofo, the leader of the oppositional National Democratic Congress, could show in how far compliance is partisan.

This paper has focused on only one, albeit important, public address by Ghana's president, and much remains to be done to get a more complete picture of Covid-19 crisis communications in the country. Nevertheless, the detailed,

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<sup>7</sup><https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1354287184756321>

multi-level analysis presented here adds depth to comparable case studies and will hopefully serve as a model for future work.

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# **Fighting a global pandemic and local stigmatisation: War metaphors in presidential update speeches and their effect on attitudes to COVID -19 (Patients) in Ghana**

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## **Abstract**

Ghana's President has used WAR-framed metaphors in announcing and explaining both the notion of COVID-19 and the measures his government outlined to curb its spread. This paper explores the potential effects the various conceptual mappings in the WAR-framed communication by the President had on the general public in dealing with a global pandemic in a local context. This is achieved by linking the mappings in the WAR-framed communication to the attitudes and practices among the Ghanaian public. Data were drawn from 8 presidential COVID-19 updates between March 15 and May 31, 2020. Findings indicate that the use of WAR-framed communication successfully evoked fear among the general population. However, this transcended the virus to COVID-19 patients (and their families), provoking a cause of action among the general public to fight not only the virus but also COVID-19 patients (and their families). This appears to have caused stigmatisation of COVID-19 patients, and led to a situation where COVID-19 positive patients