THE PRESIDENTIAL PANDEMIC DISCOURSE ON TWITTER

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Abstract
The novel Coronavirus is the most serious pandemic the world has faced in the last century. The political leaders have been forced to adapt their public discourse to this new situation and many have ended up communicating on social media on this subject on a daily basis. Twitter has become the social media platform the most frequently utilized for spreading information and keeping updates on the current worldwide issues and phenomena. This research focuses on the main topics of the French presidential online discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a multidisciplinary approach grounded in critical discourse analysis, it attempts to decipher the promoted social and political values behind the discourse. A total of 52 tweets of Macron's tweets were collected from February 2021 to July 2021, and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis was applied to decoding the political strategies concerning the pandemic crisis, and their constructed meanings on social media.

Keywords: presidential discourse, social media, pandemic crisis, discourse analysis

1. INTRODUCTION. CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

Covid-19 was first officially reported in December 2019 by Chinese authorities. The issue of the emergence and spread of a global pandemic is challenging and complex from multiple points of view because the consequences are not only medical but also social, economic, political and, of course, related to human behaviour, considering that health is essential for the human species. Even if we are in a phase where the vaccine is already a solution, the consequences of a pandemic health crisis, spread over at least two years, will be seen beyond the actual end of illness (or reduction of illness) on many levels of our lives.

The online discourse, on Twitter in our case, has been flooded with the presence of this health issue and has attracted numerous scientific contributions because it closely records the opinions, perceptions and attitudes of the public, of citizens going through a series of unprecedented experiences in relation to the coronavirus pandemic. Interpreting and understanding discourse of this kind, on a broad scale, can lead us to conclusions about how people conceptualise and react to a global crisis, a crisis that affects each of us individually, and which calls into question the very survival of each of us. Also, studying the changes in perception that such a phenomenon can bring about over time can lead to an understanding of crucial aspects of how key issues impact the population. In a recent article by Wicke and Bolognese (2020), it is pointed out that the topics discussed are dynamic and tend to change if they are seen/recorded over time.

The impact of COVID-19 and the measures to prevent transmission have generated fiery debates among the general population, medical and public health professionals, and government officials. But at the forefront of this crisis are the national leaders and heads of state, who have been charged with the responsibility of devising a response to the pandemic as it unfolds. Much of their discourse is made available through social media websites such as Twitter. During this pandemic, social media was also used to share news, information, personal thoughts and emotions, because the phenomenon is a real challenge for everyone.

> Although many of the typical challenges these world leaders face vary as a product of their social or political circumstances, the COVID-19 pandemic presents an issue that is universally applicable. Sociopolitical differences among nations and cultures may influence the capacity of a leader's response with respect to form and function; the crisis itself, however, transcends borders and places populations in jeopardy with little regard for demographics. As such, it would be within reason to expect that the ubiquity of the COVID-19 threat would result in an ostensibly uniform response from world leaders. This has not, however, been the case. Rather, leaders have reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that vary dramatically, ranging from swift social and economic interventions (Kealey, 2020), to downplaying the virus' severity and deflecting responsibility (Phillips, 2020), and even purporting that the virus is a "hoax" (Egan, 2020).

Discourse is the tool and the trade of politics (Partington and Taylor, 2018). It is difficult to think of an aspect of politics that is not conducted through discourse. To inform, to mobilise, to influence and to create stories – these all can be reasons for political public discourse. Statements or mediatised speeches can be insights into how politicians perform actions and exercise their power and authority through discourse, the politician being an agent of controlling such a communicative event.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The present article aims at describing how the presidential discourse around Covid-19 is framed on Twitter. In particular, we will make an incursion into the discourse of the French president, Emmanuel Macron, attempting to elucidate the **main topics** of the French presidential online discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic and their **constructed meanings**. Using a multidisciplinary approach that relies on critical discourse analysis, the research attempts to decipher the **promoted social and political values** behind his online discourse on Twitter.

The research questions addressed in this study are (1) which topics are discussed on Macron's Twitter in relation to Covid-19 one year after the beginning of the sanitary crisis? and (2) what social and political **values** emerge from the French president's tweets about Covid?

3. HOW THE PANDEMIC CHANGED (POLITICAL) COMMUNICATION – AND WHY IT MATTERS

Among the twenty-first-century digital communication tools, social media websites like Facebook and Twitter provide innovative ways for politicians to connect with citizens. Since March 2020, the norms, values and expectations of a free society have changed because of the new world order: the pandemic. In order to impose lockdowns, freedom has been restricted. In order to reduce the effects of the pandemic, the distancing norms are different. In order to avoid a humanitarian disaster, wearing masks and abidance by lockdowns and curfews for shopping or circulation have been imposed. Schools have been shut down and many citizens were (and still are) working remotely,

isolated at home, which some are leaving only for reasons of primary necessity. These changes were made for public health reasons but they still pose significant challenges to the accepted conventions of any democratic society.

The social distancing imposed by various governments stimulated many internet users to use social media for communication. Politicians, governments, medical staff and specialists, parents, entrepreneurs, workers, professors joined online groups and watched television, newspapers, influencers in order to get informed and make the most appropriate decision for their lives and their medical state. Opinions, concerns, beliefs and emotions were (and still are) expressed on social media through tweets, videos, comments, hashtags.

The government decisions, the problems faced by people in hospitals, by families with the homeschooling, the interpretations of numbers associated with the pandemic, the containment of the vaccine and of the treatment are expressed and commented on social media on a daily basis. The presidents all over the world took the lead and have been considered a power pole and a decision factor capable of changing legal aspects and people's choices and offering solutions through their power structures.

A president's opinion on the current epidemiological crisis on social media can inform us on how a presidency conceptualizes the pandemic and how an entire political power/state power is reacting to its development.

4. POLITICAL TWEET AS A RESEARCH OBJECT

Twitter is a popular platform used by politicians in order to get interactions with the general public. Twitter is considered a communication space using technology, connected to the cultural usage practices of users. There is widespread agreement that due to its influence, extensive use, frequency and ease of access by the general public, social media can and should be used for beneficial dissemination of public health information, especially in the context of the COVID19 pandemic. There is also evidence that world leaders' use of social media, especially Twitter, has been substantive and influential during the COVID19 pandemic. As Rufai and Bunce note "Twitter may represent a powerful tool for world leaders to rapidly communicate public health information with citizens." However, they urge "general caution when using Twitter for health information" with a "preference for tweets containing official government-based information sources." (Rufai & Bunce, 2020).

An important part of today's political communication is performed through social media (Longhi, 2013: 26) and the tweet can be considered also a sub-genre of political discourse if the main topic of the tweet is a political one. Twitter's high adoption rate among the political elite is also telling with regard to the political influence of the platform. Virtually all significant French politicians, journalists and pundits use Twitter. For example, about 60% of French members of parliament were active on Twitter in 2014 and the number is significantly higher in 2017 (Maurer, 2019: 113).

5. METHODS. CORPUS OF #EMMANUELMACRON TWITTER ACCOUNT

The primary data used in this article is taken from Emmanuel Macron's political declarations concerning the pandemic situation on Twitter. There are 52 tweets collected between November 2020 and February 2021 from his official Twitter channel - @Emmanuel Macron. The tweets were manually chosen by hashtags or by selecting words related to pandemic/sanitary crisis/vaccine. So the main topic of these tweets was the pandemic. It is important that the data only discussed pandemic and closely related situations so that the main strategic political positions, ideology, and values regarding the issue can be specifically highlighted. The tweets

come from the period mentioned above, because of the context that may affect the declarations: approximately one year after the official begging of the sanitary crisis. The vaccine had not been delivered yet, the situation was still unclear and the decision was not founded only on medical reasons, but on the ongoing specialist studies.

These tweets are analyzed using Fairclough's (1993) three-dimensional framework: **textual, discursive practice, and social practice**. From the textual dimension, we have analyzed the word choice and the themes in the posts in the 52 tweets. The words or phrases under focus are keywords that could reflect the president's attitude towards the pandemic. Moreover, the themes that are related to the pandemic are analyzed to show how they identify political and strategically constructed meanings.
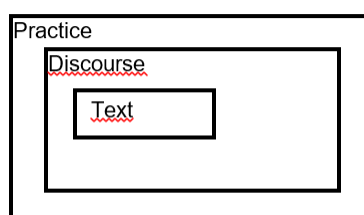

Figure 1. Fairclough's three-dimensional framework (1993)

In the discursive practice dimension, the tweets are seen as products of political discourse. Because of that, it is assumed that the tweets possess the power to construct the response of society. Thus, the answer to the question —Which are the social and political values behind the discourse? - can be defined by construing these tweets as part of the discourse of the French president. The social practice dimension is revealed by the political and social values promoted through his pandemic tweets. Finally, through these three dimensions of analysis, the ideology behind the French presidential political Twitter posts can be understood.

6. TOPICS AND CONSTRUCTED MEANINGS IN MACRON'S COVITWEETS

Emmanuel Macron was elected president on 7 May, 2017. He disputed the second ballot of the election against Marine Le Pen. He was a relative political newcomer challenger of the political establishment without an affiliation to one of the major parties. He is known as a part of the reconfiguration of French politics that took place in the 2017 election also because of the communicative side related to the efficient use of social media (Maurer, 2019). Online platforms and social media have played an increasing role in French elections from 2007 onwards as tools for mobilization, building party platforms and influencing public opinion (Lilleker, 2016; Mercier, 2015).

Fairclough and Wodak (1997) argue that language can be used as a form of action to change the world. Language also becomes a form of action that is connected socially and historically with other social aspects. Macron uses the Twitter space in order to call to action through all his pandemic messages:

> *Vaccination against COVID is a global public good! We must address two challenges at the same time. The first is the immediate response to the crisis. The second is to prepare, as of today, for the future, and to make sure that, together, we will be ready to address similar pandemics in the future. (May, 28 2021).*

> *I call on global vaccines, therapeutics and test-producers to engage in licensing agreements so as to deploy their innovations throughout the world. Let's do it together! (May 27 2021)*

> *Vacciner le jour. Vacciner la nuit. Vacciner le week-end. Vacciner les jours fériés. Merci à toutes celles et à tous ceux qui ne comptent pas leurs heures pour sauver des vies. Car c'est bien cela dont il s'agit. (May, 6 2021) [Vaccinate during the day. Vaccinate at night. Vaccinate on weekends. Vaccinate on holidays. Thank you all who do not count their hours to save lives. Because that's what it's all about.]*

6.1. Topics in the French Presidential Covitweets

Using the three-dimensional framework of Fairclough, the ideology can be understood by first analyzing the text (the topics). After that, its production and distribution in the online political discourse will be seen through the notion of power relation as a discursive practice and finally, the relation between these tweets with the society (social practice) will be seen through how they put crisis and solutions (vaccine, social distancing, wearing masks, etc.) in the French society through constructed meanings.

The topics discussed in Macron's analyzed tweets in relation to Covid-19 are strongly related to the social and political values that the French president sought to transfer in the public space. The topics in 52 tweets of the French president seem to create a bridge to other elements involved in social processes. Social issues like wearing masks or refusing to wear them, keeping social distance or not, staying at home or not, using all kinds of disinfectants or staying normal, and on top of all – getting or refusing to take the vaccine, all these social issues are pointed out in Macron's COVITWEETS discursive aspects.

Macron delivered his interpersonal meaning through a few strategies, and used them to express his political purpose which was/is to gain trust from his audience. Macron projects pandemic in a very positive way, trying to stimulate the confidence in the sanitary personnel and the scientific researcher, on the one hand, and on the government decisions on the other hand.

All his actions referring to the coronavirus strategy "reveal a president trying to juggle three different roles — as commander, communicator and multilateralist-in-chief". Macron has assumed the role of a commanding general, but he has also cultivated more of a team approach to leadership than at other times in his presidency because of all of the aspects affected by the pandemic crisis. The French president's approach to the crisis rests on four pillars: building and leading his key team, communicating, decision-making and international cooperation (Eder 2020)[1].

This section explains the textual analysis of Macron's covitweets in terms of words choice and social and political values. This includes ways in which the French president represents the coronavirus threat in words. Based on this short analysis we will emphasize the major recurring themes /patterns that can be seen in his covitweets.

6.1. 1 Word choice

The collection of 52 tweets from February to July 2021 is based on French and English tweets that include hashtags and keywords that are commonly used while referencing the pandemic.

Even if the figurative frame used in discourses around diseases is **WAR** – *to mobilize, crisis, strategy, emergency, save lives firemen, military, honor the country, people died, the battle is far from over* – is certainly a conventional one, frequently used, often unconsciously. But the WAR is conducted with **competence** – *being effective, being fair, our priorities are clear, to strengthen health systems, accelerating the production of the solution, and doing everything for defeating the*

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[1] https://www.politico.eu/interactive/inside-emmanuel-macron-coronavirus-war/, accessed on November, 30 2021.

virus, *decisive role,* collectivity/solidarity – *to share doses of vaccine*, *let's do it together!*, *our greatest strength is solidarity, the fight against this virus can only be global, the United States is now joining us in this collective effort, Over the next few weeks, together we will build the path that will bring us back to normal life. Hold together,* and **hope** – *confidence, we will succeed.*

Such a frame is handy but not drawn on a kind of knowledge coming from first-hand experience, but the urgency is associated with a very negative situation and the necessity for action to be taken. Constructed in terms of allies and enemies, the inner structure of the pandemic theme, central in the tweets chosen, is opposing forces that have different strategies and sometimes different goals to achieve, involving risks, even lethal ones.

Even if the topics are regarding the pandemic and words like *vaccine, virus, battle, crisis*, *death, fight*, the findings show that Emmanuel Macron tries to frame the hope in his online discourse but he is using competence and solidarity.

6.1.2 Social and Political Values

Values are a powerful tool in political discourse used for persuasion, legitimization and, most notably, coercion. Recognizing the audience's needs and values in any political speech is thought to help secure political power (Karwat 1982). In the socio-cognitive approach (developed by Van Dijk), values are defined as 'shared mental objects of social cognition', located in the social memory (Van Dijk, 1998: 74), this suggesting that values are essentially socially constructed. In other words, values dictate what is permitted or prohibited and the goals to be aspired to by individuals and societies alike. Assuming that language is a source of information about socio-cultural values, I next seek to establish what values are referred to in the analyzed tweets and how these values are construed. The tables below seek to underline the values to which Emmanuel Macron refers in his online discourse.

Social Values

Framing hope	*Stay united (#Franceunie)*	*Engaging a community*
• A sense of shared purpose • Minimize harm to lives • Build trust	• Enabled kindness • Meaning • Empathy	• Being solidary • Commitment to precautionary attitudes

Political Values

Mobilize collective effort	*Enable planning*	*Economic*
• Inform & educate • Persuade	• Convey • Direction • Strategy	• Launching • Economic Strategy

Unite (by solidarity, trust, direction, convey) is the presidential branding key in response to the pandemic. Unite against the COVID-19 WAR. Efforts go to reinforce the importance of collective mobilization include the constant use of terms such as "we", "us", "all". Unity is seen as playing a special role in combatting COVID-19. This is because every single person can limit the virus spread by abiding by the measures against COVID-19.

6.2 The Constructed Meanings through the Topics: Competence, Collectivity and Hope

The 52 tweets from Macron's online pandemic discourse analyzed here convey **hope** as a general frame of the pandemic situation, which could reflect the president's attitude towards the sanitary and economic crisis. Moreover, the themes that are related to coronavirus communication on Twitter regard the following topics: **(1): Communications and Reporting, (2) Community and Social Compassion, (3) Politics, (4) Reacting to the epidemic.** In the discursive practice dimension, online communication on social media, in general, is seen as a product of political discourse. Because of that, it is assumed that the tweets possess the power to construct the society, or at least to influence the nation. These tweets are a part of the discourse on the coronavirus crisis in France. Finally, through these three dimensions of analysis, the constructed meanings behind Macron's strategy of communicating on Twitter can be understood. His online communication on COVID-19 gives a clear understanding of the president's official position facing the coronavirus crisis.

Language is used in this case to emphasize power relations. Macron conceptualizes it into the *Politics of staying united* – and in this way, the French president uses the hashtag *#FranceUnie* in which all the French people are targeted as a united whole because all the individuals' attitudes are important in gaining the war against the coronavirus. So, this sanitary crisis is perceived as a threat to all of them but the threat can be stopped if all are united in attitudes and actions. Unity must be constructed for the purpose of gaining the war. So, all the people have to identify themselves as saviours.

As for the presidential attitude towards the pandemic, Emmanuel Macron has solemnly called for **national unity** online, on television, on press conferences, in video calls, and so on, and sought to place himself above the fray, only answering a handful of questions from journalists.
"One principle guides us to define our actions," Macron said on March 12 in the first of his three televised speeches on the coronavirus. "Trust in science. Listening to those who know."

Officials said Macron had been trying to strike a balance in his speech. "It was a complex message about needing to confine but also needing to keep the economic engine going," the adviser in his office said days later.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Mining the information encoded by public and private internet users in the short texts posted on Twitter (tweets) is becoming an increasingly fruitful field of research. Besides providing a valuable tool for tracking the spread of epidemics, and thus helping experts to make more effective decisions, social media have been used to investigate public awareness, attitudes and reactions about specific diseases (JI X Chun &Geller, 2013; Smith and alii, 2016).

French president casts himself as commanding general in the fight against the pandemic. Like other national leaders, Macron is fighting to save lives and prevent an economic depression. But he is also battling for the survival of his political vision.

"Inside Macron's coronavirus war" is the way in which the French president conceives his communication on Twitter. Short messages on the pandemic situation are delivered on the official Twitter account not on a daily basis, but twice or three times per week. They are usually very concise messages, like urges with a persuasive dimension of doing what's best for the health condition population. We use an already known coinage, a composed noun - COVITWEETS - in order to extract only the tweets regarding the COVID and pandemic themes.

The discursive ethos of Emmanuel Macron in politweets regarding the coronavirus crisis can be resumed in one phrase - *from Power to Solidarity* – because the ideology that converges from his political tweets on COVID-19 is positive thinking about a negative situation which can be addressed with implication and solidarity.

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