Covid-19 in American Political Speeches: A Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

During the time of COVID-19, politicians around the world delivered different ideological speeches. The study in hand aims at identifying the types and triggers presupposition that exist in American political COVID-19 speeches. This is to uncover the crucial role that linguistic factors in shaping political leaders' communication strategies during pandemics. Particularly, how preferences and implicit motivations are expressed. In doing this, the study limits itself to analyses presupposition in political speeches delivered by four key figures — Governor Gavin Newsome, Governor Andrew Cuomo, Secretary Anthony Blinken, and Secretary Alex Azar — during the COVID-19 pandemic. Methodologically, the analysis draws on Yule (1996) and Levinson (1983). The results show that lexical presuppositions are the most frequently encountered, followed by structural and existential presuppositions, besides a variety of types of presuppositions triggers used in discourses.

Keywords: *Political Discourse, Presupposition, COVID-19.*

Introduction

Politics plays an important role in influencing public opinion, especially during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Political discourse as an ideological tool is used by leaders to persuade, manipulate, and sometimes control public opinion and behavior. During the epidemic, the US. Politicians used verbal and non-verbal strategies to convey the situation's urgency and promote vaccination etc. These speeches were not just simple communication but were complex and had many facets, and rhetorical strategies such as ethos, logos, and pathos were used to resonate with different segments of the population There is a preconceived notion, that enables speakers to present or assume stories that have already been adopted the small factor allows This subtly influences how the audience interprets the message, shaping their understanding and response. In this context, the study will focus on an analysis of four speeches delivered by prominent American politicians during the pandemic, examining how preconceptions were used to craft messages that shaped public opinion and influenced decision-making on the effect of species. By reviewing these discourses, the study highlights the central role of political communication in shaping preconceived notions during the global health crisis.

Research Questions

What are the frequencies of the types of presupposition in political covid -19 texts?

What are the frequencies of triggers of presupposition in political covid -19 texts?

Literature Review

The presupposition is a fundamental concept in linguistics that involves background assumptions a speaker or writer makes, and these assumptions are already accepted by the listener or reader. Presuppositions shape how communication is constructed and interpreted, as they allow for a shared understanding between participants. In simple terms, presupposition refers to what is taken for granted or assumed to be true before a statement is made. For example, by saying, "Your brother is out," the speaker presupposes that the listener has a brother. Without this transparency, the story may be difficult to understand.

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The study of presuppositions can trace its origins to philosophers and linguists who explored how meaning in language goes beyond the expression of words Early discussions of presuppositions can be found in Beaver (1996) and Strawson (1996). 1950) in the literature. Frege introduced the idea of presuppositions when analyzing sentences with definite implications, and Strawson expanded on this by explaining how sentences take on facts that are necessary for them to make sense, and he noted that when their preconceptions are false, some cases fail. As the sentence "The king of France is a skull" implies the existence of the king of France, without this truth the sentence lacks coherence.

Yule (1996) defines presupposition as what a speaker believes to be true before making a statement. This emphasizes that presuppositions are more than mere linguistic structures—they are tied to the speaker's cognitive and communicative context. Levinson (1983) emphasizes the role of practical preconceptions in everyday language use, noting that shared knowledge can be relied upon to communicate effectively and with one another meet.

Previous views have unique properties, such as the principle of consistency under denial, as highlighted by Degano (2007). This theory states that formalism remains intact even when the main verb in a sentence is negated. For example, "John couldn't stop in time" still assumes that John tried to stop. This illustrates the durability and robustness of prior concepts in meaning-making, regardless of syntactic structure.

In discourse, preconceptions are closely related to the notion of collectivity, which refers to shared knowledge among participants. Speakers rely on this common ground when they make presuppositions to ensure their statements are understood. Accommodation is another feature of presupposition. When presuppositions experience a context where their triggers are not fulfilled, they can be pragmatically balanced to fit the conversational setting. This alteration makes a difference in maintaining coherence and avoids communication breakdown (Delin,1992)

In summary, presuppositions are a crucial aspect of communication that bridges the gap between semantics, pragmatics, and discourse. They enable speakers and listeners to manage information flow and maintain coherence in conversation. The study of presuppositions, from early thinkers like Frege and Strawson to more recent scholars such as Yule, Levinson, and Degano, offers valuable insights into how language functions at both the sentence level and within broader contexts.

Presupposition Types and Triggers

Presupposition triggers are specific lexical items or linguistic constructions that evoke presuppositions. Levinson (1983) identified thirteen primary triggers that give rise to presuppositions:

- *Definite Descriptions*: Definite noun phrases or possessives signal the existence of a particular entity. For example, "John saw the man with two heads" presupposes that a man with two heads exists (Levinson, 1983, p. 181).

- *Factive Verbs*: Verbs like "know," "regret," and "realize" assume the truth of their complement clause. For instance, "Frankenstein knew Dracula was there" presupposes that Dracula was indeed present (Levinson, 1983, p. 181).

- *Implicit Verbs*: Verbs such as "avoid," "forget," or "fail" imply an underlying presupposition. For example, "John failed to open the door" presupposes that John attempted to open it (Levinson, 1983, p. 181).

- *Change of State Verbs*: Verbs indicating a shift from one state to another, such as "stop" or "start," "carry" presuppositions about prior conditions. For example, "John stopped beating his wife" presupposes that John used to beat his wife (Levinson, 1983, p. 181).

- *Repetitive Verbs*: Words like "again" or "return" presuppose a previous occurrence. For instance, "The flying saucer came again" presupposes that it came before (Levinson, 1983, p. 182).

- *Verbs of Judgment*: Verbs like "accuse" presuppose that the action being judged has occurred. For example, "Agatha accused Ian of plagiarism" presupposes that Ian plagiarized (Levinson, 1983, p. 182).

- *Temporal Clauses*: Temporal conjunctions like "before" or "after" signal presuppositions related to time. For example, "Before Strawson was born, Frege realized the presupposition" presupposes that Strawson was born (Levinson, 1983, p. 182).

- *Cleft Sentences*: Cleft structures like "It was John who opened the door" presuppose that someone opened the door, with the focus on identifying that person (Levinson, 1983, p. 183).

- *Implicit Clefts with Stressed Constituents*: Stress on particular elements can evoke presuppositions. For example, "Chomsky invented linguistics!" presupposes that linguistics was invented by someone (Levinson, 1983, p. 183).

- *Comparisons and Contrasts*: Comparatives and contrasting structures like "better than" trigger presuppositions about other entities or actions. For example, "Simon is better than the other players" presupposes the existence of other players (Levinson, 1983, p. 183).

- *Non-Restrictive Relative Clauses*: These clauses provide additional, non-essential information, as in "The Proto-Harrapans, who flourished between 2800-2650 BC, were important temple builders," presupposing the temporal existence of the Proto-Harrapans (Levinson, 1983, p. 184).

- *Counterfactual Conditionals*: Conditional statements that contradict reality, like "If the notice had said 'mine-field' in English, we would never have lost poor Llewellyn," presuppose that the notice did not say 'mine-field' in English (Levinson, 1983, p. 184).

- *WH-Questions*: WH-questions inherently presuppose the existence of an answer, as in "Who opened the door?" presupposing that someone opened the door (Levinson, 1983).

Yule (1996, Pp. 27-32) Classifies Presuppositional Triggers into Six Categories

- *Existential Presupposition*: This refers to the assumption that certain entities exist, often indicated by possessive constructions or definite noun phrases (e.g., "Maria's cat" implies Maria exists and has a cat).

- *Factual Presupposition*: Verbs like "know" and "regret" signal information that is assumed to be true. For instance, "Linda is sorry to tell us" Presupposes that Linda has already told something.

- *Lexical Presupposition*: Certain verbs like "stop" or "start" carry presuppositions. For example, "He stopped smoking" presupposes that he used to smoke.

- *Structural Presupposition*: WH-questions assume the truth of the information following the WH-word (e.g., "Where did you buy the bike?" assumes a bike was bought).

- *Non-factual Presupposition*: Verbs such as "dream" or "assume" imply false fantasies. For example, "I dreamed that I was rich" presupposes that the speaker is not rich.

- *Counterfactual Presupposition*: Counterfactual statements refer to the opposite of fact. For example, "If English were our native language" presupposes that English is not the speaker's native language.

Some Related Studies

Lathar et al. (2023) conducted a descriptive qualitative study analyzing presuppositions in President Joe Biden's victory speech. They focused on how speakers make implicit assumptions, which are reflected in their speech, influencing comprehension (Yule, 1996; Haji & Mohammed, 2019). The study identified that Biden's speech relied heavily on lexical triggers, with 894 occurrences, particularly noun phrases, which appeared 683 times. Synthetic triggers, such as temporal sentences, were also present, though less frequently. The dominant type of presupposition in the speech was existential, making up 82.28% of the total. The findings have potential applications in linguistic and pedagogical fields.

Abdulabbas (2020) conducted a functional analysis of ideology in selected political speech, with a particular focus on Trump's speech. Using Yule's (1996) theoretical model—which incorporates probabilistic, ontological, literal, structural, nonfactual, and counterfactual theories—the study aims to examine several previous theories of Trump politics of the metaphor of the. The findings suggest that political content, especially in Trump speeches, can promise and reassure elite citizens through the use of strategic language. To demonstrate his vast knowledge of American social and political realities, Trump uses a wide range of perspectives, avoiding excessive detail and using straightforward statements that resonate with his audience His speeches reflect mouthpieces, community assumptions, and perceived mistakes about weight. However, the analysis reveals significant upside risks associated with its broader arguments, supported by its analysis but still controversial and often criticized as inappropriate This contributes to critics that its metaphor is of a mixed nature.

A study by Liang et al. (2016) examines the initial motivational elements of Hillary Clinton's first campaign speech to understand how these linguistic elements contribute to her political goals. It analyzes preconceived motives at the level of words and syntax, and argues that its widespread use makes its political messages more effectively communicated and more accessible to its audience Analysis to highlight key issues , makes speech affordable and clear, encourages audience interaction, strengthens speaker-audience relationships To does so, highlights the important role of prior stimuli Finally , the research aims to improve the composition and understanding of political discourses by investigating the antecedents of motivations.

Methodology

This study limits itself to analyses presupposition in political speeches delivered by four key figures — Governor Gavin Newsome, Governor Andrew Cuomo, Secretary Anthony Blinken, and Secretary Alex Azar — during the COVID-19 pandemic. The discourses selected for this study focus on public health policy, advocacy campaigns, and major policy decisions related to epidemic management in order to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information on, the speeches were taken from authentic sources, including official websites, official news reports and popular media.

The study draws on Yule (1996) and Levinson (1983), which present a comprehensive approach to understanding theories used in politics Yule's model distributes theories of priority are six major types of internal, including existential, lexical , structural, factives, non-factive and counterfactual conditionals. These types serve as a basis for examining how politicians incorporate explicit patterns into their speeches. Levinson's (1983) framework complements Yule's model by identifying specific triggers factors . Through this integrated theory, the study classifies and systematically analyzes assumptions formulated in discourses. Statistical analyzes were also used to assess the distribution and frequency of these priorities, providing a quantitative basis for deriving the study findings This analytical approach provides a deeper understanding in how explicit assumptions shape political communication in the context of global crises such as the COVID pandemic. Additionally, mathematical analysis was utilized to derive the findings.

Data Analysis & Discussion

The Analysis of Governor Newsom's State of the State Address (March 9,2021)

- *Existential Presuppositions*

Proper Noun

"I am speaking to you from Dodger Stadium, transformed from the home of last year's World Series Champions into a centerpiece of America's mass vaccination campaign."

The trigger of the presupposition here is proper noun "Dodger Stadium." It presupposes that the speaker is currently addressing the audience from a specific location, and that the location, Dodger Stadium, is relevant to the context of the communication.

- *Lexical Presuppositions*

Factive Verbs

"I know our progress hasn't always felt fast enough."

The trigger of the presupposition here is the factive verb "know" it presupposes that the progress made has been perceived as slow. This acknowledges the frustrations faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- *Structural Presuppositions*

Temporal Clauses

"Since this pandemic started, uncertainty has been the only thing we are certain of."

The temporal clause "since." It presupposes that the pandemic began at a specific time and in that time the uncertainty has been a consistent and defining feature throughout the entire duration of the pandemic.

The Analysis of Secretary Blinken's Remarks on the COVID-19 Response (April 14,2021)

- *Existential Presupposition*

Definite Description

" From day one, the administration has led a full-court press to get as many Americans vaccinated as fast as possible!"

The existential presupposition trigger is definite description "the administration." It presupposes that the administration has an effective role in making Americans vaccinated as fast as possible.

- *Lexical Presupposition*

Change-of-State Verbs.

"The administration is moving quickly to open new vaccination sites across the country."

The verb "open." It presupposes that there is a rapid increase in vaccination sites, reflecting an urgent and proactive approach to expanding vaccine access.

Structural Presupposition

Temporal Clause

"Since the United States recorded its first COVID-19 death in February, more than 550,000 Americans have died in the pandemic."

The temporal clause "since" presupposes that the pandemic began significantly with the first death in February.

The Analysis of Alex Azar's Remarks at National Taiwan University (August 11,2020).

- *Existential Presuppositions*

Proper Noun

"Taiwan has now experienced two serious viruses that have emerged from China in the past decades, SARS and COVID-19."

The proper noun "China "It presupposes that serious virus, specifically SARS and COVID-19, have indeed originated from China. It assumes that China has been a source of these significant outbreaks.

- *Lexical Presuppositions*

Factive Verb

"I understand that Taiwan's baseball league was able to start games this spring with a delay of only three weeks."

The lexical presupposition trigger here is Factive Verb "understand" it presupposes that it is a fact that Taiwan's baseball league started its games with only a three-week delay.

- *Structural Presuppositions*

Non-Restrictive Relative Clause

"This came as little surprise to Taiwan, which experienced the consequences of Beijing's cover-up of SARS in 2003, costing dozens of lives in Taiwan and causing serious disruption to the whole region's economy."

The Non-Restrictive Clause "which" it presupposes that Taiwan's prior experience with the SARS outbreak, including its adverse impacts, is a relevant and known background detail.

The Analysis of Cuomo's Announcement on COVID-19 Restrictions (June 15, 2021)

1. *Existential Presupposition*

Possessive

"New York's progress is extraordinary and exceptional. It has the lowest positivity."

The possessive expression "New York's progress." It presupposes that New York's efforts to combat COVID-19 are both measurable and significant. The speaker is emphasizing the state's achievements in reducing positivity rates.

- *Lexical Presupposition*

Factive Verbs

"As you know, the state is working on two primary goals with a focused effort."

The trigger " know." It presupposes that that the audience is already aware of the state's focused efforts on two primary COVID-19 goals. This implies that the discussion is building on established knowledge, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of ongoing strategies to combat the pandemic.

- *Structural Presupposition*

Temporal Clause

"Remember when we went through the hospital vaccination protocol early on."

The temporal clause "when." It presupposes that a specific period during the initial stages of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign when hospital protocols were critical. It serves to remind the audience of past efforts, providing a temporal context for the discussion of how far the vaccination program has progressed.

Speaker	Type of Presupposition	Total Frequency	Total Percentage
Governor Newsom	Structural Presuppositions	15	34.88%
	Existential Presuppositions	11	25.58%
	Lexical Presuppositions	17	39.53%
Secretary Blinken	Lexical Presuppositions	16	53.33%
	Existential Presuppositions	8	26.67%
	Structural Presuppositions	6	20.00%
Governor Cuomo	Lexical Presuppositions	18	43.90%
	Existential Presuppositions	10	24.39%
	Structural Presuppositions	13	31.71%
Alex Azar	Structural Presuppositions	14	41.18%
	Lexical Presuppositions	10	29.41%
	Existential Presuppositions	10	29.41%

Table (1). Total Frequency and Percentage of Presupposition Types in the Speeches of Governor Newsom, Secretary Blinken, Alex Azar, and Governor Cuomo

Triggers of Presupposition	Total Frequency	Percentage
Definite Description	16	10.9%
Proper Noun	11	7.5%
Possessive	12	8.2%
Factive Verbs	27	18.4%
Non-factive Verb	2	1.4%
Implicative Verb	5	3.4%
Change of State Verb	17	11.6%
Iterative Items	10	6.8%
Verbs of Judging	0	0.00%
Temporal Clause	9	6.1%
Cleft Sentences	5	3.4%
Implicit Cleft with Stressed Constituents	0	0.00%
Comparative and Contrast	17	11.6%
Counterfactual Conditionals	6	4.1%
Non-restrictive Relative Clauses	3	2.0%

| Questions | 7 | 4.8% |

Table (2). The Total Frequency of the Triggers of the Presupposition

Types of Presupposition	Frequency	Percentage
Existential Presupposition	39	26.0%
Lexical Presupposition	61	41.0%
Structural Presupposition	48	33.0%

Table (3). The Frequency of The Types of The Presupposition

The distribution of several triggers that result in presumptions in the political discourse around COVID-19 is shown in the first table. Factive verbs are among the most common triggers, appearing in 27 cases (18.4%). This implies that a lot of the presumptions come from claims that are handled as facts, supporting the speakers' claims by portraying some presumptions as proven facts. With 17 instances (11.6%), change of state verbs is another major category that shows a strong emphasis on situational changes or transitions. Similarly, comparing and contrast structures, also with 17 instances (11.6%), highlight the use of comparisons to construct arguments and underline differences or improvements over time.

Furthermore, possessives and definite descriptions—which occur 16 times (10.9%) and 12 times (8.2%), respectively—are significant presupposition triggers. This alludes to the frequent use of explicit allusions to individuals or things, which naturally carry assumptions about their existence or ownership. Temporal phrases (6.1%) and iterative items (6.8%) are relatively prevalent, suggesting that the discourse is supported by time-based assumptions or repetition. On the other hand, non-factive verbs (1.4%) and verbs of judgment (0.0%) are uncommon triggers, suggesting that utterances that are neither forceful or evaluative are not as frequently employed to arouse presuppositions. The very low frequency of counterfactual conditionals (4.1%) and cleft sentences (3.4%) indicate that these more intricate structures are not as frequently used to create presuppositions in political discourse. The sorts of presuppositions that are present in the speech are the subject of the second table. With 61 occurrences (41%), lexical presuppositions are the most common, illustrating how word choice and lexicon convey implicit preconceptions. Next, there are 48 instances (33%), of structural presuppositions, demonstrating the significance of phrase structure in ingraining preconceptions. There are 39 instances of existential presuppositions (26%), which suggests that a lot of assumptions entail the existence of certain things or persons.
The distribution of presuppositions among various political speakers is seen in the third table. Governor Gavin Newsom uses presuppositions almost equally—that is, 39.53% for lexical presuppositions and 34.88% for structural ones—with existential presuppositions accounting for a significant portion of his usage (25.58%). This illustrates how he uses phrase structure and terminology to communicate information implicitly in a balanced manner. Secretary Antony Blinken leans substantially on lexical presuppositions (53.33%), demonstrating a penchant for employing precise word choices to construct his arguments, with less structural (20%) and existential presuppositions (26.67%). In a similar vein, Governor Andrew Cuomo incorporates existential presuppositions (24.39%) together with lexical (43.90%) and structural (31.71%) presuppositions. Alex Azar's speech has a more diversified approach as seen by his more balanced usage of structural (41.18%), lexical (29.41%), and existential presuppositions (29.41%).

Conclusion

The analysis shows that lexical presuppositions were the most frequently used, comprising 41.0% percentage of the total presuppositions across the four speeches. Structural presuppositions followed closely making 33.0% of the total, while Existential presuppositions constituted 26.0% of the total. The frequency of lexical presuppositions suggests that public opinion and implicit notions are frequently shaped by the word choices made by political personalities.These data imply that political leaders quietly integrated assumptions to enhance their arguments and communicate successfully during the COVID-19 epidemic.The study identified key triggers of presupposition, such as definite descriptions, factives, change

of state verbs and comparatives, which were prevalent across the speeches. These triggers served as mechanisms to subtly introduce assumptions as established truths. Through the frequent use of presuppositions, the political speeches analyzed in this study effectively framed the COVID-19 crisis in ways that supported the speakers' policy responses. By embedding certain ideas as presupposed truths, the politicians were able to subtly influence how the public understood key issues such as health measures, economic interventions, and government responses. This rhetorical strategy allowed them to assert control over the narrative while avoiding direct confrontation with opposing viewpoints or critical questions.

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