

Constructions of Solidarity and Leadership of Powerful Global Leaders in Post Pandemic Recovery Speeches

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Abstract

The COVID-19 witnessed varied enactment of leadership by political leaders around the world in response to its threat. With COVID-19 recovery policies shining a spotlight on government's future action, the leadership of global political figures is once again scrutinised on how they 'build back better' the damages caused by the pandemic. This study analyses the COVID-19 post-recovery speeches of the world's most powerful leaders to gain an understanding of their enactment of discursive leadership. Focusing on solidarity, this study elucidates the processes and identifies how it is linguistically constituted as part of their aims to create bonds with international allies. The analysis reveals that the construction of solidarity is done through storytelling and, proverbs and metaphors. The findings have led to a deeper understanding of discursive leadership and solidarity practices in political discourse, and is hoped to be useful to researchers to understand exemplary discursive practices pertinent to solidarity building.

Keywords: discursive leadership, solidarity, solidarity discourse, post COVID-19

1. Introduction

In recent years, political leaders around the world have responded in different ways to the threat of the COVID-19 virus. Correspondingly, this has led to a resurgence in the analysis of political leadership and discourse, with literature going back to the earliest times, from historical crisis events (e.g., Randour, Perrez, & Reuchamps, 2020) to different leadership behaviours of global political figures (e.g., McGuire et al., 2020; Craig, 2021), drawing distinctions and similarities to explain changeable leadership in turbulent times. At the height of the pandemic COVID-19, a leader's ability to apply strategic thinking on a daily basis to maximise trust and minimise public stress is severely tested. More importantly, the role of political speeches as vehicles for directing and influencing decisions on policy development, decision-making and political ideologies are crucial during the crisis.

A particularly interesting case of reaction to the virus is the President of the United States, Donald Trump, whose political speeches downplaying the threat of the virus in the early stages of the outbreak have received much attention in the media and political studies. Moreover, his initial remarks in which he directed contradictory messages to public health officials (including the government) and medical scientists (Kakisina, Indhiarti, & Al Fajri, 2022) have influenced the way people frame the situation. Not only did the incompetent and irresponsible discourse led to further loss of livelihoods, his racist, metaphorical 'Wuhan or Chinese virus' remark about the coronavirus had serious implications for the reception of people of Asian descent in the West (Herb & Serhan, 2020; Brown & Wang, 2020). Trump's leadership came under public scrutiny, which his authority claimed as one of the "least effective pandemic actors" (The Guardian, 2020) and widely condemned as "Covid champs of chumps" (ibid.). These key interactive events presented by heads of state occupying powerful government positions like Trump reinforce the fact that discourses have a powerful influence on public behaviour and consequently on our understanding of our own political tool, i.e. leadership. Discourse in this context is 'the trade and tool of politics' (Jaworska & Vasquez, 2022, p. 1) and central to our understanding of presidential leadership.

As the health crisis gradually subsides in many countries, attention now turns to preparing a durable and resilient

stimulus for recovery. Global political leaders around the world once again face tasks as significant as during the pandemic. The COVID-19 recovery policy has brought political discourse into the spotlight. Researchers are examining the critical role that heads of state and government play to “build back better” (OECD, 2020) the social and economic damage caused by COVID-19 while securing prosperity in the longer term. As Lagowska et al. (2020, p. 1) point out, discourse is crucial in the context of reconstruction, as leaders are expected to provide “guidance, comfort, hope and accurate information”. This is done through “timely and transparent communication, ‘limited optimism’ and understanding of the nature and impact of the unfolding crisis” (Bundy et al., 2017; Lagowska et al., 2020), which has been found to be helpful in arousing positive emotions among the public about the likelihood of the government’s success in overcoming the crisis.

One of the salient values addressed and highlighted in the post-crisis COVID-19 discourse is solidarity. It is widely acknowledged that solidarity is a bond and connection between individuals and groups (Putnam, 2007) that is important for social structuring at both interpersonal and inter-group levels (Berrocal et al., 2021). In the context of political speech, solidarity is often addressed in political decision-making processes and public debates (Wonka, 2016; Fetzer & Bull, 2012), such as in the Euro Crisis, which serves as an opportunity to show solidarity with citizens in other states (Fetzer & Bull, 2012). Solidarity can also be expressed towards political parties or institutions and international allies as a whole. As part of the discourse, it is therefore of utmost importance and timely for us to use the social context of speeches made in the aftermath of the pandemic to examine the discursive constructions of political figures consistent with recovery efforts after COVID-19. Following the ideas of qualitative research and discursive leadership (Fairhurst, 2007; Clifton, 2012), the article aims to explore the discursive analysis of leadership through the constructions of solidarity in post-pandemic speeches. We base our notion of leadership and solidarity on discursive (co-)constructions and aim to find out how solidarity is lived in social contexts and how it reflects one’s approach to leadership. In line with other discourse analysts, pragmatists and sociolinguists working on leadership discourse (Mullany, 2007; Clifton, 2012; Schnurr, 2018; Schnurr & Mohd Omar, 2021), this study recognises leadership as a socially constructed and discursive phenomenon by shedding light on the intricate processes of solidarity and identifying how it is linguistically constituted. To achieve this goal, the study seeks to answer the following question: How do the selected heads of state construct solidarity in their speeches after the recovery COVID-19 and what does it mean for their leadership? The selected speeches are conference speeches on the post-crisis economic recovery plan. Our participants are Chinese President Xi Jinping and the then Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern.

2. Literature Review

In this section, we review some of the literature in relation to discursive leadership approach and how it differs from mainstream leadership scholarship. We also demonstrate past researches that utilise the approach and address the concept of solidarity from a social constructivist approach.

2.1 Discursive Approach to Leadership

It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that the concept of the leadership process was conceived as it is understood by many researchers today, namely as a dynamic, social influence process involving emergent coordination and change (Clifton, 2012). Discursive leadership turns away from traditional assumptions about individuals and focuses on the social and cultural elements that influence the meaning shared by individuals in different contexts, including political discourse. Without the immediate concern of developing a generalisable theory, discursive leadership involves ‘a dense description of context that includes immediate as well as cultural and political aspects’ (Fairhurst, 2008, p. 517). It emphasises interactional processes with the aim of providing empirical knowledge about the actual practises of leadership (Holmes et al., 2011; Clifton, 2012; Schnurr & Mohd Omar, 2021). The recent burgeoning trend of studying leadership through discourse is particularly evident in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, which use approaches that focus on language in use (Holmes et al., 2011; Clifton, 2012; Schnurr & Mohd Omar, 2021). Their units of analysis are defined by selecting texts that include all types and varieties (Fairhurst, 2008).

In politics, politicians simply ‘do’ more than talk. They present their various roles and functions and ‘do leadership in context’ and that leadership ‘emerges endogenously in conversation’ (Fairhurst, 2008, p. 30). In political contexts, an increasing number of research studies have widely acknowledged the relevant role of discourse in political discourse. However, the focus has mostly been on ideology (e.g., Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Rozina & Karapetjana, 2009; Ghazali, 2006; Schäffner, 1996; Al-Badawi & Al Najjar, 2021), and where leadership has been documented, it has usually been from the perspective of leadership and crisis management (e.g., Clercy & Ferguson, 2016; Porkodi, 2022) and very little has been documented on the actual construction of leadership (Vásquez, 2021). Much of this research focuses primarily on conceptual and theoretical aspects and

“largely ignores empirical concerns and sidesteps the important question of how, if at all, we can capture authenticity in action” (Clifton, Larsson, & Schnurr, 2020, p. 422).

Conversely, studies that emphasise the linguistic devices and pragmatic functions of speech acts and identities (De Fina, 1995; Rozina & Karapetjana, 2009) do not identify the central elements of discursive leadership. As far as we know, there are few studies that focus on leadership as a social process in political discourse (see also Varma, Paramasivam, & Nimehchisalem, 2020). This study therefore aims to fill this gap in the literature on discursive leadership in the context of political discourse by examining how it is exercised through the construction of solidarity, while also bridging the gap between leadership researchers interested in discursive approaches to leadership and linguists interested in the study of leadership (Clifton, Schnurr, & Van de Mierop, 2020).

In general, a linguistic analysis of political discourse and especially political speeches can be done from two perspectives: from the linguistic micro-level to the macro-level and vice versa (Schäffner, 1996). Following Schäffner (1996), the analysis of post-pandemic speeches in the study starts at the linguistic micro-level with the strategic linguistic functions for building solidarity and then moves to the macro-level by relating the linguistic means of solidarity to the communicative situations and leadership approach of the selected political actors. Using conference speeches by political figures, we will undertake a fine-grained analysis of solidarity and leadership based on interactional sociolinguistics (Holmes et al., 2011; Schnurr & Mohd Omar, 2021).

2.2 Recent Studies on Discourse and Leadership

An edited volume by Jaworska and Vásquez (2022) shows how political leaders in different geopolitical contexts (Germany, India, New Zealand, South Africa, the UK and the US) use discourses and media to ‘do’ leadership during the outbreak of the crisis COVID-19, in particular what discursive strategies they use to demonstrate authority and agency, win public support and present themselves as effective political actors. The collection highlights political leadership discourse in a range of media, both older and newer, and uses a number of different discourse analytic approaches and frameworks to the ways in which leadership is discursively constructed and represented. Jaworska (2021) and Hunt (2021), for example, examine recurrent features of Angela Merkel and Cyril Ramaphosa’s discourse in the early months of COVID-19, both using corpus linguistics as a tool of analysis. Taken together, these studies conclude that the linguistic features of the respective political figures reflect interpersonal relations and inclusivity. While Ramaphosa deliberately uses metaphors to highlight group identity, Merkel refrains from using metaphors and other idioms, which are often found in abundance in political discourse. A similar finding is observed by Sambaraju (2022), whose findings on Narendra Modi’s speeches use a similar framework of family affiliation with the audience; building relational nationalism and a national polity in which instructions and adherence to COVID-19 appropriate behaviours are embedded. Another study worth highlighting is by Jones (2021) and looks at the COVID-19 narratives of Donald Trump and Boris Johnson as they seek to portray themselves as ‘strong leaders’ and whitewash their misconduct in responding to the pandemic. By analysing a variety of public statements on Twitter and interviews, it looks at the two politicians’ experiences of contagion COVID-19 and the ways in which they portray themselves as “strong, resilient leaders” whose ‘illnesses made them even more qualified to lead’ (p. 2). Other studies in this issue include Vásquez’s narrative analysis of York State Governor Andrew Cuomo and Hafner and Sun’s co-construction of Jacinda Ardern’s leadership role with her leadership team and members of the press corps. The various leaders responding to this public health crisis examined here reflect the immediate socio-political and cultural realities in which they find themselves, making an important contribution to the limited literature on discursive practises of political leadership.

2.3 Solidarity

While political discourse is often concerned with social power, dominance and inequality in social and political contexts, much of the literature in the field of ‘other’ discourse analysis shows that politics also exists in human relations (Chilton, 1990; De Fina, 1995). The latter can be traced in a more sociolinguistically—and pragmatically oriented studies. Political behaviour is established through various speech acts such as politeness (Chilton, 1990), apology (Varma, Paramasivam, & Nimehchisalem, 2020) and solidarity (De Fina, 1995). Such behaviours are used to maintain relationships and achieve cooperation, exercise power and show good values towards global allies or the followers.

One of the salient values addressed and emphasised in the COVID-19 crisis discourse is solidarity. Solidarity refers to the concept of equal power and symmetrical relations (Brown & Gilman, 1960, p. 258). According to Tannen (1993, p. 167), solidarity is a similar concept to rapport that governs symmetrical relationships characterised by social equality and similarity. Solidarity arises from the common views and interests that

members share among themselves. This brings them closer together and consequently promotes camaraderie within the group. In a more specific definition of solidarity in a political context, solidarity is based on the idea that a particular group ('we') should work together to create solidarity-based political institutions and policies, a feature of group formation, both in terms of community and society (Berrocal et al., 2021). Berrocal et al.'s (2021) concept of solidarity is consistent with a view of solidarity as a process of meaning-making that focuses on discourses and actors that are included and excluded. Following the work of Brown and Levinson (1987), Holmes (2005) relates solidarity to politeness, where politeness can take the form of an expression of goodwill or camaraderie, but also the more familiar, non-intrusive behaviour referred to as 'polite' in everyday speech. Similarly, Fetzer and Bull (2012) have also transposed the concept of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) into political discourse and reconceptualised politeness as a form of self-reference aimed at positive face and the desire to be desirable to at least some others. Reference to a positive face is attributed to the status of expressing solidarity (Fetzer & Bull, 2012).

In line with the social constructivist perspective of solidarity, this study follows the definition of Berrocal et al. (2021), who consider solidarity as a notion of cooperation of a certain group ('we') in a political context to create solidarity-focussed political institutions and policies.

3. Method

This paper draws on an interactional sociolinguistic approach to examine the speeches of the selected heads of state, and in particular how solidarity is accomplished in their post-pandemic speeches on specific occasions. We will also discuss the discursive constructions of solidarity as a social practice and examine how this doing is related to leadership. This section starts with a description of the participants, followed by the data collection and data analytic procedure.

3.1 Participants

For the purpose of this paper, we have selected two global leaders named by Time Magazine (2022) and Forbes Magazine (2022) as the World Most Influential People and The World's 100 Most Powerful Women. While it is fascinating to look at leadership strategies from a gender perspective (Schnurr & Mak, 2011), this paper however, does not intend to investigate gender and leadership. We analyse speeches at conferences in the context of post-pandemic recovery, where the participants are more diverse and the setting is in a public domain rather than an internal context. The following paragraphs explicate the brief details of the participants we selected.

3.1.1 Xi Jinping

Voted as the number one most powerful person in the world (Forbes, 2018) and one of the most influential people in 2022 (Time, 2022), Xi Jinping is at its core the most powerful leader since Mao Zedong (Time, 2022). Under his governance, the virus reflected ambiguity about his autocratic, highly centralised style and why he is seen as problematic by many in the outside world (Brown & Wang, 2020). COVID-19 was the first major internal crisis he faced, and the response was initially bumpy. In the first week of January 2020, Xi was conspicuously absent (Brown & Wang, 2020; The Guardian, 2020), allowing his deputies to become the public face of the government's response to the national crisis. The head of state was widely criticised for hiding from the Chinese the existence of the virus that eventually affected not only Wuhan and Hubei provinces, but China and the whole world. Besides, the silencing of the first whistleblowers, the censorship of COVID-19 content on social media (Ruan, Knockel and Crete-Nishihata, 2020), the drastic measures to quarantine millions of people and the zero policy (COVID)—all drove a stake through the notion of Confucian authoritarianism and the Chinese leadership's ability to govern effectively in times of crisis, according to political analysis experts (The Diplomat, 2020). Although criticised, Xi walked the fine line between censure and role model for the world in dealing with the pandemic (Looi, 2020; The Guardian, 2020, see also Xu et al., 2020 for extensive details on China's practices and control of COVID-19). However, it is beyond the scope of this article to assess the multi-layered issues surrounding the outbreak, both the political cause and the geopolitical nature under Xi's authoritarian government.

A study on world leaders discourses in respect to authenticity and emotional tone showed that Xi's speeches had a very emotional tone but a lack of authenticity, i.e., unrevealed information on COVID-19, which created a sense of breakdown in transparency (Figueiredo et al., 2020). This is not surprising, as Xi was widely criticised for failing to alert the world about the disease when it was first discovered. A study by Guo (2022) on Xi's 2021 New Year's greeting notes that his speech contains a relational process, or in other words, solidarity, in which he calls on the world to fight the pandemic and promote community building. In a study by Jinshuang and Rong (2020) on the major diplomatic speeches in COVID-19, it was found that Xi's speech contains a large amount of positive resources of appreciation for China's efforts and achievements towards the international community.

This is achieved through analysis at both the lexical and syntactic levels, with high-frequency words such as ‘people’, ‘community’, ‘treatment’, ‘global’, ‘international’ and ‘cooperation’ simultaneously calling for greater collaboration between countries to overcome the pandemic. The study concludes that Xi’s speech constructs China’s national image as a promoter and preserver of ‘peace’, ‘justice’ and ‘equality’, paralleling Beijing’s diplomatic vision of ‘building a community with a shared future for mankind’ (Lams, 2018). This political vision, which foregrounds the importance of the ideology of collectivism and humanism, was proposed by Xi when he assumed office in 2012 and later included in the United Nations resolutions in 2017 (Lams, 2018).

3.1.2 Jacinda Ardern

Former New Zealand Prime Minister Ardern is widely praised as one of the most successful leaders that has effectively controlled the spread of the virus (Looi, 2020; Craig, 2020; Nasution, 2021) leading the country as one of the lowest mortality rates in the developed countries (The Guardian, 2020). Although some may argue that the country’s location is remote and sparsely populated, which has facilitated border closures, her swift action for prompt lockdowns and restrictive measures has successfully eliminated the virus from the community. Demonstrating a shared construction of leadership with her leadership team, Ardern congratulated the nation for winning the battle (The Guardian, 2020; McGuire et al., 2020) and emphasised the coordinated national effort in the fight against the virus. Her well-known metaphors of ‘our team of five million’ and ‘go hard and go early’ directed at the nation persuaded and appealed to New Zealanders to adhere to the new social norms (McGuire, 2020), while signalling unity in the fight against COVID-19. In this respect, journalists and the world public were intrigued by the ‘positivity’, ‘friendliness’ and ‘kindness’ central to Ardern’s contemporary political demeanour as she demonstrated her competence and determination in dealing with crises (McGuire et al., 2020; Craig, 2021; Hafner & Sun, 2021). Ardern’s successful leadership has further enhanced her reputation as an ‘effective and skillful politician’ (Craig, 2021, p. 279), a reputation she has also earned in other crises, namely the Christchurch mosque attacks and the Whakaari White Island volcanic eruption (ibid.)

3.2 Data Collection

The data for the study are speeches made in the context of post-pandemic recovery, particularly at annual conferences attended by global leaders, delegates, economists and business leaders and partners, among others. The details of each speech are given in Table 1. The choice of conference speeches by leading politicians made it necessary to create a comparable corpus of texts for the analysis. These texts were readily available on the official websites of the prestigious conferences, hence official transcripts were thus made available. While these transcripts contain details of spoken language, other multimodal features such as facial expressions, gestures and body language were notably absent. It is important to note that the focus of our analysis is on the textual micro-level of the speeches and preexisting contextual information.

Table 1. Details of the analysed speeches

Participant	Country	Context	Link to the transcript of the speech
Xi Jinping	China	Keynote speech at BOAO Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2022	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202204/t20220421_10671083.html
Jacinda Ardern	New Zealand	Opening speech at APEC CEO Summit 2021	https://www.apec.org/press/features/2021/prime-minister-jacinda-ardern-s-full-speech-at-the-opening-of-the-apec-ceo-summit-2021

The discourse pattern chosen for the study is in a similar context to the speakers’ aspirations, namely to promote proactive economic and social developments to lay the groundwork for the post-pandemic period. Echoing Yoon (2021), the fierce competition within the particular domain of recovery plans discourse provides an ideal example of the discursive construction of solidarity as part of the goal of creating a bond between the country, international allies and citizens, and how these leaders strive to capture the world’s attention and present themselves (and the country) as global leaders. In South Korea, the government put forward a post-pandemic policy proposal earlier than other countries, with the aim of “becoming a world-leading nation”, and this plan makes the country one of the first to put forward a post-pandemic policy (Yoon, 2021, p. 381). Moreover, the context of post-pandemic speeches is relatively sparse, as most speeches are analysed before and during the pandemic (Yoon, 2021). Therefore, it is hoped that this study will add to the literature.

Schaffner (1996) categorises political speeches into certain sub-genres of political texts, which include political speeches and epideictic speeches. The data in this study fall into the category of political speeches, under a specific genre of internal communication. Internal communication speeches refer to all forms of discourse that primarily

concern the functioning of politics within political institutions, i.e., government agencies, parties or other organisations that discuss political ideas, beliefs and practises of society, while external communication is addressed to the general public, i.e., non-politicians. All the selected speeches were addressed to different stakeholders, especially in the political and economic environment, so these data fall into the category of internal communication. In a more specific categorisation of political speeches, Jinshuang and Rong (2020), who examined Xi Jinping's speeches at the World Health Assembly and the Extraordinary G20 Leaders Summit, classify speeches delivered in diplomatic contexts such as these as diplomatic speeches. Following Schaffner (1996) and Jinshuang and Rong (2020), this study refers to the speeches analysed as both internal (Schaffner, 1996) and diplomatic speeches (Jinshuang & Rong, 2020) based on the setting and the communication partners involved.

In line with the focus of the study, we have concentrated our analysis of the speeches where these heads of state express their solidarity and how it relates to the construction of leadership. To this end, we thoroughly read and re-read the official transcripts several times to uncover the strategies and practices of solidarity. The discursive practices of constructing solidarity are coded descriptively, focusing on the linguistic features necessary to create solidarity.

3.3 Analytic Procedure

The data are analysed using techniques from interactional sociolinguistics (Holmes et al., 2011; Vásquez, 2021; Schnurr & Mohd Omar, 2021). Interactional sociolinguistics approach aims to understand how social meaning is constructed in and outside of interactions. It focuses not only on the micro-level of an interaction through the analysis of linguistic features and emic perspectives of participants, but also takes into account contextual and background information in which an interaction takes place. Background knowledge is gained through previous information on the speakers' and his communicative background. On the other hand, contextualisation cues refer to any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signalling of contextual presuppositions. What this means in practice is that both contextual information and the use of fine-grained analytic tools contribute to understanding and interpreting how meaning is negotiated in communicative activities (Holmes et al., 2011). This interpretation is often based on extensive ethnographic observations, interviews and analysis of audio- or video-recorded interactions. Political speeches is one of the contexts suitable for the approach (Vásquez, 2021). In leadership discourse, for instance, interactional sociolinguistics enables analysts to examine what 'leadership looks and sounds like' (Baxter, 2014, p. 427) and how these are interpreted in the given context. The approach provides insights into the larger processes through which leadership is enacted. Such processes include the activities of reinforcing solidarity and maintaining relationships through the examination of linguistic acts such as turn-taking and content, pronoun use, discourse markers to name but a few (Holmes et al., 2011).

As a result, the data included instances where solidarity is constructed through several linguistic devices which are: storytelling and, proverbs and metaphors. The detailed elaboration of discursive practices is explained in the results.

4. Results

Our analysis revealed that the construction of solidarity by the selected participants is done through various linguistic features, including proverbs and metaphors, endorsement and storytelling. Table 2 summarises the linguistic devices found in each of the participants.

Table 2. Linguistic features utilised by the participants

Linguistic features	Xi	Arden
Storytelling	Historical stories	Real-life stories
Proverbs and metaphors	Asian proverbs	Universal metaphor
	Journey- themed metaphor	

4.1 Storytelling

Storytelling is considered one of the multifunctional strategies to perform the various acts of solidarity in discourse (Alharbi, 2018, p. 6). In political speeches, storytelling can persuade (Schubert, 2010), identify with the audience and represent reality (Alharbi, 2018). To successfully create solidarity, a speaker can present a compelling selection of past events that convince or confirm the audience of their stance. In the words of Wood (2005), narratives are more persuasive than 'statistics, expert testimony, or logical conclusions', making it a dynamic strategy to create unity with the audience through the exchange of symbolic narratives and characters

that bring both parties together. However, it can be difficult to distinguish between achievement, policy support and storytelling because they have the qualities of telling the audience a story about something in the past. Our example below explicates a brief recall of story, while mentioning the past achievement to create a feeling of oneness and unity. Stories too, contain a sequence of past events through which messages are dramatised by praising, selecting and mentioning specific people, places, events and quotes (Al Harbi, 2018, p. 11), so there is an overlap with the speech act of congratulating. To distinguish these two oratory strategies, we base our interpretation of the speech act of congratulating as a literal congratulatory unit of praise (e.g., You have done a tremendous job!) to the winners or wishes for their future successes. Storytelling also involves details of the situation and characters portrayed. Schubert (2010), on the other hand, define four main functions of political narrative, and they are: personalising, exemplifying and polarising. The function of integrating suits our data, as its purpose is to integrate and emphasise common achievements or values, hence creates a sense of unity. The following examples show Xi and Ardern's storytelling techniques in their speeches as a strategy to strengthen solidarity with the audience.

Example 4.1.1 Xi- Recounting of Historical Stories

Having been through hot and cold wars, hardships and tribulations, people in Asia deeply cherish the value of peace and understand that development gains do not come easily. Over the past decades, Asia has enjoyed overall stability and sustained rapid growth, making possible the Asian Miracle. When Asia fares well, the whole world benefits. Therefore, we need to continue developing and strengthening Asia, demonstrate Asia's resilience, wisdom and strength, and make Asia an anchor for world peace, a powerhouse for global growth and a new pacesetter for international cooperation.

In this example, Xi recalls the difficulties of the Asian countries and tells a story of Asia's success by briefly repeating the success of the Asian Miracle. This narrative contains several verbs or collocations that indicate change, such as 'deeply cherish', 'has enjoyed', 'fares well' and 'the whole benefits', which make Asia the agent of the story. These encouraging lexemes evoke positive emotions and develop patriotism and a sense of pride among the audience. Although the narrative sequence is concise, the flashback transports the addressees to 'another time and place, creating a collective experience' (Schubert, 2010, p. 149) of the past success of Asian countries. This narrative is relatively similar to the one given by Margaret Thatcher (Schubert, 2010), which mentioned British achievement. The inclusive pronouns in the first person plural, 'Asia' and 'we', further emphasise the solidarity between the speaker and the addressees. The form of the narrative here fulfils the functions of integrative narrative functions identified by Schubert (2010). He notes that the narrative highlights common achievements or values of a nation or a political party, while the speaker is a representative of the group (p. 148). Political narrative thus not only helps to consolidate the identity of the speaker, but also supports solidarity and coherence between speaker and audience by creating shared stories (ibid., p. 159), thus creating solidarity among them. With the recalls of a glorious history (albeit momentarily) and the calls to continue keeping the nation in shape (see the lines towards the end of the extract), solidarity is based on the idea that a particular group ('we') should continue working together (Berrocal et al., 2021).

Ardern, on the other hand, uses the technique of storytelling by exemplifying selected individuals whose actions reflect the speaker's goals and fulfil the narrative. Termed as an exemplifying function (Schubert, 2010), Ardern demonstrates her empathy by narrating personal tribulations in the lives of ordinary people that they overcame during the pandemic, while at the same time introducing the newly launched Digital Boost programme to the international community.

Example 4.1.2 Ardern-Real life stories

So crucial in a country like ours, made up mostly of small and micro businesses.

Liz Mitchell, one of New Zealand's long standing fashion designers, faced a difficult pandemic-induced problem: taking the measurements of clients, both locally and overseas, for bespoke garments when travel was restricted.

She shared her challenge with Digital Boost and came away with online measurement tools and video media – digital solutions that were picked up by other businesses facing similar challenges.

One food business used Digital Boost to optimise social media just before a lockdown – and now instead of producing 200 jars for her local market, she gets orders of over 2000.

Another entrepreneur who didn't have access to the internet until the age of 18 now helps our farming community to digitise parts of their work on the farm to seek efficiencies while meeting environmental rules.

And if you need an even more Kiwi example – our second most capped All Black Keven Mealamu has spoken about how Digital Boost helped him to run a successful gym with digital tools that help people stay connected and motivated with their training.

Digital Boost is a free, government-funded training and support programme designed to help all Kiwi small businesses run their day-to-day operations on digital platforms. The embedded stories in Ardern's anecdote are framed by the introduction of Mitchell's story, which relates to her challenges and solutions through Digital Boost in overcoming economic turmoil during the pandemic. The anecdote is not exhaustive, yet detailed, as can be seen in specifics such as 'taking measurements', 'locally and overseas clients' and the mention of the designer's name. The use of these lexicons implicitly shows her attentiveness and compassion towards her people. This is not surprising owing to her personal touch that has been prevalent in her various public speeches, including the first informal address at COVID-19 (McGuire et al., 2020). Similar to the speech, Ardern addresses the people not as a prime minister, but as a human being affected by the hardship and economic downturn like everyone else. The subsequent sequence of stories, though anonymous, is logically ordered and well conveyed as they connect well with the overall theme of the discourse as a whole. The story ends with another prominent Kiwi character, Keven Mealamu, overcoming his difficulties in business through the said programme. These contextually relevant stories are concise in terms of the setting and actors required for post-pandemic recovery efforts. Nonetheless, they represent a narrative with a personal touch that includes several characters and serves different functions in the context in which it takes place. Not only do the personal stories downplay the status differences between her and New Zealanders, but they also communicate trust, intimacy and solidarity (Schubert, 2010; Fetzer, 2010) with her people and also the audience. The audience, especially the public, will feel appreciated and close to her when the leading figure like Ardern, mentions and utilises them as the characters in her speech during a prestigious conference like this.

Stories allow the politician to present different personas of their political self and beliefs by foregrounding relevant information and relegating other information to the background (Fetzer, 2010; Vásquez, 2021). They are an appropriate means for building and reconstructing the more favourable sides of a politician's identity as well as for deconstructing the less favourable parts (Fetzer, 2010). In these two examples, we can see a clear difference between the narrative techniques of the two politicians. While Xi's story is more structured and aims at a realistic vision of the post-crisis future (McGuire et al., 2020), Ardern, on the other hand, shows empathy and relational aspects when telling the stories to the international audience. The communicative act of sharing personal feelings is often at odds with conventional expectations of leaders who are expected to display a bold, confident and agile demeanour (McGuire et al., 2020). Such an analysis of a person's discourse allows us to scrutinise one's leadership approach and the authentic self and values of the speaker. In this example, Ardern's approach to storytelling and leadership aligns with New Zealand's national values, which include tolerance and support for equality (McGuire et al., 2020), and creates a strong image of social solidarity. Similarly, Xi's strategic narrative about the historical success of other world players reflects China's way of calling for political unity. With the narrative still deeply rooted in Chinese history, Xi embeds Confucian authoritarianism (Lams, 2018), upholds Confucian moral values and portrays China and its allies in a positive light.

4.2 Proverbs

Proverbs are traditional propositions existing in all languages and have a native, specific content, structure and perception (Glonti, 2020, p. 633). A proverb is a result of collective consciousness that paints a picture of regular events of the universe in a figurative sense, being metaphorically sharp or less metaphorical in other languages (ibid.). When used in political discourse, proverbs indicate creative construction in persuasion (Glonti, 2020; Khasandi-Telewa, Makoni, & Bade, 2022), express political goals (Jabir & Al-Maryani, 2013), politeness (Obeng, 1996), and the establishment of solidarity with the audience (Mieder, 2005; Jabir & Al-Maryani, 2013). One of the world leaders known for his use of proverbs is Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln's remarkable proverb 'Government of the people, by the people, for the people' has continued to be used as a well-known verbal symbol of democracy that resonates so well in the minds of Americans and appears in such a sublime setting, even in the national crisis of September 11, 2001 (Mieder, 2005). Proverbs, also known as "common denominators" (Jabir & Al-Maryani, 2013, p. 20), are used in events that are socially appropriate and understandable to the audience, creating a 'social currency and ultimately part of a common understanding' (Mulholland, 1991, pp. 3–4, as cited in Jabir & Al-Maryani, 2013), and the setting such as international conferences could not be more strategic. Examples 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 show how Xi incorporates proverbs into his speeches, while in the following section we discuss Ardern's use of metaphors. In the examples below, Xi builds relationships with the audience in a similar way, i.e. he uses proverbial wisdom to enable the identification of different ethnic cultures (Glonti, 2020, p. 633). Compared to Ardern, Xi uses several proverbial wisdoms in the selected speech, especially when he calls for togetherness and

solidarity among allied countries.

The examples below demonstrate the proverbs by Xi, which occur in the middle and the end of the speech.

Example 4.2.1 Xi-Asian proverbs

We need to work together to maintain peace and stability in the world. An ancient Chinese philosopher observed, **“Stability brings a country prosperity while instability leads a country to poverty”**.

Example 4.2.2 Xi-Asian proverbs

Second, we should vigorously advance Asian cooperation. Many Asian proverbs describe the value of solidarity and cooperation, such as **“climb the hill together and go down the ravine together”** and **“sugarcane and lemongrass grow in dense clumps”**.

In examples 4.2.1 and 4.2.2, he uses proverbs after expressing his positions on securing peace in Asia in particular and in the world in general. In example 4.2.2, the first proverb is a well-known proverb in Malaysian society and its general meaning is the call for cooperation in society. On the other hand, the second proverb “sugarcane and lemongrass grow in dense clumps”, is from Indonesian society. Both proverbs express the value of solidarity and unity. The fact that Xi's proverbial discourse and thoughts are strengthened by these proverbs is not accidental. The politician knows the importance of connecting emotionally to one's culture (in this case, with Asians) and winning over the masses (Glotti, 2020, p. 635). Proverbial statements seem to be routine in his rhetoric, where Xi also spoke proverbially at the recent G20 Leaders' Summit in 2022. During the conference, he embedded the same Indonesian proverb to strategically influence and identify with the host. In both cases, the use of proverbs shows his sensitivity to the audience and contributes to the conviction of solidarity in his speech (Glotti, 2020, p. 635). Proverbial remarks are also significant in Asian countries. Through the use of local cultural linguistic proverbs, Xi acknowledges the presence of the participants, the place and time, and the occasion in which the speech is given (Obeng, 1996), making this move a solidarity-building technique in his rhetoric.

Example 4.2.3 Xi-Asian proverbs

Let me conclude with an old Chinese saying, **“Keep walking and one will not be daunted by a thousand miles; make constant efforts and one will not be intimidated by a thousand tasks.”** As long as we join hands and never slacken in efforts, we will build great synergy through win-win cooperation, overcome the various challenges along the way, and usher in a brighter and better future for humanity.

In the last part of his speech, the leader adds the proverb to reinforce his statements and convince the audience of the importance of solidarity (Obeng, 1996). Xi quotes the proverb as a preface, not only to signal his intention to engage in a conclusion (Obeng, 1996), but also to emphasise the aims of his discourse. By using another local proverb, he makes his speech a well-structured one with proverbs quoted and used appropriately within the speech. As indicated earlier, Confucian values have become an essential part of his rhetoric of solidarity. By invoking similar historical sayings, common development tasks and shared strategic interests, Xi places himself in a positive light as a global leader. The proverbs, which call for cooperation and solidarity among the Asian countries, is conceptualised metaphorically. The coherence with the audience is built through the utilised proverbs, that evokes a sense of oneness and solidarity.

As is so often the case in cultural studies and linguistics, proverbs and metaphors are closely linked and often discussed together (Khasandi-Telewa, Makoni, & Bade, 2022). In our data, Ardern did not use a proverb, but instead used a metaphor when calling for solidarity. The following section provides examples of how the participants use metaphors in their strategy to build solidarity with the audience.

4.3 Metaphor

Metaphor has been recognised as one of the most important rhetorical devices since Aristotle (1991) treated it in his Art of Rhetoric (Musolff, 2012, p. 3). Similar to proverbs, metaphors are not only poetic expressions, but they play an important role in shaping our understanding of the world around us (Musolff, 2012). In political communication, metaphors are one of the most important political tools that are considered socially powerful (Musolff, 2012, p. 3; Sambaraju, 2022; Obeng, 1996) to achieve various forms of persuasion among audiences (Imani, Habil, & Mohd Don, 2021; Özcan, 2015). Studies have shown that metaphors are used in relation to or as explanations of unspeakable or politically sensitive issues (Obeng, 1996), enhance solidarity with the audience (Imani, Habil, & Mohd Don, 2021), convey ideology (Mio et al., 2005), evoke high emotions (Steinert, 2003), to name a few. Such metaphors are expressed through a plethora of metaphors such as war metaphors, food and journey themed- metaphors, which are effective in evoking emotions and creating vivid images in the minds of viewers (Meadows, 2007, p. 2). Our data show that metaphors are used by participants, albeit

occasionally. Nevertheless, the frequency is significantly lower than the proverbs found in the data, with only one instance in Xi's and Ardern's speeches.

Example 4.3.1 shows an example of a metaphor embedded in Xi's speech, where he strategically embeds the metaphor of a thematic journey themed-metaphor. Efeoglu-Ozcan (2015, p. 72) refers to journey metaphors embedded in movement, way, path, speed and vehicle. When examining Turkish political texts, he too finds that journey metaphors are one of the productive sources in political discourse in both English and Turkish. This is not surprising considering that the domain of travel is one of the most important metaphor domains in literature (Charteris-Black, 2011; Imani, Habil, & Mohd Don, 2021). In the following example, Xi uses a journey- themed metaphor by clearly illustrating the value of solidarity.

Example 4.3.1 Xi-Journey-themed metaphors

We need to work together to tackle global governance challenges. Countries around the world are like passengers aboard the same ship who share the same destiny. For the ship to navigate the storm and sail toward a bright future, all passengers must pull together. The thought of throwing anyone overboard is simply not acceptable.

Xi's pragmatic-rhetorical choice again falls on optimistic rhetoric in the form of metaphorical utterances. The metaphor involves a comparison achieved by creating a sense of unity with Asian countries that have similar goals and 'destiny' in governance. Using the metaphors of 'ship', 'storm', 'sail' and 'passengers', Xi emphasises collectivist values to explicitly illustrate the social, economic and other existential challenges that China and allies must face in order to fully recover from the pandemic. These lexicons reflect the characteristics of metaphors that relate to the journey, i.e. their function is to boost morale and create a sense of optimism (Charteris-Black, 2011, p. 67). According to Charteris-Black (2011), the said metaphor contains elements of the journey and the destination, which are illustrated by the nature of the journey, the guides and the companions (ibid., p. 67). Through the use of the modal word 'must' and the verb 'pull together', it represents a strong collective effort calling for unity, while at the same time recognising the profound shared responsibility to take care of each other and appeals to positive emotions such as strength, courage and determination to survive (see also Charteris-Black, 2004). Xi also clarifies his firm stance against selfish behaviour through the use of 'not acceptable' that illustrates his democratic ideology and enhances the emotional impact of his speech (Charteris-Black, 2004). According to Charteris-Black (2011), the rhetorical purpose of journey metaphors is to create solidarity (p. 67). In this regard, journey metaphors encourage followers to bear the resistance and suffering together for worthwhile long-term goals (ibid.). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the metaphor used by Xi points to an underlying concept of Asian countries as travelling companions (Charteris-Black, 2011, p. 69), similar to the metaphor used by Churchill, which also refers to the UK and the USA, also as travelling companions (Charteris-Black, 2011).

Journey metaphors are apt as it conveys a positive image of the country as a reliable and supportive ally in the face of post-pandemic global challenges. The metaphor calls for solidarity and unity among participating countries to compete on the global economic stage and face future challenges. Xi's constant use of figurative language is consistent with the findings of Mio et al. (2005), who concluded that charismatic presidents use twice as many metaphors as non-charismatic presidents to inspire their audiences or other supporters.

Example 4.3.2 Xi – Journey-themed metaphor

For us to break through the mist and embrace a bright future, the biggest strength comes from cooperation and the most effective way is through solidarity.

The above example is an explicit use of the light metaphor 'mist' and 'bright future' in referring to the unprecedented situations during the pandemic and a hope for a positive outcome following the transition to a post pandemic life. The lexical use of solidarity is a direct call for unity, and this is done to express direct thoughts and clear message on collectivity. These lexicals again, reflect a journey- themed metaphors that emphasis on a destination and goal- focused, that simultaneously call for movement towards desirable goals and solidarity (Charteris- Black, 2011).

Example 4.3.3 Ardern-Universal metaphor

If there is a silver lining to the restrictions we've all recently experienced, it is that we have been forced to take a 'major digital leap forward'. After years of talking about the digital transformation, COVID-19 accelerated our progress by years.

Unlike Xi, Ardern uses a universal metaphor that represents a silver lining to express the global problems and compassion for all the hardships borne by all during the pandemic. Although this metaphor is not much of a

significance of her use of metaphor, we would like to draw attention to the phrase Great Digital Leap Forward, which is worded similarly to that of China, i.e. China The Great Leap Forward. The Great Leap Forward refers to an economic and social campaign waged by the Chinese Communists in 1958. Although the phrase is not directly related to the bond, it emphasises the drastic measures she and her team must take to reduce the impact of the pandemic on the world economy and contains the personification leap forward.

It is interesting to note that the choice of figurative language differs in that Xi's choice is linguistically and culturally sensitive, while Ardern's metaphor is more generic. The findings are consistent with the data we presented earlier that Xi's leadership style is aligned with Confucian values and aims for a polished, transactional presentation, while Ardern's is a friendly, relational oriented and natural leadership style. Nevertheless, both approaches pursue the same goal, namely to create a bond with the audience.

5. Discussion

In this paper we examined Xi's and Ardern's constructions of solidarity in the context of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic speeches at an international conference. The analysis explored the practices these participants use to construct solidarity with the audience and secondly, what this means for their approaches to leadership. We identified several strategies for building solidarity and they are storytelling, and proverbs and metaphors. Both participants use these strategies, with the exception of proverbs, where only Xi incorporated local, traditional statements into his speech. The overall results show that the speakers try to build a bond with the audience after a devastating crisis. By bringing in their own narratives, the speakers portray their dominant characteristics in their leadership approach.

Most of the strategies evident in Xi's discourse are not particularly new. The selected stories, proverbs and metaphors reflect his consistent style within his speeches, which integrate both Chinese and non-Chinese elements to convey the Chinese story and voice well (Lams, 2018). It is well known that Chinese political discourse paid great attention to 'metapragmatic awareness of the power of language' (Lams, 2018, p. 394; Mio et al., 2005). Equipped with Confucian values to influence the opinion of the international community, China strives to become a major force for global development (Lams, 2018). These discourse strategies cast China and its allies in a positive light, with speakers (in this case, Xi himself) serving as the nation's communication bridge to the world to promote international cooperation and community building. While Xi acknowledges the cultural aspects of Asian countries and identifies with the target audience, the discursive strategies he employs in an international sphere, on the other hand, can be seen as 'an extension of soft power' (Lams, 2018, p. 394). It is interesting to note that the terms he frequently uses, such as 'common humanity' (Example 4.2.3), 'sharing the same destiny', 'bright future' (Example 4.3.1), which Lams (2018, p. 397) calls "teleological framing of time and space", are routine in his speeches. These vocabularies signal development and vision to shape a common destiny for the participating countries.

The keynote speech at the BOA forum is yet another example of Xi's discourse expressing interest in supporting the affairs of allied countries and constructing solidarity with them by referring to similar historical values and shared future prospects. Examples of speeches that reflect the similarities he has shown in date include the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) and the Party's Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference (Lams, 2018). To reiterate, Xi's discourse adheres to traditional Confucian values. His approach is clearly leadership-centred in order to promote China's national image, and thus reflects a predominantly transactional approach to leadership (Holmes et al., 2011; Holmes, 2015).

Compared to Xi, we observed relational aspects of Ardern's speech behaviour in the selected speech. The inclusion of anecdotes of ordinary people and the use of inclusive pronouns are examples of speech devices that consider interpersonal aspects in speeches. Apart from the fact that Xi and Ardern come from different cultural backgrounds (which ultimately affects the way the speech is constructed), we would also like to point out Ardern's natural speaking style. Her communication style has been praised as exemplary (Craig et al., 2022), and the effectiveness of this style and her leadership skills becomes even more apparent during the pandemic (Craig et al., 2022). New Zealand was seen as a 'successful' nation in eliminating the virus, and much of the success was attributed to her compassion expressed in various COVID-19 speeches and dialogues. Our data has confirmed that Ardern maintains the values of social solidarity and empathy when communicating with the public. The empathic values portrayed in ordinary people's narratives are indeed extraordinary, as this is not necessarily the case for those in leadership positions who would share an everyday, less familiar narrative and experience of ordinary people in an international setting. The findings echo Craig et al.'s (2022) claim about Ardern's empathetic tone in several of her speeches during the crisis, and show that Ardern downtones herself to

a common level with the public.

Our analysis also suggests that Ardern's leadership approach is indicative of a more relational leadership style (Holmes et al., 2011; Clifton, Schnurr, & Van de Mieroop, 2020). By portraying a natural and authentic self, Ardern's contemporary political demeanour (McGuire et al., 2020; Craig, 2021; Hafner & Sun, 2021) is an equally important leadership behaviour (Holmes et al., 2011; Clifton, Schnurr, & Van de Mieroop, 2020). The authenticity in Ardern's speech reflects some of the qualities associated with authentic leadership, such as openness and disclosure of personal values (Clifton, Schnurr, & Van de Mieroop, 2020). In addition, authentic leadership promotes a human enterprise and relational transparency in the collaboration between leaders and employees (Wang et al., 2014). These qualities are reflected in Ardern's leadership, particularly through her narratives that highlight her humanity and humility when describing the struggles of New Zealanders. Ardern simultaneously achieves transactional leadership goals, that is to spread awareness on the Digital Boost policy to the public, through which she exercises effective, authentic leadership. It is important to note that the differences in participants' leadership approaches are multifactorial. However, assessing cultural diversification is beyond the scope of this article.

In line with other researchers in the field of discursive leadership (Clifton, Schnurr, & Van de Mieroop, 2020) and interactional sociolinguistics (Holmes et al., 2011; Schnurr & Mohd Omar, 2021; Vásquez, 2021), this paper demonstrates fine-grained analysis to enhance our knowledge of how leadership is exercised in a natural linguistic context, which in turn helps to build and challenge typical assumptions about leadership (Clifton, Schnurr, & Van de Mieroop, 2020). The interactional sociolinguistics approach, on the other hand, allows us to scrutinise 'another side' of leadership that may be overlooked as the doing of leadership (Clifton, Schnurr, & Van de Mieroop, 2020).

6. Conclusion

This paper examined the COVID-19 post-recovery speeches of the world's two most powerful global leaders to understand how they exercised their discursive leadership through the construction of solidarity. Political discourses are ideologically laden involving various political motivations, and one of them is solidarity. Xi and Ardern's speeches are part of the social practices that are essential for building international relations and promoting their country's position in the global arena. An interesting aspect of this is discursive leadership and while this topic has been widely researched in non-political contexts, this study makes a contribution to this field that goes beyond the more technical aspects of policy-making and political ideologies.

The COVID-19 crisis poses a challenge not only to its own leadership, but also to the way it communicates with the public and international allies to (re)manage the crisis and provide them with guidance, comfort, hope and accurate information to weather its aftermath. In their speeches, participants convey their 'bounded optimism' (Lagowska et al., 2020, p.1) and how these shape the way they perceive and manage the crisis. We hope that the results of the analysis during one of the most challenging global health crises will be useful for researchers, leaders and political scientists in order to understand exemplary discursive strategies relevant to building solidarity within one's rhetoric. Future research can examine how these leaders project their leadership roles on different occasions, using different discursive strategies when certain actions are expected of them. Researchers can also examine the role of gender and cultural values that potentially influence the implementation of discursive leadership in verbal interaction.

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