

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Crisis Management Language during COVID-19: A Corpus-Assisted Analysis of Malaysian Prime Minister's Discourse

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**ABSTRACT** - Crises, particularly those that are unprecedented, present significant challenges for leaders. COVID-19 that has been aptly described as a 'perfect storm,' pushed leaders worldwide to their limits, forcing them to adapt new policies and reflect on their crisis management language. This paper investigates the language used by a Malaysian Prime Minister during COVID-19 by adopting a corpus-assisted discourse analysis approach. Through examining press releases, the analysis highlights how language is utilized as a tool of governance during a time of crisis as demonstrated by the Prime Minister. Aristotle's persuasive rhetoric theory was adopted to discuss the persuasive strategies used by the leader. This research explores persuasion in crisis communication and leadership, drawing on existing linguistic studies. Different language strategies were identified and categorised in this paper according to three themes, namely i) explicit coercive narrative, ii) legitimising action of the government and iii) diplomacy narrative via appealing and endearing expressions. One of the strategies includes the use of negation to show definiteness. Additionally, the use of active voice in the phrase '*kerajaan akan* (the government will)', arguably functions to legitimise the action taken by the government. The use of endearing terms was also prominent, highlighting the strategy of maintaining low power distance and increasing a sense of familiarity. This study contributes to our understanding of the power of language used by a national leader in shaping public discourse by looking at the detailed examination of persuasive language strategies employed during a crisis. This study may provide valuable insights for future leaders and government spokespersons regarding the most effective language to employ when addressing the public during times of crisis.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Arguably, the most taxing period for global leaders occurred when the world was hit by COVID-19 and declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020 (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). Faced with myriad challenges from all fronts, leaders had to quickly adapt to the evolving crisis and pacify the uneasy public, while simultaneously remaining politically vigilant to maintain their hold on power. Malaysia was no exception.

This paper investigates and describes the way language is used by a leader to magnify directions, recommendations, and solutions during a crisis. By examining these, the study wishes to uncover the crucial role of language in political leadership during crises, specifically revealing how a Malaysian Prime Minister utilised linguistic resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. An analysis of texts, namely press conference statements or press releases, derived from the live stream of the former Malaysian Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin's public announcements about COVID-19, was conducted. Choosing this particular Prime Minister's discourse as the data for examination is driven by the fact that he was the first Malaysian Prime Minister who had to manage the first outbreak of COVID-19. He was appointed during a period marked by significant challenges, including a health crisis and political instability. The latter was characterized by the formation of a new government in March 2020, which ultimately lasted only until August 2021:

A new government overthrew the PH ruling side when one of the parties withdrew from the PH coalition, forming new government consisting Muhyiddin's new Perikatan Nasional (PN). Ironically, this new government is argued to survive the immense internal and external challenges it faces in the coming months due to Covid-19 pandemic.

(Yaakop et al., 2020, p. 225)

As a national leader, statements by Muhyiddin Yassin, arguably reflect the increasing dominance of resilience and uniformity in political, and pandemic discourses that serve the interests of public stability, governance, and diplomacy. This is done by using words and phrases that are relatable, desirable, and 'publicly'-appealing by taking into consideration the perspectives of persuasive narratives. This paper aims to uncover how language is utilised as a tool of governance during a time of crisis as demonstrated by the Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin.

## 1.1 COVID-19 in Malaysia

In the middle of March 2020, the Malaysian government imposed the Movement Control Order (MCO) under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 and the Police Act 1967 (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2020). This is a reaction to the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) which was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). The MCO includes the restriction on mass movement and gathering across the country, local and international travelling sanctions, closure of tourism and education sectors, and government and private premises except those involved in essential services (Leong et al., 2020). When the MCO was issued on March 16, 2020 Malaysians reacted in panic and confusion which had been demonstrated in panic buying and mass travel to hometowns (Azlan et al., 2020; Koh et al., 2020). The MCO was implemented with several extension periods based on the increasing number of daily COVID-19 cases before the government announced a Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 and a Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Many press conferences held by national leaders were observed during these periods.

The Movement Control Order (MCO) has had significant economic implications, negatively impacting several key sectors and industries. These include construction (Zamani et al., 2021; Zanuair & Mohd Nasir, 2022), small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Hasin et al., 2021), education (Zainal et al. 2021), and manufacturing (factories) (Ibrahim et al., 2021) among others. For example, SMEs face challenges as COVID-19 impacts the supply and demand chains, forcing them to close due to declining demand (Hasin et al. 2021).

Despite utilising channels like the National Public Broadcaster of Malaysia (RTM) and various social media platforms, the Malaysian government's communication regarding the Movement Control Order has been criticised by some (Tay et al., 2021). The government could have been more transparent and provided timely and clearer updates to the public (Tay et al, 2021). Some of these are related to the use of language during the time of crisis. Therefore, uncovering specific linguistic shortcomings or proficiencies is crucial for understanding the role of language and communication during the crisis.

## 1.2 Language Used for Crisis Management: Linguistic Examination

The language used by leaders during a crisis, for example, crisis terminologies are political tool that is "a means of governing" (Mcconnell, 2020, p. 8). The language used by leaders during crises differs from that in peaceful times, particularly in formality (Dowell et al., 2016). As a result, many studies have successfully identified effective language strategies so that leaders and stakeholders can use these to counter this adversary (e.g., Temnikova & Margova, 2009).

Past linguistic investigations on language during crisis based on big data or corpus investigation have been undertaken using a collected corpus of emergency instructions including alerts, messages, and glossaries (cf. Temnikova & Margova 2009; Dvořák, 2016). In Temnikova and Margova's (2009) study, their linguistic investigation focused on lexical complexity, morphological complexities and syntactical complexities of language use during a crisis. Dvořák (2016) focused on terminology used during crises, especially looking at highly frequent terms and their collocations. Dvořák (2016) has demonstrated the use of collocational analysis in the examination of crisis language, but Temnikova and Margova (2009) successfully produced useful guidelines for researchers and stakeholders alike when considering the use of language for crisis management. While their research focuses on the Bulgarian language, some of their findings and suggested guidelines may be useful for this research. Summarising some of the key ideas for controlled language during crises guideline excluding those that are specific to the Bulgarian language lexically, the language should be straightforward or simple, 2) negation is useful because of its shortness and definiteness, 3) figurative language should be avoided, 3) when giving instruction, the imperative must be used (obligatory), 4) "[t]he verb should be in second person, plural, active voice", 5) simple phrases with one action is used 6) "the instructions should follow the logical order of the actions to be performed", and 7) "[t]he conditions should be placed before the instructions" (Temnikova & Margova, 2009, pp. 2–5).

Some recent studies are the examination of political debates by American Presidents by Egbert and Biber (2020) using a corpus linguistic approach, and an exploration of how the Prime Ministers of Malaysia and Singapore frame COVID-19 through metaphors (Rajandran, 2020). There is also a study on Saudi and British health officials on social media that adopt a corpus-assisted discourse analysis that focuses on keyness, speech acts, and metaphor (Alhedayani & Alkhamash, 2023). In Australia, "Prime Minister Scott Morrison employed war rhetoric in his speech on the epidemic delivered in the Australian Parliament" (Alyeksyeyeva et al., 2021, p. 91). A study by Gkalitsiou and Kotsopoulos (2023) showed that the Prime Minister of Greece and the President of Ukraine both used metaphors and storytelling in different crisis situations. Lastly, the study by Yasin, Mansoor and Thalho (2021, p. 2832) "concludes that the Pakistani PM uses easy and colloquial language for shortening the audience's distance".

Rajandran's (2020) study of metaphor use by Malaysian and Singaporean Prime Ministers is particularly relevant here, as it is one of the few studies that directly examine Malaysian political crisis discourse. This work shows how local cultural and political contexts influence the choice of metaphors and framing devices in crisis communication. Dowell et al., (2016) emphasized the importance of formal language, which aligns well with the observed distinction between formal and informal language use within Malaysian political discourse. In Malaysian political communication, particularly during crises, leaders frequently utilise formal Malay (Bahasa Malaysia) or formal English. This linguistic choice carries significant cultural weight and reinforces the authority of the speaker. Following the guidelines proposed by Temnikova and Margova (2019), a comparative analysis with Malaysian data could be conducted to assess their applicability to the Malay language. Given that their research focused on the Bulgarian language, this cross-linguistic comparison would be valuable. In this study, our method and approach to analysing our data are very much influenced by Temnikova and Margova and Dvořák (2016). The results and approaches used by past studies can inform the present research on language for crisis management in the Malaysian context.

### 1.3 Theoretical and Conceptual Underpinnings

When talking about approaches and theoretical underpinnings for examining persuasion, numerous options are available including those in the linguistics field that is influenced by functional theories (e.g., Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, Kress & van Leeuwen's visual grammar), and cognitive approaches and theories e.g. conceptual metaphor (Pelclová & Lu, 2018). Looking beyond the confines of any particular approaches and fields, some works focused on outlining the persuasion strategies themselves. For example, the *Handbook of Persuasive Tactics* by Mulholland (1994) has compiled 300 persuasive strategies or tactics from different fields such as linguistics and pragmatics. While frameworks like that of Mulholland (1994) are more comprehensive and detailed, this study uses Aristotle's theory and strategies mainly because despite the many advances in persuasion analyses (especially in the functional, cognitive and semiotic field) "the nature of persuasive communication is still grounded in the three rhetorical appeals described by Aristotle in the 4th century" (Furley & Nehamas 1994 as cited in Pelclová & Lu, 2018, p. 1). Thus, this study adopts Aristotle's theory of persuasion (rhetoric), particularly focusing on *Pathos*, *Ethos*, and *Logos*, in the discussion of findings. Aristotle's theory has also been adopted by some studies that examined the language of leaders in times of the COVID-19 pandemic thus making it easier for comparison.

As mentioned before, *Pathos*, *Ethos* and *Logos* are the three rhetorical elements or appeals in Aristotle's theory of persuasion. Briefly, *Pathos* is an appeal to emotion; *Ethos* is an appeal to character, and *Logos* is an appeal to logic. A further description of these elements is explained in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Framework for theoretical underpinnings*

Working definition for this study (adapted from Ting 2018).	
<i>Pathos</i>	Instances of language used by the leader to appeal to the audience's emotion.
<i>Ethos</i>	Instances of language used by the leader to appeal to the credibility or trustworthiness of the leader of the audience.
<i>Logos</i>	Instances of language used by the leader to appeal to the audience's reasons and logic

Unlike other studies that focus solely on identifying instances of *Pathos*, *Ethos*, and *Logos* in the texts, this study initially employed corpus analysis techniques to identify recurring and significant language patterns. Those findings that are related to *Pathos*, *Ethos* and *Logos* will then be identified and discussed, along with a discussion related to the language used for crisis management.

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Data and Corpus-assisted language investigations

The main data used for this paper are the public speeches of the Prime Minister of Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic. These speeches are retrieved from press releases issued by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and are converted to txt. format. Data collection started on 15 March 2020 when the Prime Minister notified the citizens about the Movement Control Order, a type of lockdown that imitates the ones initiated in Wuhan, China and several other countries but with several modifications. The MCO was extended three times before two new phases were introduced i.e. The Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) and Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO). Details about these phases are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

Phases of the Movement Control Order

Phases	Name	Dates
1	Movement Control Order	18 March - 31 March 2020
2	Movement Control Order (first extension)	1 April -14 April 2020
3	Movement Control Order (second extension)	15 April-28 April 2020
4	Movement Control Order (third extension)	29 April - 12 May 2020
5	Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO)	13 May- 9 June 2020
6	Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO)	10 June - 31 August 2020

We identified that the Prime Minister's Office has issued several press releases after the announcement of the MCO. Since the focus is COVID-19, only press releases with the word COVID-19 in them were collected. The speeches were collected until 7<sup>th</sup> June 2020 right before RMCO starts. Thus, the data collected is representative of the language used by the Prime Minister up to the CMCO phase. The corpus for this study consisted of sixteen press releases, totaling 29,256 words (tokens).

**Table 3**

Details about the press releases

Num.	Title of the text	Running words (tokens)
1	13 Mac 2020, Perutusan Perdana Menteri Malaysia berkaitan Penularan Jangkitan Penyakit Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) di Malaysia	979
2	16 Mac 2020, Perutusan Khas YAB Perdana Menteri mengenai Covid-19	829
3	18 Mac 2020, Perutusan Khas Covid-19 Stay At Home	964
4	23 Mac 2020, Kenyataan Sidang Media YAB Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin Bin Haji Mohd Yassin Perdana Menteri Malaysia	947
5	Teks Perutusan Khas YAB Perdana Menteri, 25 Mac 2020, 1 Petang	1815
6	27 Mac 2020, Teks Ucapan YAB Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin Bin Haji Mohd Yassin Perdana Menteri Malaysia Pakej Rangsangan Ekonomi Prihatin Rakyat (PRIHATIN)	3616
7	6 April 2020, Teks Ucapan YAB Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin Bin Haji Mohd Yassin Perdana Menteri Malaysia Langkah Tambahan Bagi Pakej Rangsangan Ekonomi Prihatin Rakyat (PRIHATIN)	2315
8	10 April 2020, Teks Perutusan Khas YAB Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin Bin Haji Mohd Yassin Perdana Menteri Malaysia	1474
9	23 April, Teks Perutusan Khas YAB Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin Bin Haji Mohd Yassin Perdana Menteri Malaysia	1857
10	1 Mei 2020, Teks Perutusan Khas YAB Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin Bin Haji Mohd Yassin Perdana Menteri Malaysia	2983
11	10 Mei 2020, Teks Ucapan YAB Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin Bin Haji Mohd Yassin Perdana Menteri Malaysia	1911
12	15 Mei 2020, Ucapan YAB Tan Sri Haji Muhyiddin Bin Haji Muhammad Yassin Perdana Menteri Malaysia Sempena Sambutan Hari Belia Negara 2020	484
13	16 Mei 2020, Teks Ucapan YAB Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin Bin Haji Mohd Yassin Perdana Menteri Malaysia Hari Guru 2020 "Berguru Demi Ilmu, Bina Generasi Baharu".	1454
14	23 Mei 2020, Perutusan Khas Aidilfitri YAB Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin Bin Haji Mohd Yassin Perdana Menteri Malaysia	1544
15	5 Jun 2020, Teks Ucapan YAB Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin Bin Haji Mohd Yassin Perdana Menteri Malaysia Pelan Jana Semula Ekonomi Negara (PENJANA)	4544
16	7 Jun 2020, Teks Ucapan YAB Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin Bin Haji Mohd Yassin Perdana Menteri Malaysia	1540
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>29256</b>

To investigate the data, we adopted the corpus linguistics approach, which is a method used to examine different types of discourses including that of political discourses (see Ädel, 2010; Vincent, 2020). The concepts and techniques applied in corpus linguistics are thoroughly explained in several works (e.g. Baker et al., 2006; Gries, 2009; McEnery & Hardie, 2011; Taylor, 2008). The use of a corpus linguistic approach in language study can be described as an examination of a naturally occurring language variety, through the use of computer-assisted analysis (Taylor, 2008).

This current study investigates the lexical, phrasal and syntactical patterns of language for crisis management used by the prime minister of Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The language examined in the data is Bahasa Malaysia. To present the findings in this article, the words and phrases focused on are italicised, and the English translations are provided. The analyses include an examination of the use of negation, and imperative forms among others. As mentioned in the previous section, some studies in language and linguistics examined the choice of words (lexis), and syntactical structures by using discourse analysis (Temnikova & Margova, 2009; Rajandran, 2020) and some of them used corpus linguistics (e.g. McConnell, 2020). Inspired by these studies, in this

research, we will examine the language used according to the corpus-assisted discourse analysis approach. Additionally, we compared our findings to the concept of persuasion. We propose these stages of analysis that we believe will assist researchers in examining small language data like our corpus.

Our use of only 29,256 words of data might be considered too small for a corpus analysis, but this data is representative of the language used by a prominent politician in Malaysia. Based on our survey of other existing smaller corpora, several other corpora of similar size if not smaller exist. For example, the Small Corpus of English Political Apologies (SCEPA) compiled by Liubinsk (2017) which contains political apologies and language used for communicative tactics used in apologies, collected from the UK, USA, and Canada is only made up of 22,538 words. Corpus linguists have debated the ideal corpus size. The best size is not fixed but rather depends on the research questions being asked (de Haan, 1992; Lindquist, 2009). As de Haan (1992) points out, there is no single "optimal" size. A corpus is suitable as long as it allows researchers to answer their specific questions. This means studies can use small corpora (e.g., Baker & Levon, 2015, with 51 newspaper articles) or very large ones (e.g., Baker, 2014, with 2 billion words).

With corpus-assisted discourse analysis, different points of entry to start the analysis are possible. Usually, researchers choose to use the keywords analysis which is a method that compares two different corpora/data. Others prefer to focus on predetermined target words for example ideology-laden words (e.g. *sleaze*) or gendered words (e.g. terms of address such as *Mr.* and *Ms.*). With a large corpus (usually more than 1 million words, although some might argue against this cut-off size) these methods of starting a corpus-assisted analysis are open for choosing. However, due to the small size of our data, we decided to use tools/approaches like the word list, collocates and n-grams instead. By doing these, we can focus on words and language patterns that are frequent or stand out compared to the rest of the words in our data. Figure 1 briefly outlines the steps we used to examine the corpus.

**Figure 1**

Steps of analysis for a small, specialized corpus

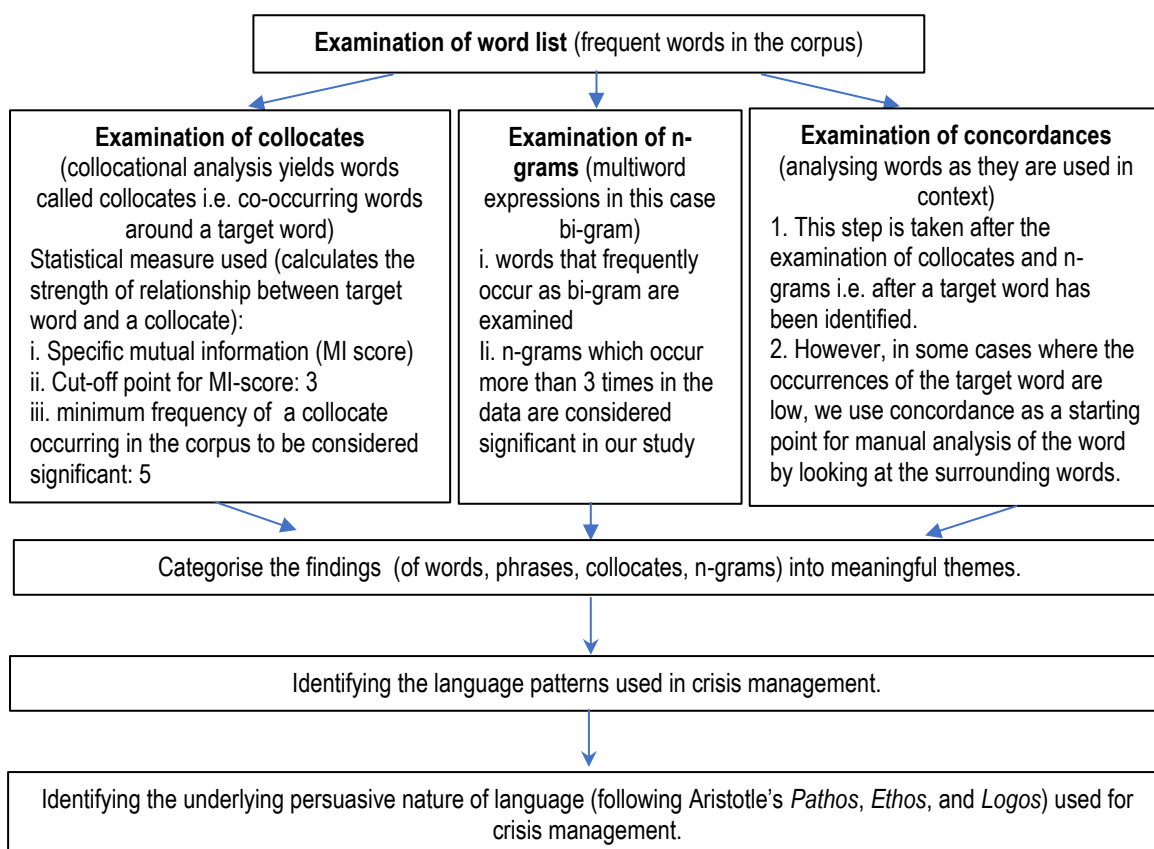


Figure 1 refers to the steps for analysing the corpus in the present study. As shown in the figure, different types of analysis including wordlist, collocational analysis (which identifies co-occurring words around a target word), n-gram analysis (identify a group of two or more words, see Cortes, (2015)), and concordance analysis were used for the examination of our data. Based on the statistical setting for collocation and n-gram shown in Figure 1, the corpus software will automatically generate the most significant collocates and n-grams, which are then further examined in their respective texts using concordances. More information about these analyses will be presented alongside our presentation of findings. For this paper, we used LancsBox version 6.0 whereby we utilised the n-grams, collocational and concordance analysis functions. Lancsbox also automatically generates the graphic/figures of collocates we present in this paper.

**Table 4**Examples of *Pathos*, *Ethos* & *Logos*

	Working definition for this study (adapted from Ting, 2018).	Example (taken from actual data)
<b>Pathos</b>	Language that appeals to the audience's emotion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>jangan cemas</i> (don't worry)</li> <li>• <i>jangan panik</i> (don't panic)</li> </ul>
<b>Ethos</b>	Language that appeals to the credibility or trustworthiness of the leader to the audience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Kerajaan akan melaksanakan program...</i> (the government will implement programmes...)</li> <li>• <i>Menurut Kementerian Kesihatan, negara kita juga telah memenuhi enam kriteria yang ditetapkan</i> (According to the Ministry of Health, our country has also met the six criteria set)</li> </ul>
<b>Logos</b>	Instances of language used by the leader to appeal to the audience's reasons and logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>...kehidupan kita mungkin tidak boleh kembali seperti sediakala. Selagi virus ini masih ada...</i> (...our lives may never go back to the way they were. As long as this virus is still around...)</li> </ul>

Rhetorical elements in speeches were analysed and categorized according to the three classifications presented in Table 4. For *Pathos* and *Logos*, specific linguistic features and patterns were examined. *Pathos* was identified through explicit emotional words (such as "worry") and phrases that evoke emotional responses (like "don't panic," which aims to instil calmness and composure). For *Ethos*, the analysis focused on references to institutions (such as government bodies, countries, and the Ministry of Health) and their associated actions (following an institution + action pattern). Leaders established their credibility by referencing these institutions, thereby enhancing their perceived trustworthiness. The analysis of *Logos* required consideration of broader contextual resources, as logical appeals cannot be identified through specific words or linguistic patterns alone. Instead, a comprehensive examination of how leaders constructed their arguments and presented evidence was necessary to determine their attempts to appeal to audience reasoning.

### 3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigates the language for crisis management used by the Prime Minister of Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the presentation of findings and discussions, the main results are presented thematically in this order: 1. explicit coercive narrative, 2. legitimising the government's action, and 3. diplomacy narratives via appealing and endearing expressions. Within these themes, relations to *Pathos*, *Ethos* and *Logos* were discussed.

#### 3.1 Explicit coercive narrative

One of the most commonly used words to wield the power of coercion during the COVID-19 speech by the Prime Minister is the negative words including *tidak* (don't) (freq. 140) and *jangan* (don't) (freq. 20). Table 5 shows a concordance of *jangan* as used by the Prime Minister.

**Table 5**Concordance of *jangan*

1 walaupun kita telah berjaya mengawal penularan COVID-19, jangan kita alpa. Teruslah berwaspada. Amalkan tabiat  
2 Lumpur hujung minggu ini. Duduklah dulu di kampung dan jangan ke mana-mana. Anak anak yang sepatutnya balik ke  
3 dan surau, termasuk solat sunat Aidilfitri pagi esok, jangan lupa untuk mematuhi garis panduan 2 PKPB yang telah dium  
4 kita untuk menangani krisis yang sedang kita hadapi ini. Jangan kita lupa, penentu kejayaan kita ialah Tuhan Yang Maha  
5 saudara- saudari dapat bersabar menghadapi dugaan ini. Jangan panik, jangan cemas, dan sentiasalah bertenang. Saya  
6 kenduri. Akad nikah boleh dibuat, tetapi majlis kenduri jangan buat dulu. Tangguhkanlah. Apabila keadaan telah bertambah  
7 petanda kejayaan. Tetapi saya nak nasihatkan supaya kita jangan alpa. Kita masih di peringkat awal pelaksanaan PKPB  
8 Tanggungjawab kita sendiri. Jaga kebersihan diri kita. Jangan keluar rumah kecuali jika perlu. Patuhi SOP yang ditetapkan  
9 ngkitan sentiasa ada. Saya pun bimbang juga. Apapun kita jangan panik dan jangan mengalah. Saya yakin dengan  
10 dari dapat bersabar menghadapi dugaan ini. Jangan panik, jangan cemas, dan sentiasalah bertenang. Saya percaya

Based on Table 5, one of the functions of *jangan* is to control movements and activities. Among the things that members of the public are not allowed to do are going back to the city from the village/hometown (line 2), holding wedding feasts (line 6), and going

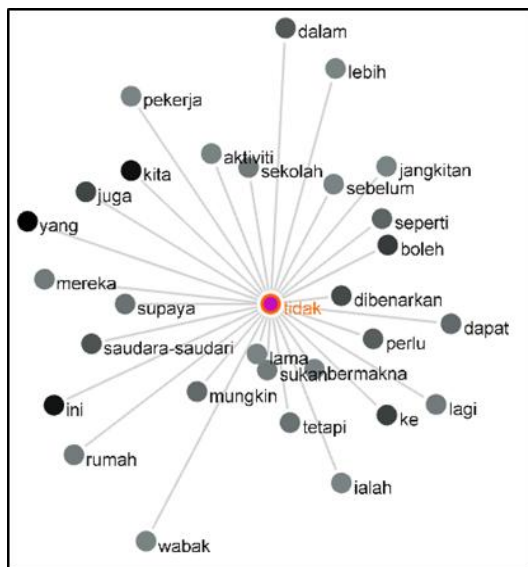


out of the house (line 8). All these necessary precautions were mentioned by the Prime Minister and later by the government's mouthpiece i.e. mainstream media. Another function of *jangan* is to manage the emotions of the citizens to avoid panic. *Jangan* was repeatedly mentioned in his speech including phrases such as *jangan panik* (do not panic) and *jangan cemas* (do not be anxious).

In the corpus, *tidak* (don't) occurs 140 times. It collocates with 30 words including *boleh* (can) and *dibenarkan* (allowed). Figure 2 exhibits that some of the collocates appear further from the node word *tidak*, while others appear closer to the node word. The closer a collocate is situated from the node word, the stronger it is associated with the node word as expressed by the statistical measure (cf. Brezina et al., 2015).

**Figure 2**

Collocations of *tidak*



Based on Figure 2, we focus on two phrases/constructions namely *tidak dibenarkan* (not allowed) and *tidak boleh* (cannot) as they are the stronger collocates compared to the rest of the collocates. These two phrases are examples of negation that show definiteness in instruction and prohibition. Based on examination of the concordances, activities that are not allowed include congregation at places of worship or events, interstate travel, and dining-in at eateries. The 'X activity not allowed' phrase/construction is useful to clearly outline activities that are allowed and activities that are not allowed or cannot be done. In other words, these are statements that directly order the citizens and ultimately become the standard operating procedure (SOP) during the MCO.

Unlike *tidak dibenarkan*, the phrase/construction *tidak boleh* emphasises the ability and inability to do something (e.g. *taxes cannot be collected*; *industry cannot grow*) apart from the more obvious function that is the prohibition to do something (e.g. *you cannot work*; *we cannot go to the mosque for tarawih prayer*). It was also observed that in some instances, the phrase/construction is used hypothetically (e.g. *maybe we cannot go back to our hometown/village like we used to*). Table 6 shows an overview of the phrase/construction *tidak boleh* used in context.

**Table 6**

Concordance lines of *tidak boleh*

- 1 bermakna terhentilah semua pendapatan negara. Cukai tidak boleh dikutip, industry tidak boleh berkembang
- 2 pendapatan negara. Cukai tidak boleh dikutip, industri ini tidak boleh berkembang, pertumbuhan ekonomi terencat dan yang
- 3 wabak COVID-19 ini daripada menular. Namun begitu, kita tidak boleh mengambil mudah situasi yang sedang berlaku.
- 4 tak boleh dan sebagainya. Namun, saya sedar kerajaan tidak boleh mengawal kehidupan saudara- saudara buat selama-
- 5 diatasi seratus peratus. Itupun kehidupan kita mungkin tidak boleh kembali seperti sediakala. Selagi virus ini masih
- 6 bulan Ramadan akan menjelang tiba tidak lama lagi. Kita tidak boleh ke bazar Ramadan untuk membeli juadah berbuka
- 7 Ramadan untuk membeli juadah berbuka puasa, tidak boleh ke masjid untuk berterawih. Jadi berterawihlah di rumah
- 8 berterawihlah di rumah bersama keluarga. Mungkin juga kita tidak boleh balik ke kampung seperti biasa. Walaupun sukar
- 9 lagi selepas ini. Ini bermakna, saudara- saudara mungkin tidak boleh menyambut hari raya di kampung. Saudara- saudara
- 10 menyambut hari raya di kampung. Saudara- saudara masih tidak boleh bekerja, kecuali bagi mereka yang bekerja dalam

The hypothetical type of clause of *maybe X cannot do Y* can be seen in lines 5, 8, and 9 in Table 6. Even though they appear hypothetical, we argue that these types of clauses also subtly function as a warning i.e. if citizens are unable to comply with the standard operating procedure (SOP), it is highly likely that these hypothetical situations will happen. The findings suggest that negations are used to tell the citizens about what is prohibited and what is allowed by using the constructions of *jangan* and *tidak*.

These findings are in line with what was found by Temnikova and Margova (2009) when they mentioned that the use of negative is possible – because of its shortness and the definiteness.

With persuasive strategies, the use of *jangan* such as *jangan cemas* or *jangan panik* relates to *Pathos*, whereby emotion and in this case, reference to fear, anxiety and panic is used to persuade the citizen to stay indoors i.e. control their movements and activities. On the other hand, *Logos* or appeal to logic is noticed in the use of *tidak dibenarkan* (not allowed) and *tidak boleh* (cannot) especially in constructions such as “*kerajaan tidak boleh mengawal kehidupan saudara-saudari selama-lamanya* (the government cannot control your lives forever)” and “*...kehidupan kita mungkin tidak boleh kembali seperti sediakala. Selagi virus ini masih ada...* (...our lives may never go back to the way they were. As long as this virus is still around...)”. In this case, the use of logic here is to provide justification and reason why restrictions are in place, at the same time persuading the citizens to follow the government’s order.

In summary, during the crisis, the use of negation (*tidak* and *jangan*) is useful as it provides definiteness. It provides a clear line between what can be done and what should not be done by the citizens. While negation is usually forceful, the use of persuasive strategies such as *Pathos* (appeal to emotion) softens the force a bit – in a way, it functions as a hedging device. *Logos* (appeal to logic), on the other hand provides reason as to why these limitations (do’s and don’ts.) are put in place to appease the citizen and to pacify the critiques.

### 3.2 Legitimising Action of the Government

In the second theme, we discuss the action of the government based on a language pattern found from an n-gram analysis of the corpus. N-grams are multi-word expressions that “represent contiguous lexico-grammatical patterns” (Brezina et al., 2020, p. 32). Our focus is on the type of action and how these actions are legitimised to be accepted by the citizens. These are exhibited in Table 7 which shows the frequencies (both absolute and relative) of the top ten n-grams (or bi-gram) types in the selected corpus of press releases.

**Table 7**

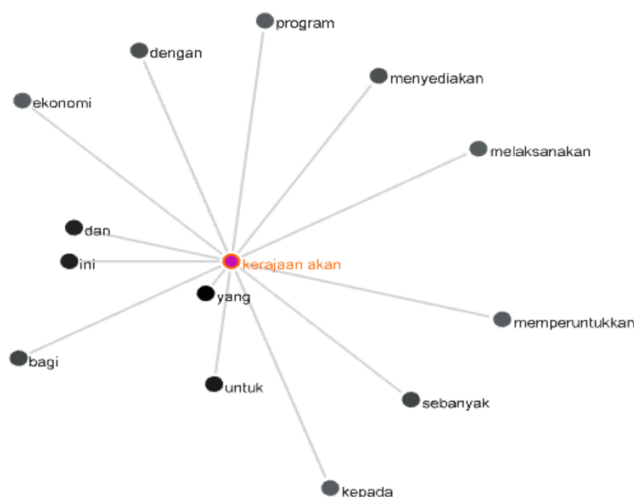
Top ten n-gram types in the corpus

ID	Type	Absolute frequency (Relative frequency)
1	COVID-19	64 (21.773)
2	<i>kerajaan akan</i>	53 (18.031)
3	wabak COVID-19	49 (16.670)
4	<i>yang saya</i>	49 (16.670)
5	<i>kawalan pergerakan</i>	48 (16.330)
6	<i>perdana menteri</i>	48 (16.330)
7	<i>yang telah</i>	48 (16.330)
8	<i>perintah kawalan</i>	47 (15.990)
9	<i>ini akan</i>	46 (15.649)
10	<i>negara kita</i>	46 (15.649)

In the phrase *kerajaan akan* (government will) which is one of the most frequent n-grams as shown in Table 7, we found that such construction carries with it a language strategy that attempts to legitimise the action of the current government. Linguistically, the phrase *kerajaan akan* (the government will) indicates a volition or plan to do something. In this case, that something affects the well-being of the citizens in light of a pandemic.

**Figure 3**

Collocates of *kerajaan akan*





Based on collocational analysis, we found verbs such as *menyediakan* (to provide), *melaksanakan* (to execute), and *memperuntukan* (to allocate) as shown in Figure 3. It exhibits that such power belongs to the government. Additionally, the phrase *kerajaan akan* (government will) also demonstrates the government's promises and plans amidst the ongoing crisis at that time. Things that government will provide or allocate are *program* (programmes) and *ekonomi* (economic) support as shown in Excerpt 1:

#### Excerpt 1

"... memastikan pengekalan pekerjaan, Kerajaan akan memperuntukkan hampir RM9 bilion yang akan memanfaatkan seramai 3 juta pekerja"

Translation: "... To ensure job retention, the Government will allocate almost RM9 billion 'which' will benefit 3 million workers."

Both Figure 3 and Excerpt 1 show the actions that the government took during the pandemic as informed by the Prime Minister. The use of active voice in *the government will* (*kerajaan akan*), concurs with the recommendation by Temnikova and Margova (2009, p.4), that "[t]he verb should be in second person, plural, active voice" for the Bulgarian language. We argue that the use of active voice is a recommended language strategy in managing crises in the Malay language too.

With regards to *the government will do something* phrase construction, Excerpt 2 indicates that whatever plans the government has to overcome the pandemic or to improve the economic conditions of the nation, they are very clear and confident that they can execute the action and at the same time manage COVID-19. The economy appears to be an equally important agenda of the government in its effort to manage COVID-19. All plans and actions were justified by pointing to the other crises happening amidst the pandemic, especially those related to the economy, such as business, income, and employment.

#### Excerpt 2

"Sejak dari awal, Kerajaan mempunyai perancangan yang jelas dalam memerangi wabak COVID-19 dan menghadapi krisis ekonomi. Kerajaan menggunakan strategi yang merangkumi 6 pendekatan"

Translation: "From the beginning, the Government has a clear plan in combating the COVID-19 epidemic and in facing the economic crisis. The Government uses a strategy that includes 6 approaches."

This message from the government functions as a form of buffer in its efforts to ensure safety and stability. The efforts and actions are legitimised as the primary aims are the safety and stability of the nation. This is in line with the hashtag *#kitamestimenang* (*#wemustwin*) used throughout MCO as publicized in mainstream media and social media. The finding as shown in Excerpt 2 is in line with what was found in another study about the then New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in showing preparedness and decisive action, she said "... as you can see, we are prepared, we've planned for this, and we are ready and if we work together, we will get through it" (Facebook Live Broadcast, 19 March 2020 as cited in McGuire, Cunningham, Reynolds, & Matthews-Smith, 2020). Excerpt 3 below exhibits how actions are legitimised.

#### Excerpt 3

"Saya hendak sebutkan di sini bahawa negara kita rugi sekitar RM2.4 bilion setiap hari sepanjang tempoh PKP dilaksanakan. Jumlah kerugian setakat ini dianggarkan sekitar RM63 bilion. Jika PKP berterusan untuk tempoh sebulan lagi, negara kita akan kerugian RM35 bilion menjadikan jumlah keseluruhan kerugian RM98 bilion."

Translation: "I want to mention here that our country loses around RM2.4 billion every day during the MCO period. The total loss so far is estimated at around RM63 billion. If the MCO continues for another month, our country will lose RM35 billion, making a total loss of RM98 billion."

In this case, numbers are used to show the economic gravity of MCO, and these numbers affect the whole nation. Thus, whatever the government does and the justification behind the action, it is explicitly shown to be motivated by a nationally accepted vested interest as shown in the use of *negara kita* (our country) which is another frequent n-gram as shown earlier in Table 7. As a morphological guideline, Temnikova and Margova (2009) stated that the verb used should be in the second person, plural, active voice. However, in the case of Bahasa Malaysia, the pronoun used in the phrase *negara kita* (our country) is first person plural pronoun (*kita*/our). The function of inclusive pronouns or in-group pronouns in language for crisis management can be seen here as an important element that sparks nationalistic sentiments to appeal for the support and compliance of the citizens.

In relation to the Aristotelian persuasive strategies, the phrase *kerajaan akan* (the government will) most of the time is coupled with factual statements that somehow function to illustrate credentials and dependability of the government at the time. We argue that these are examples of *Ethos*, or appeal to credibility found in our data. Providing these programmes and services for the citizens is indeed the role and responsibility of the government, however, repeatedly verbalizing these in the speeches directly reminds the citizens that they are in good hands, and actions are being taken to ensure that aid (monetary or service) reaches them – persuading them to believe in the government and indirectly aiming for their continuous support. This can be seen from the concordances of the phrase in Table 8 below:

**Table 8**Concordance lines of *kerajaan akan*

- 
- 1 Seterusnya, bagi golongan penganggur pula, Kerajaan akan melaksanakan program peningkatan kemahiran (upskilling) syarikat
  - 2 dalam tempoh peralihan pembukaan semula ekonomi, Kerajaan akan melanjutkan subsidi upah ini selama tiga bulan ekonomi negara.
  - 3 khususnya kepada rakyat. Untuk itu, kerajaan akan memastikan pakej rangsangan ekonomi yang telah bagi menjana jualan atas
  - 4 Sehubungan itu, Kerajaan akan membantu setiap pemiagaan, sama ada besar atau dan terkawal.
  - 5 InsyaAllah, apabila Parlimen bersidang nanti, kerajaan akan membentangkan Rang Undang-Undang Perbekalan
  - 6 semua melalui Bantuan Prihatin Nasional. Di samping itu, Kerajaan akan memberi tumpuan kepada aktiviti pelaburan
  - 7 amanah kepada negara. Bagi menghargai sumbangan mereka, Kerajaan akan membenkan bantuan tunai sebanyak RM500
  - 8 untuk menghantar semula anak-anak mereka ke taska, Kerajaan akan memberikan geran kepada pengendali taska
  - 9 aktiviti pemiagaan dan menyebabkan masalah aliran tunai, Kerajaan akan memberikan insentif cukai dalam pelbagai bentuk
- 

In Table 8, instances of *Ethos* are illustrated in statements of *kerajaan akan* with a 'will-do something' pattern for example, will execute (*melaksanakan*), will extend (*melanjutkan*), to help (*membantu*), and will give (*memberikan*) help/grant/tax incentive. Similarly, instances of *Ethos* can be seen in some expressions of *negara kita* as shown in Table 9:

**Table 9**Concordance lines of *negara kita (Ethos)*

- 
- 1 dengan segera supaya semua hospital di negara kita mempunyai kakitangan yang mencukupi untuk menangani penularan
  - 2 seperti seditakala. Sekali lagi kita bersyukur kerana negara kita merupakan antara negara yang mencatatkan kadar kesembuhan
  - 3 terjejas secepat yang boleh. Menurut Kementerian Kesihatan, negara kita juga telah memenuhi enam kriteria yang ditetapkan
  - 4 dan disiplin anda semua, penularan COVID-19 di negara kita telah dapat dibendung dengan lebih 80 peratus
  - 5 dan PKPB dilaksanakan kadar jangkitan COVID-19 di negara kita menunjukkan trend yang semakin menurun. Statistik Kementerian
- 

As shown in Table 9, *negara kita* is contextualised in a way to highlight the situation of the country at that time, in good or satisfactory conditions amidst the pandemic with the narrative following the phrase such as having enough staff, showing downtrend of COVID-19 infection among others. These narratives indirectly give credit to the then government for creating these satisfactory conditions – highlighting credentials and dependability.

With regards to the theme of legitimising the action of the government, we found a variety of instances and patterns that are used to 'legitimise'. Many of these instances arguably highlight what the in-group (through *negara kita* phrase and in-group pronoun *kita*) would be or are experiencing, which became the main justification for the government's actions. Highlighting what the government offers in the form of service and monetary aid is another focus of this theme (through the construction of *kerajaan akan*), which not only has the function to advertise what the government plans to do but at the same time functions to gain or appeal for support from the citizens who would be the recipient of these plans. In light of strategies used for language for crisis management, the approach adopted by the Prime Minister of that time when trying to legitimise the action of the government includes igniting patriotic or nationalistic sentiment (using in-group pronoun *kita*), announcing/advertising plans or future action of the government – all these while repeatedly using *Ethos* (appeal to credibility) among other persuasive strategies.

### 3.3 Diplomacy Narratives via Appealing and Endearing Expressions

In the third and final theme, we examined expressions that evoke a sense of closeness between the speaker and the citizens. We call these expressions endearing expressions. Different expressions and words are categorised as endearing expressions and we explore some of them here.

One of the most frequent types of endearing expressions used throughout the texts is *saudara-saudari*. The expression *saudara-saudari* is equivalent to ladies and gentlemen but differs in terms of power relations. *Saudara-saudari* brings the citizens closer to the speaker as the expression is less formal compared to *tuan-tuan dan puan-puan*. The previous term, when used is almost at the same power level as if the listeners are family i.e. brothers and sisters. In Malay, *saudara* means family relatives such as *saudara saya* (my relative). This closeness increases when the phrase *saya kasihi* (I dearly love) is used instead of *yang dihormati* or *saya hormati* (I respect) as seen in this phrase "*saudara-saudari rakyat Malaysia yang saya kasihi* (my dear Malaysian brothers and sisters)". Throughout all sixteen press releases the term *saudara-saudari* appeared 118 times in comparison to the term *tuan-tuan* which only appeared twice in the same press release dated 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020. In both instances, the term *tuan-tuan* is used to refer to the parents of the bride who are also the host of wedding feasts i.e. *tuan rumah*.

Secondly, emotive words are another type of construction that we categorised as endearing expressions. They were used when the Prime Minister tried to relate emotionally or to empathise with the citizens. The use of emotional expressions by the Prime Minister can be observed in Excerpts 4 and 5:

## Excerpt 4

"Saya tahu anda semua rindukan anak masing-masing. InsyaAllah, dalam sedikit masa lagi, anak-anak anda dah boleh berada di rumah. Yang penting mereka semua boleh pulang dengan selamat."

Translation: "I know you all miss your children. InsyaAllah, in a little while, your children can be at home. The important thing is that they can all go home safely"

## Excerpt 5

"Saya juga baca komen-komen ibu-bapa di Facebook. Ramai yang mahu penutupan sekolah dilanjutkan lagi. Ibu-bapa rata-rata bimbang tentang keselamatan anak-anak. Saya pun ada cucu yang bersekolah. Seperti saudara-saudari saya pun bimbang juga. Semua orang sayangkan anak. Cucu lebih lagilah sayangnya"

Translation: "I also read the parents' comments on Facebook. Many want the school closure to be extended. Parents are generally concerned about the safety of their children. I also have a grandchild who goes to school. Like you, I am worried too. Everyone loves their children. Grandchildren, even more so."

Words such as *bimbang* (worried) and *rindukan* (miss) evoke emotions that parents and family members can easily relate to. And by using repetition *he also feels the same*, which shows that he understands and could connect with their anxiousness and that these families are not alone in experiencing such difficulties. In Excerpt 5, he reveals that he too has a grandchild, which somehow projects his domestic identity as a grandparent alongside his professional identity as the leader of a country – making it even easier for citizens to believe in his genuine understanding of the citizens' feelings.

Additionally, in his speeches, The Prime Minister explicitly uses *saya merayu* (I plead). Table 10 shows the use of the word *merayu* (I plead) as a way to implore the citizens to follow the SOP during the pandemic. The seriousness of his appeal is further emphasised with the use of the words like *patuhilah* (obey) and *duduklah* (stay). Arguably the use of particle 'lah' here, hedges and softens these appeals further.

Table 10

Concordance of I plead (*saya merayu*)

1 orang ramai yang ingin pulang ke kampung. Saya ingin merayu kepada saudara- saudari. Tolonglah. Stay put where you  
2 perkara ini daripada berlaku. Oleh sebab itu, saya nak merayu kepada saudara- saudari semua supaya patuhilah SOP  
3 jangkitan wabak ini adalah tinggi. Jadi, tolonglah. Saya merayu sekali lagi. Duduklah diam-diam di rumah. Stay at home  
4 Tempoh Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan ini berkuatkuasa. Saya merayu kepada saudara- saudari agar sentiasa mematuhi

On the one hand, this appeal is another strategy to get the citizens to follow the SOP during the MCO. However, the strength and level of humbleness expressed in the speech influenced the citizens to abide by the SOP. When data were further examined, we found another strong appeal word, the verb *tolonglah* (please help). The appeal word *tolonglah* means to ask for support or help. We observed that the appeal word *tolonglah* was repeatedly used by the Prime Minister to show his seriousness over the matter in focus while at the same time showing humbleness. By using this appeal word, the severity of the issue was made explicit to the members of the public. The repetitive use of the appeal word functioned as an emotional appeal. Its use in context can be seen in Table 11 below.

Table 11

Concordance of please help (*tolong or tolonglah*)

1 mengikut SOP kesihatan yang ditetapkan. Jadi saya nak minta tolong dengan majikan jika boleh benarkan pasangan suami  
2 kenduri kahwin. Jadi, kepada ibu- bapa pengantin saya minta tolong sangat- sangat batalkan kenduri. Akad nikah boleh  
3 pulang ke kampung, batalkanlah dahulu niat itu. Saya minta tolong untuk tempoh dua minggu ini sahaja. Kenapa? Kerana  
4 dan mendapat jangkitan wabak ini adalah tinggi. Jadi, tolonglah. Saya merayu sekali lagi. Duduklah diam- diam di  
5 pulang ke kampung. Saya ingin merayu kepada saudara- saudari. Tolonglah. Stay put where you are. Yang ada di Kuala

As can be seen in Table 11, he repeatedly used *tolong* and sometimes with the particle *lah* as in *tolonglah* which further emphasises the appeal. He also uses 'minta' along with *tolong* which can somehow be translated as 'ask for your help'. In line 2 of Table 11, he uses *sangat-sangat* which is a form of intensifier or booster. It does not have a literal translation to English, but it functions to intensify, in line 2, the word 'please'.

Based on our examination of the data, we observed that the ideas expressed, and the words used in the press releases were consistent as the main message was to stay at home to win the war against COVID-19. In political discourse, repetition of ideas albeit using different words is a common strategy to increase persuasive impact (Erns et al., 2017). Studies have shown that repetitions also increase credibility and change of attitude of the supporters (see Erns et al., 2017).

With regards to persuasive strategies used to manage crises, the Prime Minister at that time used positive emotional appeal and fear-inducing emotional appeal which fall under the category of *pathos* (*appeal to emotion*). Fear-inducing emotional appeal is

especially evident in excerpts 4 and 5, where he shows that he too is fearful for the safety of the citizens and most importantly of his family members. Meanwhile, fear is an emotive factor that can hardly be ignored during a state of emergency like during a pandemic, the Prime Minister arguably tries to balance this negative emotional appeal out by using positive emotional appeals (endearing expressions) as much as possible. Using words that exude humbleness is arguably another emotive induced construction with the use of particle *'-lah'*, use of *tolong*, *merayu* and *sangat-sangat*.

### 3.4 Language for Crisis Management during COVID-19 and the Contemporary Context

The three themes discussed in the previous sections highlight the main findings of this study in terms of the language strategies and linguistic resources used to persuade citizens during the pandemic era. Understanding these is important as these strategies if effectively used function to 1) gather public support for the government and 2) dismantle resistance either to the government or to the policies introduced by the government to curb the problem at hand during the COVID-19 pandemic. The question now is whether or not these strategies are still relevant now post the COVID-19 era.

Looking at the results and findings, in the contemporary context, we argue that it is relevant and applicable in the contemporary and future political landscape when governments face a crisis in the form of unexpected situations or resistance. We say this based on several factors including the aftermath of the COVID-19 emergency and ongoing wars in some parts of the world that disrupt the supply chain, especially the Russian-Ukraine war (World Economic Forum, 2024). Consequently, economic and financial instability are still a reality in many countries and there is also a need for governments to have a fiscal space, especially after the inevitably heavy fiscal support given to the citizens during the COVID-19 crisis (World Economic Forum, 2024). This means fewer government subsidies and tighter budgets. For example, in June 2024, diesel subsidies had to be rationalised and given to the neediest in society. While unpopular, experts have noted that it is a necessary step so that the government has what it needs to reduce its current fiscal burden and provide newer and better policies for the citizens. Announcements for such important yet delicate-unpopular policies should be done as effectively as possible so that citizens are not only well-informed but can empathise and continue to support the government. For example, such a delicate announcement should be accompanied by a language style that addresses the nation in a unified way (using words that can be considered endearing expressions might be good). Thus, some of the persuasive strategies utilised during the COVID-19 pandemic era could be utilised by future leaders.

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

For managing a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the language used in terms of lexical, phrasal and syntactical are varied. In the first theme discussed within the findings and discussions section, we presented how negation *jangan* and *tidak* were used when outlining things that are allowed and things that are prohibited. These directly relate to the SOP enacted during the MCO. We believe that negation is an important linguistics resource that can be utilised to give a sense of definiteness and clarity, especially during a crisis. This is followed by the use of active voice in the phrase, such as *kerajaan akan* (the government will) which we argue functions to legitimise the action taken by the government. At the same time, the frequent use of *negara kita*/our country may be used to garner support through nationalistic sentiments.

We also found frequent use of endearing words including the salutation *saudara-saudari* and emotive words such as *miss*, *love* and *worried*. These words evoke a sense of familiarity and at some level aim to prove a kind of understanding between the government and the citizens. Instances of using these endearing words are manifestations of how the then Prime Minister cares about the citizens. At the same time, such strategies help to maintain low power distance to avoid intimidation.

In this paper, we described the language used by the former Malaysian Prime Minister to understand how language plays a role in governing during a time of crisis. We avoided exhaustive explanations about the methodology due to the limited space, but we believe that the use of the corpus linguistic approach has helped to point out interesting linguistic resources used by a leader during the COVID-19 pandemic. We recommend that future research compare our findings, especially the use of endearing words and salutations with that of other leaders. Since the COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented crisis, we might see some changes to the repertoire of language for crisis management, but that can only be proved through comparison with other leaders' speech statements. A war against an invisible enemy is not an easy battle, and a new war always begs for new strategies – whether it is on the battlefield or the platform of political leadership.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

## AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

Habibah Ismail (Formal analysis; Writing; Supervision; Visualisation)

Hazleena Baharun (Conceptualization; Writing)

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