

Representation of Social Actors in COVID-19 Speeches by Southeast Asian Political Leaders

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ABSTRACT

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as an infectious disease outbreak that started in Wuhan, and it became a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. A significant number of studies have been done on this disease. However, scholarly research on the representation of social actors in the Southeast Asia political discourse is limited. Thus, this study examines how social actors in relation to COVID-19 are represented in speeches by Southeast Asian political leaders from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. A selection of two categories adopted from van Leeuwen's (2008) Representational of Social Actors is chosen to examine the representation of social actors on COVID-19 portrayed in Southeast Asia. A total of 32 transcripts of speeches on COVID-19 were gathered from official government websites over seven months, from 11 March 2020 until 30 September 2020. The speeches are analysed and categorised accordingly into exclusion and role allocation. It was discovered that despite the inclusion of all social actors as playing dynamic and active roles, the government, citizens, and COVID-19 are excluded in the discourse in accentuating the actions rather than the doers. The results of this research are valuable in understanding the ideology and power status in the ways political leaders view and address social actors in their speeches, particularly in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: COVID-19, political speeches, representations, social actors, Southeast Asia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 25 January 2024

Accepted: 21 July 2024

Published: 15 November 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.32.4.20>

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INTRODUCTION

In 2020, countries worldwide were shut down for months due to the global pandemic, first detected in Hubei province, China. It started in early December 2019, and the disease was detected among the residents of Wuhan City, spreading rapidly from just a single city in China to almost all regions

worldwide. With the sudden significant increase in positive cases worldwide, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic in global health issues on 11 March 2020. Since then, the media has strived to seek mass consideration and persuade public opinion regarding the coverage of coronavirus (Atasoy, 2020) as it informs the public on what to think and affects what the public thinks about it (Chaiuk & Dunaievskaya, 2020). Print and electronic media worldwide have spread awareness and information about this outbreak. The media coverage of COVID-19 has influenced public emotions, leading to fear and a perception of the disease as a mortal danger (Singer, 2020). It has affected not only personal relationships, international collaboration, and industrial regulations (Aazam et al., 2020) but also societal distance, financial difficulties, political and economic implications, public health emergencies and the loss of many lives.

Tucker (1968) and Pillai (1996) assert that crisis situations call for charismatic leaders, who refer to exceptional political figures who are capable of relieving the tension and uncertainty of the public by offering inspiring hopes and strategies for the future (as cited in Tortola & Pansardi, 2019). In this situation, political leaders play an important role in communicating and disseminating information to the audience, particularly public citizens, as they reflect the image of their respective organisations or government institutions, hence obtaining more followers. Political leaders with different political and socio-

cultural backgrounds utilise language in their speeches with the objectives of influencing, particularly persuading their audience and assuring them of the honesty and integrity of the governments.

Given the situation regarding the impacts of COVID-19 occurring from 2019 to 2021, it is very important for political leaders to have a better comprehension of language use, varieties, patterns and functions in speeches and interactions, as language can serve as a type of social practice used to control, convince, and shape the views and attitudes of individuals. Moreover, it is a communicative method to explain something, persuade others, give promises, make compliments and other social objectives (Olimat, 2018; 2019a; 2019b, as cited in Olimat, 2020).

Globally, politicians have attempted to disseminate information on COVID-19 pandemic issues, especially on providing updates to the public and calming down their respective public citizens. For instance, the responses from the Mauritius government have shown that the government has been employing prevention strategies (screening of passengers, restriction of borders, closure of schools, confinement of population), outbreak management strategy and communication strategy that look into community engagement, prevention of fake news and outbreak control (Sun & Wah, 2020). Besides that, President Xi Jinping of China has demonstrated the usage of more positive and appreciative vocabulary in his speeches on COVID-19 (Jinshuang & Rong, 2020). It is significant as it shows

the government's efforts in fighting this pandemic, thus showing a positive role in the construction of China's image.

Consequently, there is a need to investigate how the political leaders in the Southeast Asia region address their speeches through the portrayal of social actors focusing on political leaders, the government, citizens and COVID-19 with respect to this pandemic as a global phenomenon. Language is not perceived as a straightforward way to portray reality but rather as a powerful tool for maintaining or challenging power structures and dominance within society (Zghayyir, 2016). In this context, the language used by political leaders in their speeches can influence the social and political dynamics of public citizens regarding the level of seriousness of COVID-19. Furthermore, it is crucial to conduct such a study among these four Southeast Asian countries as this will provide a guideline for improvement for the governments and various stakeholders in public health response. The role of the leaders in handling and reminding the citizens about the disease outbreak is essential for the successful implementation of policies in a country (Sun & Wah, 2020). Therefore, this study aimed to examine how social actors in relation to COVID-19 were represented in speeches by Southeast Asian political leaders from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political discourse is the talk or text of politicians and political institutions coming

from Presidents, Prime Ministers, political parties or other government parastatals at local, national and international levels (van Dijk, 1997). According to Hongyu (2016), it is highly political due to its formal expressions of leaders' perspectives, which express political opinions to their followers. In this sense, all leaders, politicians of countries, nations and organisations use speeches to communicate with their followers, thus acting as an important tool for politicians to captivate and maintain their followers, ensure their loyalty and seek future support (Taiwo, 2009). Biria and Mohammadi (2012) posit that political discourse is characteristically peculiar among public speeches as orators must make an appeal to both personal and emotional aspects of their audience (as cited in Adegbite, 2019) by manipulating their orations in a way that formulates their perceptions, beliefs and ideologies (Capone, 2010). Moreover, van Dijk (2015) claims that if the political field is deeply influenced by ideology, then its political practices and discourses are also influenced by ideology. It means that politicians engage in power struggles to achieve their desired objectives, establish guidelines for societal values, obtain regulatory approval for resource distribution and incorporate ideological agendas into their decision-making processes (Sajjad, 2015). In other words, ideology is explicitly filled in all political activities, especially political speeches, as there is a bilateral connection between political ideologies and political discourses.

Besides, the language of political leaders consists of many filters and layers. It has the potential to both misrepresent and portray realities, as well as to construct visions and imaginaries that can be utilised to alter realities and, in some instances, enhance the well-being of humans (Fairclough, 2013). However, Fairclough (2013) also adds that language can serve as a rhetorical tool to obscure and manipulate realities ideologically to encourage unjust power relations. Thus, there is a strong connection between language and politics, as Bello (2013) emphasises, as language acts as the medium through which political activity takes place.

It is also important to look at how social actors are represented in discourses as the representations offer not only to depict the events occurring but also to evaluate, justify and assign intentions to actions, which often obscure the actual social behaviours being observed (van Leeuwen, 2008). In his framework, social actors are often represented by abstract or concrete nouns that do not directly indicate “human,” such as authority, government or citizens. When this happens, it provides various purposes, such as adding impersonal authority to their actions and giving positive or negative connotations to their quality or activities. Therefore, this helps in the formation of perceptions about the identity of social actors (Gong et al., 2023). Instead of focusing on the linguistic categories (such as categories of transitivity) and the linguistic operations (as in nominalisation and passive agent deletion), van Leeuwen

(2008) emphasises comprehending the socio-semantic inventory of the ways in which social actors can be represented and establishing the sociological and relevance to the different categories in terms of the way they are linguistically realised. It helps reveal the complicated methods by which language constructs and reflects social realities, providing significant perspectives into the dynamics of discourse and social power relations.

A lot of studies have been conducted on how various political leaders with different backgrounds constructed their political speeches in the Asian, Eastern and Western contexts (Al-Majali, 2015; Banguis-Bantawig, 2019; Darweesh & Muzhir, 2016; Manzano & Orquijo, 2020). The research focused mainly on the discursive, persuasive and linguistic styles of all political leaders. Among the studies, Darweesh and Muzhir (2016) have investigated the representation of the Syrian crisis in the political speeches of Barack Obama, John Kerry and Hillary Clinton. Significantly, the findings have found that all the speeches delivered on the Syrian crisis “have not been neutral” (p. 40) as the American political figures have been manipulatively employing negative ideology, creating “negative other-representation and positive self-representation” through various linguistic and discourse markers.

In regard to the representation of social actors in COVID-19 speeches, previous studies have been done looking at the representation of diseases from the linguistics perspective, such as in

Ebola by Moodley and Lesage (2020) and Wonnah (2018), SARS by Joye (2010) and Lean (2007) as well as in COVID-19 by Berrocal et al. (2021) and Zahra and Abbas (2022). The representation of Ebola in the news reports showed that the emotive involvement with Ebola in the media illustrated how medical discourse indirectly became political and ideological as it reinforced the ideas of Ebola as “a form of terrorism and othering” (Kamalu, 2016, as cited in Moodley & Lesage, 2020, p. 2). Such emotive reinforcement was also seen in Germany and Spain’s daily newspapers as the discourse producers preferred to use “fear as a decisive factor” on the COVID-19 virus in influencing the public’s emotions as well as continuously presenting China as the source of global health issue (Atasoy, 2020, p. 12). It eventually created a negative representation of COVID-19 towards China. In a way, these studies showed how political leaders, government and media had a great impact on the emotive engagement of the public and consequently enabled the country to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic constructively.

Several studies have been conducted on COVID-19 from the perspective of linguistics, looking at Singapore’s Prime Minister speeches (Ala’yun, 2020), Indonesia’s President press statements (Megah & Mohd Noor, 2020), Malaysia and Singapore’s leaders’ public broadcasts (Rajandran, 2020), Malaysians public letters (Joharry & Turiman, 2020), Malaysia’s newspapers (Mohd Nor & Zulcaffi, 2020), and many others. Moreover, Gong et

al. (2023) mentioned in their study that narratives play a huge role in social representation and have a huge impact on public perceptions, policy responses, and the construction of social realities during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the limitations of this research is the limited amount of research done on political leaders in Southeast Asia, especially in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore during its peak pandemic season. It is fundamental to look into how diseases and illnesses are portrayed because these are not described in neutral, objective terms (Lyons, 2000). Instead, they are commonly communicated in terms of ideologies or discourses that reflect different social interests. As such, understanding how the media and other politicians represented health, illness, and disease, as well as the ideologies and power relations embedded in the representations, is important in comprehending politicians’ choices.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative study was adopted in this study as it helped in the analysis and interpretation of texts to discover the meaning of patterns about a certain phenomenon (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). As a result, the ideologies and agenda of the texts were revealed. Purposive sampling was applied in the selection of data to unveil the meaning of patterns by selecting four Southeast Asia countries, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, due to their shared common similarities in ethnic, historical, linguistic, religious and cultural diversity, thus helping

to generate an in-depth understanding of the research topic. Additionally, research within this area is limited in the context of Southeast Asia regions. Therefore, this research investigates the representation of social actors focusing on the political leaders, government, citizens, and COVID-19 in the speeches of Southeast Asian political leaders from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Political leaders involved were Prime Minister Hassanal Bolkiah (Brunei), President Joko Widodo (Indonesia), then Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin (Malaysia) and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (Singapore). These are referred to as political leaders who represented the voice of their constituents as they steered their governments as rulers of their countries at that time.

According to Potter and Wetherell, there is no definite limitation on the number of texts to be analysed as long as the corpus adequately supports the research objectives (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Therefore, a total of 32 transcripts of speeches delivered by the heads of governments in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore with relation to the issues of the COVID-19 pandemic, focused on the public, were gathered from each government website (Brunei: <http://www.pmo.gov.bn/>, Indonesia: <https://setkab.go.id/en/>, Malaysia: <https://www.pmo.gov.my>, Singapore: <https://www.pmo.gov.sg>) in the span of seven months from 11 March 2020 until 30 September 2020. The speeches were collected during that period, as 11 March 2020 was the day when WHO (World Health

Organisation) declared this virus a pandemic and marked the beginning and peak of COVID-19 worldwide (Rajandran, 2020). Due to that, political leaders are required to be proactive in giving public speeches and announcements to the citizens of the country in combatting the pandemic. Moreover, their political speeches symbolise their respective political discourse. Although the number of speeches selected for each country was imbalanced due to the differences in the number of COVID-19 cases in each country and the approaches used by the governments depending on the country's population, the number of speeches selected for Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore's political leaders were relevant as it can provide an in-depth information supporting the research objectives (Table 1).

Table 1
Description of sample

Country	Number of Speeches Selected	Language of the Speeches
Brunei	2	Malay
Indonesia	9	English
Malaysia	15	Malay and English
Singapore	6	Mandarin and English
Total	32	-

*Source: Speeches selected were taken from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore's Government websites

In the data analysis, speeches in languages other than English were translated and checked twice by translators who were native speakers of those languages.

Prior to selection, the speeches were refined based on several criteria, such as the similarities of the four countries, the presidents and prime ministers of the countries and the duration of the peak of COVID-19 globally. Additionally, the selection of speeches reflected public speeches addressing public citizens with a common goal: to inform and disseminate information on the outbreak and strategies planned for COVID-19. These speeches were fundamental as they can be analysed to evaluate the rationale of political leaders composing them in handling and managing the situation in terms of discursive strategies and linguistic tools, thus uncovering the speeches' hidden ideology and political agenda.

The analysis of speeches was grounded in critical discourse studies (CDS), which used critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA explored the relationship between text structures and strategies, as well as social, political and cultural structures and processes. Moreover, CDA believes texts result from social and political contexts and have constitutive power in shaping cognition and influencing relations among various social groups (van Dijk, 1998; Fairclough, 1995). Thus, a qualitative study of the representation of social actors by van Leeuwen (2008) was adopted to demonstrate how the social actors in relation to COVID-19 were represented in the speeches of the four political leaders. This theory examined how social actors were depicted in discourse by analysing their sociological descriptions and linguistic

realisations, hence facilitating the analysis of power relations in political discourse and unveiling underlying political ideologies and agendas. This framework offers ten categories of how social actors were portrayed in the texts and their semantic roles (van Leeuwen, 2008), such as inclusion and exclusion, role allocation and genericisation and specification.

Notably, the language used to represent social actors was studied, where the social actors in the sentences could be represented as subjects or objects and even excluded linguistically. Therefore, the social actors in the speeches were observed through the two representational categories of exclusion and role allocation as they had the most occurrences when analysed. Ahlstrand (2019) also suggested that this approach provides a “comprehensive set of tools for analysis” (p. 22), as these tools were developed and applied in ways that were tailored to achieve the aims and context of this current research.

Reflecting van Leeuwen's framework, the exclusion of social actors can be radical, completely omitting social actors, or less radical, mentioning them elsewhere without linking to specific actions, with a purpose tailored to their targeted audience (van Leeuwen, 2008). It is achieved linguistically through passive agent deletion ('Capacity of referral hospitals will be increased, be it the numbers of rooms, equipment, medicines and human resources'), non-finite clauses that function as a participant ('Although the number of new cases of COVID-19 is declining, the risk of increased

infection rates remains’), and nominalisation (‘The implementation of social assistance programs aims to ease the burden on the communities and boost productivity of the people’s economy’). The main distinction is that social actors are entirely absent in suppression, while in backgrounding, they are referenced elsewhere in the text. As for role allocation in discourse, it assigns roles to social actors as either active participants or passive recipients of actions through the usage of prepositions or nominalisations, while passivation treats actors as objects or affected parties. Rooted in Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), this concept categorises actors in various processes and can rearrange social roles and relationships in representations (van Leeuwen, 2008). Activation depicts actors dynamically involved in actions, like ‘Singaporeans’ in ‘many Singaporeans stepped up to help others.’ At the same time, passivation shows actors as receiving or undergoing actions, like ‘COVID-19’ in ‘prevent the spread of COVID-19’.

Political leaders, the government, citizens and COVID-19 were the emphasised social actors throughout the speeches. In identifying which sentences fell within one of the categories of exclusion and role allocation, the researchers relied on the definitions of categories provided by van Leeuwen (2008). Based on these sources, all relevant sentences involving the social actors related to the two representational categories were extracted and grouped by their respective categories. For instance, related sentences fell into the

representational category of exclusion through being realised by passive agent deletion (such as, “Capacity of referral hospitals will be increased, be it the numbers of rooms, equipment, medicines, and human resources”) was retrieved from one of the speeches in which it existed, thus indicating the exclusion of the government as a social actor.

The number of occurrences was indicated and explained using examples. The frequency distributions of the social actors were calculated and compared with one another for their number of occurrences and representational patterns. The results of these text analyses were discussed in relation to the way social actors of the political leaders, government, citizens and COVID-19 were portrayed in the speeches to better understand the embedded power relations in COVID-19 discourse.

RESULTS

The results were based on representational categories of social actors following the two categories of van Leeuwen’s framework (2008): exclusion and role allocation of social actors.

i. Exclusion

Exclusion can be distinguished into two subcategories, namely suppression and backgrounding. The former deals with excluding both social actors and their actions, leaving no reference in the discourse, while social actors in backgrounding leave a trace in the discourse. Discourses can be excluded or included in the elements of social practice

to represent certain kinds of actors to suit an individual's interest and purpose (van Leeuwen, 2005, as cited in Ahlstrand, 2019).

In Brunei, social actors of citizens and COVID-19 were excluded in 16 occurrences

throughout the speeches. The findings showed that the citizens of Brunei were mostly backgrounded through passive agent deletion and non-finite clauses that function as participants (Table 2).

Table 2
Excerpts of speeches from Brunei

Brunei	
Excerpt 1	<i>“Sumbangan-sumbangan akan digunakan untuk keperluan perubatan menanganai wabak”</i> [Donations will be used for medical needs to deal with the pandemic]
Excerpt 2	<i>“Pemberian elaun khas ini akan berjalan bermula bulan Mac 2020 dan akan dilanjutkan sehingga berakhirnya wabak COVID-19 di negara ini”</i> [This special allowance will start in March 2020 and will be extended until the end of COVID-19 pandemic in this country]

Source: <http://www.pmo.gov.bn/>

In all these cases, citizens and COVID-19 were mentioned elsewhere in the speeches by its actions. In Excerpt 1 above, the act of deleting citizens as active agents in donating was deleted to pinpoint the government's strategy with the donations collected, thus implicitly ignoring their citizens' active participation. However, removing citizens in the form of backgrounding did not invite the audience to think of the social actor receiving the initiatives. In this case, citizens were backgrounded in a way that the public was expected to understand that any kind of assistance provided by the government was to be received by all citizens; hence, the real recipients were deleted to drive the audiences' attention towards the government's contributions.

COVID-19 was also excluded in Brunei speeches through passive agent deletion and nominalisations, as seen in Table 3.

Such instances indicated that COVID-19 as a social actor in the action was hidden to accentuate the impacts of its attack on the citizens and country. COVID-19 was perceived negatively by mentioning the deceased person and using the expression *“dilanda”* [hit] as two of the impacts of the COVID-19 attack. Evidently, these proved that the social actor was excluded to suit the interests and purposes of the speaker. In this context, the speaker would like to highlight the government's contributions to the country and the danger of COVID-19, which eventually excluded such actors as ideologically motivated.

In Indonesia, 24 occurrences of exclusion of citizens were noted in the speeches of the President of Indonesia. Based on the findings, passive-agent deletion was the tactic most used to exclude citizens. Here, the social actors' agent was excluded, thus

Table 3
Excerpt of speech from Brunei

Brunei	
Excerpt 3	“ <i>Brunei kini, juga telah turut dilanda</i> ” [Brunei now has been hit]

Source: <http://www.pmo.gov.bn/>

confusing the audience about the agency of the actions. However, the audience could reasonably infer from the context of COVID-19 that the agents probably concerned the citizens due to the instructions given as actions needed to be followed (Table 4). These further accentuated the actions needed to be taken by the citizens instead of focusing on the doers.

Similarly, the government was excluded from enhancing its contributions, thus showcasing its active role. These instances, which excluded the government as social actors, tended to shift the focus towards the doers' actions, which was crucial in the current situation with the end goal of curbing the transmission of the COVID-19 (Table 5).

Table 4
Excerpts of speeches from Indonesia

Indonesia	
Excerpt 4	“Physical interaction must be reduced”
Excerpt 5	“Do the activities limitedly, but follow health protocol strictly”

Source: <https://setkab.go.id/en/>

Table 5
Excerpts of speeches from Indonesia

Indonesia	
Excerpt 6	“The implementation of social assistance programs aims to ease the burden on the communities and boost the productivity of the people's economy.”
Excerpt 7	“Handling public health problems remains our top priority.”

Source: <https://setkab.go.id/en/>

Excerpt 6 showed that nominalisation allowed the social actor to be excluded. However, the audience could assume who the social actor would be in working out the programs as the actions left traces and references of the social actor in the speeches later. As for Excerpt 7, the downgrading

of the process using the gerund form of the verb ‘to handle’, enables the social actor responsible for the ‘handling’ of the virus outbreak to be excluded. Moreover, the second clause further enhanced the backgrounded form of the government through the pronoun ‘our’, thus revealing

the identity of the social actor. Therefore, by transforming the clause into a grammatical participant, the government as a social actor responsible for the action was excluded.

In the case of Malaysia, 91 occurrences of exclusion were found throughout the speeches by the Malaysian Prime Minister via passive agent deletion, non-finite clauses and nominalisations for deleting social actors of citizens and the government. The deletion of citizens in the actions of practising new norms illustrated that the speaker intended to highlight the importance of the actions

so that the number of positive COVID-19 cases could be reduced. Moreover, Excerpt 8 demonstrated the exclusion of citizens that was realised through non-finite clauses by the gerund form of the verbs ‘to practice social distance’ and ‘to hang out’, enabling the citizens responsible for such actions to be excluded; hence, the audience could be assumed reasonably of who they were (van Leeuwen, 2008). In addition, the deletion of citizens intensified the actions, thus creating a direct and straightforward speech (Table 6).

Table 6
Excerpt of speech from Malaysia

Malaysia	
Excerpt 8	<i>“Elakkan melepak dengan kawan-kawan di restoran, di kopitiam, di pusat hiburan atau di mana-mana tempat yang boleh mendatangkan saudara-saudari kepada jangkitan wabak COVID-19”</i> [Avoid hanging out with friends at restaurants, coffee shops, entertainment centers or anywhere that could expose yourselves to the COVID-19]
Excerpt 9	<i>“Penjarakan sosial, penggunaan pelitup muka di tempat awam dan membasuh tangan menggunakan sabun atau hand sanitizer merupakan kebiasaan baharu yang mesti diamalkan”</i> [Social distancing, the use of face masks in public places and hand washing with soap or hand sanitizer are new habits that must be practiced]

Source: <https://www.pmo.gov.my>

Apart from that, the government in Malaysia was hidden in several instances to accentuate the assistance and aid that the government had helped in dealing with COVID-19, thus creating an image of a government that is deeply concerned with the citizens (Table 7). Here, passivation was used intensely rather than active structure to focus on the efforts without any attention to the social actor, ‘the government’. The excluded social actor could have been included through postmodifying phrases

with by and of, but it had not been. With regard to that, the government and citizens were excluded in most situations to suit the speaker’s political agenda.

In the analysis of speeches delivered by Singapore’s Prime Minister, 71 occurrences of exclusion were noted from the discourse. In this context, Singaporeans as citizens were seen to be exempted from the actions to highlight the actions needed to be obeyed in all seriousness to curb the spread of COVID-19, as seen in Excerpt 12.

Besides that, COVID-19 was revealed to be excluded in some instances to accentuate its detrimental impacts in various ways, as seen in Table 8. Therefore, the speaker tended to focus more on the impacts of COVID-19 on his targeted audience, which eventually created a sense of alarm for the public to follow the new norms.

Table 7
Excerpt of speech from Malaysia

Malaysia	
Excerpt 10	<i>“Kluster ini telah merekodkan sejumlah 3,375 kes positif selepas seramai 42,023 individu disaring”</i> [The cluster has recorded a total of 3,375 positive cases after a total of 42,023 individuals were screened]

Source: <https://www.pmo.gov.my>

Table 8
Excerpts of speeches from Singapore

Singapore	
Excerpt 11	“Business closures, retrenchments and unemployment are all likely to go up in the coming months.”
Excerpt 12	“Health checks and quarantines will become the norm.”

Source: <https://www.pmo.gov.sg>

ii. Role Allocation

Role allocation is a category under inclusion that examines the different roles social actors are given in a discourse, which can either be activated or passivated. The following subsections examined the way the political leaders, government, citizens and COVID-19 were activated, subjected and beneficialised.

a. Activation

Social actors were given activated roles as active and dynamic in the activities indicated in the speeches. Activation was realised in three ways: through circumstantialisation of ‘by’ and ‘from’, as well as pre-modification and post-modification of nominalisations.

In addition, an in-depth analysis of the representation of activation by various social actors was observed through transitivity processes such as material, verbal and mental processes.

The usage of circumstantialisation of ‘by’ and ‘from’, material process as well as mental process was found to be highly utilised by political leaders in the portrayal of social actors related to the COVID-19 pandemic in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Findings exhibited that citizens of all four countries were actively depicted through their contributions and cooperation in curbing the COVID-19 pandemic. The contributions were referred to as a process of undertaking actions by

following the measures and precautions stated by the heads of the government and their administrations. The activation of social actors in material processes occurred at the second highest rate. The importance of material processes had been highly emphasised by Nuñez-Perucha (2011) in understanding the exercise of power in relationships, thus revealing “who does what to whom” (p. 110). In this case, verbs such as ‘work’ and ‘fight’ were mainly employed in all four political leaders’ speeches. Active participation by the citizens in obeying the steps and measures was motivated by verbal and mental processes of ‘hope’ and ‘realise’ to connect to the impacts that COVID-19 had on the country.

All four countries’ governments and political leaders were the second most active social actors. The government and political leaders were referred to as the same social actor due to the choice of the pronoun ‘we’, which is referred to as ‘the government and I’ in conveying the government’s plans to the public. These social actors were signified as agents in providing benefits and setting the rules and regulations for the country and its citizens through circumstantialisations, material, verbal, and mental processes. Both social actors were identified via circumstantialisations of ‘from’ and ‘by’, which depicted them as the providers to the country, and this linguistic feature was mainly observed towards the citizens in Brunei and Malaysia.

Furthermore, the government and political leaders were activated through material, verbal, and mental processes,

which signify them as entities that aided the beneficiaries in overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic. It was observed that political leaders were inclined to apply verbal and mental processes in their speeches. For verbal, there were instances of ‘express’, ‘urge’ and ‘address’ whereby they actively communicated their speeches on the subjects of reminding, expressing gratitude, updating and instructing the public. It clearly accentuates the power of government and political leaders as the heads of government in instructing the citizens on what to do, which was also observed in Ahlstrand’s study on Indonesian women’s political discourse (2019). Furthermore, “direct control is achieved through discourses with a directive pragmatic function such as commands, threats, laws, regulations, instructions and more indirectly by recommendation and advice” (van Dijk, 1989, p. 27 as cited in Ahlstrand, 2019). For mental process, several verbs were utilised in the speeches like ‘aware’, ‘hope’, ‘concern’ and ‘believe’ in understanding and sharing the feelings of another with regards to the challenges faced by the people due to COVID-19. Despite reminding and advising the citizens on the danger of COVID-19, political leaders were inclined to include positivism in the speeches using verbs such as ‘hope’, ‘confident’ and ‘believe’ to ensure that citizens would feel slightly at ease with the current issue. Activation in verbal and mental processes exhibited the practice of maintaining power, hence providing greater insight into the intentions and underlying value of the administrations.

Besides that, COVID-19 was found to be predominantly activated using circumstantialisations and material processes. This virus represented the agent in its consequences on the country, especially towards the social, economic, psychological and other aspects through circumstantialisations of ‘from’ and ‘by’. The virus was also represented by the movement it had caused to the countries, thus forming new terms such as new cluster and the largest cluster. It was also noticeable that COVID-19 was signified in terms of its longer duration in the community, where it was mostly assumed to stay longer in the community until a vaccine was to be produced. Moreover, COVID-19 was depicted as an agent of the action or the doer, signifying its impact on the country and community (Table 9).

Table 9
Excerpts of speeches from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore

Brunei	
Excerpt 13	<i>“Brunei mesti bersedia secara bersepadu untuk membentengi diri daripada wabak ini”</i> [Brunei must be prepared in an integrated manner to protect themselves from this pandemic]
Indonesia	
Excerpt 14	“These programs aim to ease the economic burden of the communities affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.”
Malaysia	
Excerpt 15	<i>“Ia boleh menyerang kita pada bila-bila masa dan di mana-mana sahaja”</i> [It can attack us anytime and anywhere]
Singapore	
Excerpt 16	“COVID-19 has worsened relations between the US and China.”

Source: Speeches selected were taken from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore’s Government websites

b. Passivation

The passivation of social actors was examined through subjects, representing social actors as objects and beneficiaries. The study found that political leaders from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore demonstrated the citizens to be mostly beneficialised with a percentage of 28.6%, 39.3%, 19.4% and 35.3%, respectively, in the speeches (Table 10).

The beneficiary status of social actors in this discourse is realised by utilising the prepositions of ‘to’ and ‘for’ (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). The status of Indonesian and Singaporean citizens was mostly beneficialised by the assistance they received from their governments, as seen in Excerpts 18 and 20. It accentuated the dilemma of the citizens regarding the consequences of COVID-19 in their lives, which resulted in business closures and

Table 10

Excerpts of speeches from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore on beneficialised status of citizens as a social actor

Brunei	
Excerpt 17	“ <i>Sumbangan-sumbangan akan digunakan untuk keperluan perubatan menangani wabak</i> ” [Donations will be used for medical needs to deal with the pandemic]
Indonesia	
Excerpt 18	“The government has decided to implement several new social assistance policies, namely Special Assistance for Staple Food from the Central Government for the people of Jakarta.”
Malaysia	
Excerpt 19	“ <i>Saya juga ingin mengambil kesempatan ini untuk merakamkan terima kasih kepada seluruh rakyat Malaysia atas pengorbanan masing-masing untuk memerangi wabak COVID-19</i> ” [I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all Malaysians for their sacrifices in combating the COVID-19]
Singapore	
Excerpt 20	“We have taken emergency measures to help everyone come through the crisis together.”

Source: Speeches selected were taken from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore’s Government websites

many losing their jobs. With regards to that, the government took proactive measures by assisting in initiatives to help them go despite the current situation; hence, citizens were represented passively in the form of beneficialised participants. However, in Malaysian speeches, the citizens were positively depicted as being appreciated by the government for their cooperation and contributions in dealing with the pandemic using the preposition ‘for’ in Excerpt 19. Furthermore, the citizens were also associated with the verb ‘help’, which signifies their assistance to the country.

In the analysis of Brunei, Indonesian Singaporean speeches on the social actors of COVID-19, the subjected position of COVID-19 was predominantly depicted at

the receiving end with 57.1%, 10.9% and 17%, respectively. This passive placement was intended to highlight the government and the citizens bearing its impact and danger. Moreover, the representation of COVID-19 tends to be signalled with the word ‘fight’ and its synonyms indicating the battle against the disease from all parties: the head of the government, the government and all citizens (Table 11).

Despite being a passive actor, COVID-19 was seen to be beneficialised with a percentage of 80.7% and 47.1% in the Malaysian and Singaporean speeches (Table 12). The status of COVID-19 in Malaysia has primarily depicted a negative representation with the words ‘prevent’, ‘fight’, ‘break’ and ‘control’ associated

with it. This negative representation of COVID-19 has been installed by the Prime Minister and the government towards the citizens. As such, it brings danger and may increase the death rate among the people, and thus, it is crucial for them to combat COVID-19. This situation was also displayed in Singapore’s speeches to highlight the danger and impact it can have towards the people and country.

Table 11
Excerpts of speeches from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore on subjected position of COVID-19 as a social actor

Brunei	
Excerpt 21	“Beta telah menyebut beberapa usaha Kerajaan Beta dalam membendung penularan COVID-19” [I have mentioned some of my governments’ efforts in curbing the spread of COVID-19]
Indonesia	
Excerpt 22	“Communities play a major role in reducing the number of cases and preventing the spread of COVID-19.”
Singapore	
Excerpt 23	“This NDP is also an opportunity for us to salute those on our frontline, fighting COVID-19.”

Source: Speeches selected were taken from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore’s Government websites

Table 12
Excerpts of speeches from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore on the negative representation of COVID-19 as a social actor

Malaysia	
Excerpt 24	“Wabak ini dapat kita kawal kerana saudara dan saudari sekalian mengambil satu tanggungjawab yang serius untuk mencegah COVID-19” [We are able to control this pandemic because all of you take a serious responsibility to prevent COVID-19]
Singapore	
Excerpt 25	“But neither have we been able to eradicate the virus, despite our best efforts.”

Source: Speeches selected were taken from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore’s Government websites

DISCUSSION

The overall findings in the analysis of political speeches on COVID-19 by leaders from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore showed a tendency to exclude citizens as active social actors. Citizens

are often suppressed or marginalised in the discourse, with the focus placed on government initiatives and measures in Brunei. The exclusion of citizens highlights the importance of compliance with government regulations and guidelines.

The citizens' contributions in performing such actions were crucial in combatting the spread of the disease in the countries. However, in Brunei, citizens were excluded to emphasise the government's initiatives towards citizens, thus portraying the citizens as passive beneficiaries. Although they were backgrounded in the speeches, citizens were not radically suppressed as they were depicted as both active and passive social actors, which was seen in their allocated roles. From the analysis, citizens were represented mostly by having to abide by the new norms of COVID-19, indicating their contributions to the country. They were discursively realised through the material process of using words like 'prepare', 'take' and 'work', hence showcasing them as active social actors in the speeches. Citizens were also passivated as recipients of government initiatives, which were signified using prepositions like 'for' and 'to'. This portrayal establishes "an ideological government-citizen binary" (Rajandran, 2019, p. 32) between the government as the provider and citizens as the recipients of initiatives.

Relating to the social actor of government, the government was seen to be working along with the political leaders; hence, active contributions from both social actors were predominantly involved with the assistance, programs and strategies curbing COVID-19, which was realised linguistically via material, verbal and mental processes. However, there were some instances whereby the social actor was excluded in Indonesia and Malaysia,

depicting them as sources of initiative and intensifying the active actions in dealing with the disease.

Through the discourse of COVID-19, political leaders in the four countries, COVID-19 was perceived negatively by the political leaders in their speeches, creating an image of COVID-19 as having significant impacts on people's lives, creating a sense of fear and urgency. In the sentences, such connotations were associated with negative material verbs like 'attack', 'infect' and 'spread'. It indicates that the speeches on COVID-19 in this study had been manipulatively employed to express the negative ideology towards the impression of the disease in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, hence proving that political leaders' speeches were not neutral (Darweesh & Muzhir, 2016).

The analysis demonstrates the complex representation of social actors in the COVID-19 speeches delivered by political leaders in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, where COVID-19, citizens, and the government with political leaders are predominantly activated. Citizens are depicted as active and passive actors, reflecting the power relations and ideological orientation within the political discourse of these Southeast Asian countries through the speeches of political leaders. It supports van Dijk's (2015) and Fairclough's (2013) claims that political ideologies are deeply embedded in political practices using language, showing a strong connection between language and politics.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the present article has examined the COVID-19 speeches qualitatively using critical discourse studies. In the analysis of all the chosen speeches by political leaders of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore through the discourse examination of the representations of social actors in the issue of COVID-19, the political leaders discussed the COVID-19 issues by representing several social actors such as the government, citizens, political leaders and COVID-19. The results showed that the government, citizens and COVID-19 were excluded, while political leaders, the government, citizens and COVID-19 were included in the speeches. Despite the inclusion of all social actors in dynamic and active roles, the government, citizens, and COVID-19 were excluded from the discourse in accentuating the actions rather than the doers. Moreover, the different occurrences clearly show the negative and positive portrayal or inclination of the speeches towards several social actors, thus demonstrating the political leaders' ideology or stance as current government rulers at the time of data collection.

This article enriches research on political discourse as speeches by Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore political leaders that can be a basis for comparing public speeches delivered by leaders in other Western and Eastern countries. Understanding the dynamics of political discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Asian countries and its implications for governance is significant as it demonstrates

a political leader's power and capabilities through language, thus affecting public perception. By employing critical discourse studies in analysing the speeches by four Southeast Asian political leaders, the study illustrates how language is used to represent social actors and shape public perception. Additionally, by dissecting the language through political leaders' speeches on the actions of specific social actors, this study helps offer insights into how political speeches can influence public opinion and shape policy responses to the pandemic.

Furthermore, it is recommended that future research be done by expanding the analysis using corpus linguistics with a larger volume of speeches and duration of time. It will provide a more comprehensive understanding of political leaders' linguistic patterns and discursive strategies during the pandemic. Besides that, considering the current rulers in each country and their specific political contexts in shaping the societal perception during the recovery and reconstruction of each country after the COVID-19 pandemic can provide a deeper understanding of Southeast Asia's socio-political landscape.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors express their sincere gratitude to Universiti Sains Malaysia for providing the facilities and support essential for this research during its initial development. Appreciation is also extended to Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia for its ongoing support during the refinement of this article.

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