

The Persuasion Strategies Used in Media Discourse: Jordanian Defense Orders and Press Conferences Held during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Received: 30/11/2022

Revised: 11/1/2023

Accepted: 9/5/2023

Published: 30/3/2024

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Citation: Alserhan, F. A. . (2024).
The Persuasion Strategies Used in
Media Discourse: Jordanian Defense
Orders and Press Conferences Held
during the Covid-19
Pandemic. *Dirasat: Human and
Social Sciences*, 51(2), 188–195.
<https://doi.org/10.35516/hum.v51i2.3162>



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Abstract

Objective: This study aimed to investigate the persuasion strategies used in the Jordanian defense orders 16 through 31 and press conferences held during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Method: Within Critical Discourse Analysis, the study adopts van Dijk's (2000) model as a theoretical framework. It is a practical method for analyzing discourse, where many strategies were demonstrated, mainly metaphor, actor description, burden, euphemism, modality, repetition, and numbers.

Results: The findings revealed that defense orders did not use persuasion strategies much but used very direct intimidating discourse because they are statements issued by the government to the people living in Jordan and they must abide by them without the need to implement persuasion strategies. Conversely, press conferences extensively used persuasive strategies to convince people to adhere to the rules, so they help the government combat the pandemic. The mostly used persuasion strategies are repetition, followed by numbers, and then, metaphors and burden.

Conclusions: The study concludes that both the government and the majority of the public worked hand in hand to face the pandemic and keep Jordan safe, but in the beginning, it was a difficult situation for both. It is recommended that official government speakers who usually deliver public speeches shall be trained on how to persuade the public and what strategies they need to use.

Keywords: Persuasive strategies, defense orders, press conferences, media discourse, Covid-19.

استراتيجيات الإقناع المستخدمة في الخطاب الإعلامي: أوامر الدفاع والمؤتمرات الصحفية الأردنية التي عُقدت في أثناء جائحة كوفيد-19

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ملخص

الأهداف: تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى البحث في استراتيجيات الإقناع المستخدمة في أوامر الدفاع الأردنية من رقم 16 إلى 31 والمؤتمرات الصحفية التي عقدت خلال جائحة كوفيد-19.

المنهجية: تتبنى الدراسة نموذج فان دايك (2000)، ضمن تحليل الخطاب النقدي كإطار نظري. يعُدُّ هذا النموذج طريقة عملية لتحليل الخطاب؛ حيث تستخدم العديد من الاستراتيجيات، وعلى نحو أساسي: الاستعارة، ووصف الفاعل، وتحميل المسؤولية، ولطف التعبير، والضمائر، والتكرار، والأرقام.

النتائج: كشفت النتائج أن أوامر الدفاع لم تستخدم استراتيجيات إقناع على نحو كبير، ولكنها استخدمت لغة تهريب مباشرة للغاية لأنها تصريحات صادرة عن الحكومة للأشخاص الذين يعيشون في الأردن ويجب عليهم الالتزام بها دون الحاجة إلى اتباع استراتيجيات الإقناع. على العكس من ذلك، استخدمت المؤتمرات الصحفية استراتيجيات الإقناع بصورة كبيرة لإقناع الناس للالتزام بالأوامر والقوانين لمساعدة الحكومة في مكافحة الوباء. كانت أكثر الإقناع استخدامًا التكرار، يليها الأرقام، ثم الاستعارة وتحميل المسؤولية.

الخلاصة: توصلت الدراسة إلى أن الحكومة وغالبية الشعب عملوا يدًا بيد لمواجهة الوباء والحفاظ على سلامة الأردن، لكن في البداية، كان الوضع صعباً لكليهما، وتوصي الدراسة أن يُدرَّب المتحدثين الحكوميين الرسميين الذين عادةً ما يلقيون الخطابات العامة على كيفية إقناع الجمهور والاستراتيجيات التي يجب أن تُستخدم.

الكلمات الدالة: استراتيجيات الإقناع، أوامر الدفاع، المؤتمرات الصحفية، الخطاب الإعلامي، كوفيد-19..

1. Introduction

In the Covid-19 pandemic, many things have changed, and many new things have emerged in all areas of life such as the educational system, health sector, laws, relationships, lifestyles, and discourses. Defense orders are an example of the new things that were first issued by the Jordanian government and officials. They are a set of precautionary measures, legislation, provisions, and procedures adopted by the Jordanian government to confront the Covid-19 pandemic. Such legislations aimed to control the situation and the critical conditions at that time, so they addressed nearly all concerns of Jordanian people that faced the different aspects of their lives, including curfew, social security insurance, water, energy, gas, logistic services, and media, among others. In addition, penalties for people who violate the provisions, such as fines and imprisonment, were also announced in these defense orders.

In addition to defense orders, the Jordanian government, during the covid-19 period, was holding regular press conferences in the Prime Ministry where many government officials such as the Prime Minister, the Minister of Health, and the Minister of Defense, among other officials speak to the public and provide them with the latest Covid-related information and decisions. In these conferences, the public had been addressed in a more intimate way and the regulations set out in the defense orders were discussed in a simpler way. In other words, these conferences were similar to a conversation between the government and its people, and colloquial language was extensively used throughout them. For example, press conferences were usually started with “Good evening! Hope you are doing well.”

It is argued that discourses delivered by officials and governmental bodies often do not aim to inform or entertain, but rather to persuade and emphasize the interaction between the speaker and the audience (Dhayef and Hassan, 2022). In the case of defense orders, the Jordanian government needed to persuade the public to follow and obey the orders so they can effectively combat the pandemic, and the only way available to do so was through language. Persuasive language is a type of discourse that impacts behaviors, thoughts, and feelings (ibid), and this was the main aim of the defense orders: to announce new rules and persuade people to change their behaviors in order to abide by the rules and adapt to the new situation.

Many studies were conducted on the persuasive language and strategies used in various domains such as the educational sector (e.g., Edwards, Nicoll, Solomon, and Usher, 2013; Heilmann, Malone, and F. Westerveld, 2020), political discourse (e.g., Ferrari, 2007; Rezaei and Nourali, 2016; Khajavi and Rasti, 2020; A'raf and Rashid, 2022), technological designs (e.g., Orji, 2017), advertisements (Rabab'ah and Khawaldeh, 2016), and marketing (Marie and Zibin, 2020), among others. However, no studies in Jordan have considered the persuasive strategies used in the orders and regulations issued by the government to its people, especially in unusual circumstances such as the Covid-19 pandemic, where people's breaching of rules may cause danger to the entire state. What makes this study different from other studies done on persuasiveness is that it explores the persuasive strategies used in defense orders issued by the Jordanian government during a critical period where people need to be persuaded, considering cultural aspects, in addition to investigating the impact of such strategies on people's behaviors. More specifically, it is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the persuasive strategies used in press conferences and defense orders no. 16 to 31 that are issued by the Jordanian government during the period of Covid-19?
2. Adopting van Dijk's model, what is the most common persuasive strategy used in defense orders and press conferences?
3. What is the impact of defense orders on the public's behaviors, and to what extent did people abide by them?

The subsequent sections provide a review of the literature, explain the adopted theoretical framework and the method used to conduct this study, state the results and discuss them thoroughly, and finally, draw conclusions and provide some recommendations for further research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical framework

2.1.1. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) mainly studies how “social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). It is a

field of study where all relevant methods of social sciences and humanities can be used, so it is not about analyzing discourse, as it is commonly understood. It is used to study many different aspects of discourse such as conversations, stylistics, narrative analysis, discourse grammar, argumentation, sociolinguistics, and social semiotics (ibid).

People have control on the daily conversations they engage in with their family members, colleagues, and friends, but they are passive targets of the texts and talks directed to the public such as the texts and talks delivered by judges, teachers, authorities, and media which tell people what to do, or what to not do (van Dijk, 2015). Control in discourse is mostly contextual or topical, where the communicative situation, i.e., the way people effectively communicate with each other in language, consists of many categories such as the setting (time and place), action (discourse and genre), and participants who have different social and institutional identities and roles (ibid). CDA focuses on all of this in order to uncover the ideologies and beliefs in a talk or a text.

So, as CDA is a multidisciplinary approach to study discourse, whether spoken or written, it has many various approaches and models that can be applied depending on the situation, the setting and action, and participants. The next section explains on of CDA models, that is van Dijk's model which is used to conduct this study.

2.1.2. Van Dijk's model

Van Dijk is one of the pioneers in CDA as he developed the Socio-Cognitive Approach in which he focuses on cognitive concepts such as mental models and knowledge (A'raf and Rashid, 2022) and relates discourse structures to social structures (Van Dijk, 2017). In persuasion, there are many strategies used, some are linguistic such as intensifiers, and some are not such as metaphors and euphemism. The common strategies followed by van Dijk's model include metaphors which refer to using rhetorical devices to make the abstract and complex meanings more familiar and understandable (A'raf and Rashid, 2022). In addition, euphemism is another strategy used for persuasion. It means the indirect or the "safe" way to replace distasteful concepts and topics with more acceptable ones, and this is because speakers pay attention to the addressees' feelings (Crespo Fernández, 2014). Actor description refers to the titles and roles of the addressees and the way they are addressed in a speech such as 'us' vs. 'them' (KhosraviNik, 2010).

In relation to burden, it is used by speakers to make the audience understand that they are entitled to bear responsibility of the issue being talked about. Burden ensures and grants the principles which are reflected in arguments, and it depends on self-evidence (Dhayef and Hassan, 2022). Another strategy is modality which refers to the different meanings that modal verbs have, depending on the situation or the context. Repetition is repeating a word, a phrase, a sentence, or an idea for emphasis, which, in turn, affects persuasion. Regarding numbers, they are used to emphasize the topic as they are facts and statistics which are reliable, so they must be more convincing than opinions and impressions (ibid).

2.2. Persuasive language

Persuasion, or the art of rhetoric, is a phenomenon that primarily aims at impacting people's behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes using language (Awaad, 2016). It was argued that informative messages are only intended to inform the audience, not to affect their responses, unlike persuasive speeches that mainly aim at changing people's attitudes and behavior (Stiff and Mongeau, 2016). Attitudes have been the focus of many theories that study persuasive communication (ibid). They are a mental state of readiness that is organized by experience and influences individuals' responses (ibid).

It is argued that leaders use persuasive strategies to reflect power and the "various political structures of powers" (Dhayef and Hassan, 2022, p. 466), so that they can persuade people and the community to follow their opinions and policies (Duranti, 2006). Such persuading speeches are delivered to make policies more convincing, trusted, and accepted (Dhayef and Hassan, 2022). Here, Koch (2017) proposes that frequent exposure to persuasive communication is used to enhance and emphasize the message intended of the speech or the discourse and that would result in provoking audiences' behaviors to change and have similar effects.

In this study, the main focus of defense orders is to issue policies and rules that will affect the public's attitudes and behaviors, so these orders must be persuasive and convincing to be effective. This study will explore the persuasive strategies used in the defense orders issued for the Jordanian people, so they follow and abide by the rules in order to combat the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.3. Previous studies

Many studies were conducted on persuasive strategies used in various discourses, both written and spoken. For example, Rabab'ah and Khawaldeh (2016) analyzed six Arabic and English TV advertisements to explore the persuasive appeals used in marketing electronics. The advertisements were selected from YouTube. Results of the study showed that the persuasive strategies that are used the most are emotional and rational appeals, playing on words, and using implicit information. The results also showed that Arabic advertisements used more persuasive strategies than the English ones, due to cultural differences.

Persuasive strategies in the political domain are extensively researched. One of the studies are carried out by Rezaei and Nourali (2016) who focused on speech-making skills and the use of persuasive techniques such as metaphors, similes, repetition, parallelism, alliteration, and wordplay in two speeches delivered by the Iranian President Mr. Rouhani and U. S. President Mr. Obama. The results revealed that both presidents used the same techniques, but metaphors were used more by Obama and alliterations were used more by Rouhani, and both techniques were culturally bound. The study concludes that people who listen to the speeches need to have enough knowledge of metaphor to be able to understand.

Based on the idea that language does not only describe things and convey information but also does things and influence actions, Marie and Zibin (2020) analyzed the persuasive speech acts used by six female Arab influencers on Instagram to investigate what persuasive strategies they use to persuade followers buy products, compared with face-to-face marketing. The study developed a corpus that includes the posts shared on Instagram in which the six influencers were marketing a certain product, including some pragmatic information such as the accompanying words and/or expressions. The results of the study found that assertives were the most commonly used speech act, followed by directives, and then by expressives, commissives, and quotations, respectively. The results also found that influencers used similar assertive speech acts, but the difference lies in their references.

Another study is conducted by Khajavi and Rasti (2020) who investigated the ways two political candidate presidents, namely Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, presented themselves in the 2012 election campaign speeches to attract the audiences' attention. Relying on CDA, thirty speeches were analyzed, where common strategies such as others' negative representation, positive self-representation, persuasion, legitimization, delegitimization are identified. The results showed that Obama was more successful in delivering his message using rhetorical devices as he focused on the myth of the "American dream", but Romney used the others' negative representation strategy most often. Results also showed that metaphors were extensively used in addition to indirect strategies that would influence voters' decision. In addition, special words or ideas were repeatedly addressed to be emphasized and attract people's attention.

In addition, A'raf and Rashid (2022) analyzed two speeches delivered by David Cameron, the British Prime Minister and Barack Obama the president of United States focusing on the persuasive strategies implemented there which are proposed by van Dijk (1982), (1991), and (2000) and Thomas et al. (2004). The results revealed that both presidents used linguistic and literary strategies, and using metaphors is the most common strategy used by both presidents. From Thomas et al.'s strategies, the three-part list strategy, which combines the identities that are equal in importance, is the most used. The study is concluded by stating that presidents use persuasive strategies to convey their messages and promote their ideas effectively. This impacts their audience, changes their attitudes and behaviors, and trust their political systems and ideologies.

Despite the large amount of literature available on persuasive strategies, the most focused on political speeches, and there is a scarcity in the studies that tackle orders directed by governmental authorities to the public. So, this study aims to examine the persuasive strategies implemented in defense orders which were issued to the Jordanian people in a critical situation, i.e., the Covid-19 pandemic, where breaching such orders will put the whole society into risk. So, such orders need to be persuasive and convincing in order to be followed. The next section clarifies the adopted method.

3. Method

This study adopted van Dijk's (2000) framework to analyze the defense orders from No. 16 to No. 31 issued by the Jordanian Government and the press conferences held during the era of the Covid-19 pandemic and explore the persuasive strategies implemented there. Press conferences were uploaded to the Roya News channel on YouTube, and the researcher

watched them and took notes. Regarding defense orders, they were issued between September 17, 2020, and June 30, 2021, and their transcription was found on the official website of the Public Security Directorate. These defense orders were chosen in particular because the first 15 orders concerned different themes and focused on different ideas. They were issued in the period in which Covid-19 was newly spreading. However, the defense orders from 16 to 31 focused on more detailed topics because, by then, the situation was not new anymore and new details and firm procedures must be imposed to control the situation and combat the pandemic. For example, in the orders that will be studied in the current study, details concern some issues related to exemptions, lockdown, curfew, work of entities, courts, restaurants, and cafes, and new social security programs, in addition to penalties because people did not adhere to the rules imposed by the government and decision-makers. The researcher read the defense orders and watched the conferences carefully and searched for the words and phrases that are used to persuade the public to follow the provisions and procedures set out therein. The following section discusses the data analysis process and the results obtained.

4. Data analysis and discussion

After data were collected, the extracted words and phrases were classified according to the categories provided by van Dijk's model discussed above. Charts 1 and 2 below show the frequency of each category and the most used persuasive strategy in defense orders and press conferences.

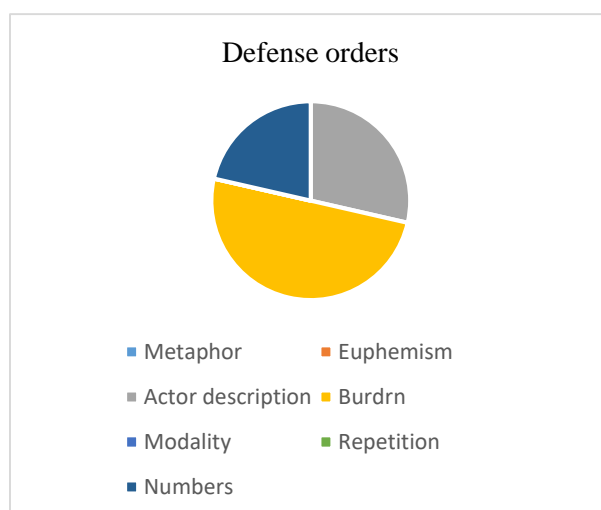


Chart 1: Frequency of persuasive strategies in defense orders



Chart 2: Frequency of persuasive strategies in press conferences

As can be noted from both charts above, press conferences used more persuasive strategies, compared to defense orders. The most used strategy in defense orders is burden, and in press conferences, it is numbers. Due to word limitation, few examples are discussed in detail. The first is extracted from Defense order no. 13, where the Prime Minister says, “Based on the increased number of Covid-19 cases, and because many gatherings are illegal and unexplainable which threatens the citizen’s lives, I decided to issue this defense order”. This bears the responsibility on the public who unnecessarily gathered and made the situation worse, and thus, new and more restricted provisions and procedures were imposed. In general, since people did not follow the orders, the government imposed tighter restrictions every time because people were not responsible enough. For example, the partial curfew became a full lockdown because the public carried the greatest burden of responsibility.

The numbers mentioned in the defense orders mainly concern the amounts of fines imposed and the dates when some rules or orders were issued or adjusted. However, in the press conferences, the number of the cases tested positive with Covid and the number of the people who passed away because of Covid was mentioned every day, and this is one of the persuasive functions of such number because it is an indication that the virus was still widely spreading, so people have to follow the rules to combat this pandemic. The number of cases and the death count caused fear among people as they were increasing in the beginning, and this made them more convinced to abide by the orders issued by the government.

One of the most popular examples mentioned by Saad Jaber, the Minister of Health, in one of the press conferences is that “Coronavirus will dry out and die” (Roya News, 2020). Here, the virus is seen as a living creature that cannot live in high temperatures (Younes and Altakhaine, 2022). This metaphor was said by him to convince people that they are asked to stay home for a two-week period so the virus will dry and die alone. The Covid-19 pandemic was also described as a challenge. Another metaphor was mentioned by the Minister of Finance who said that “Coronavirus is the worst global economic crisis” (ibid). So, although the Covid-19 pandemic is a health issue, the minister here considered it an economic crisis that had very bad effects on the Jordanian economy. Using this metaphor was for the purpose of persuading people that this pandemic is very serious and critical as it puts the Jordanian economy at risk. This goes in line with Rezaei and Nourali (2016) who stated that people need to have the cultural knowledge to understand metaphors.

Regarding modality, in defense orders, the passive voice was mainly used to set out the rules, but in press conferences, the most used modal verb is “will,” which indicates certainty and confirmation. In other words, if the officials used modal verbs such as “may” and “can,” they will indicate uncertainty and hesitation, which will make people distrust the government and feel that it is not well prepared to face such a challenge. For example, ministers used phrases like “We will do/implement/issue/ etc.” (ibid).

The actor description strategy was mainly used in both defense orders and press conferences by mentioning the roles or positions of the people involved in the rule or article stipulated in the defense order. For example, the roles mentioned include entity's Owners, judges of different levels, drivers, different ministers, service providers, and farmers, among others. Moreover, officials were calling people using intimate descriptions such as “our people” and “our brothers.” This may be considered a persuasive strategy as they will feel included and directly addressed.

Repetition was extensively used in press conferences. For example, officials were repeating what the government issued in the morning. In addition, some restrictions were imposed for later stages as people did not abide by the new rules, and the government wanted to continue applying the rule for a longer period of time. Thus, some rules and orders in press conferences were repeated and emphasized to ensure that people are convinced and will start applying. This goes in agreement with Koch (2017) who proposed that by repetition, the audience is provoked to follow what was constantly repeated to them and what they were ordered to do.

Furthermore, officials in press conferences focused on using pronouns such as ‘we’ and ‘our’ to indicate that we all in the same page. They, for instance, concluded every conference saying that “May God protect *our* Jordan” (Roya News, 2020), and the Minister of Media used phrases such as “We *all* need to collaborate” and “We have to show patriotism, solidarity, patience, and positivity” (ibid.) which make people feel that they all are one unit. It was very much repeated that all procedures established by the government are for the favor of the public and the families, and the procedures themselves

are repeatedly mentioned in the same conference to achieve emphasis and assurance.

It is worth noting that the body language and voice tones used by government officials were remarkable and effective. They can be considered non-linguistic persuasive strategies. Government officials sometimes looked worried, sad, and anxious, especially when they were about to tell bad news or a big number of deaths and positive cases. The way they were looking at the cameras delivered the message that people are not doing what they are expected to do, which makes the situation worse and harder to handle. Furthermore, officials sometimes were reprimanding and reproaching the public for some behaviors done by them. For example, they said more than once that they, unfortunately, heard some rumors which is something that is unexpected from Jordanians, and that they bet on the awareness of their people. This agrees with A'raf and Rashid (2022) who demonstrate that persuasive strategies are used to convey and deliver messages in a convincing effective way. Government officials were also wearing their face masks to be a role model to the public watching them. All of this affected how people responded to that critical situation.

At the beginning of that unprecedented situation, people were surprised and worried about everything surrounding them. They did not take things seriously and thus, did not follow the new rules imposed in defense orders. For example, they did not stay home during the curfew and kept on meeting and holding wedding parties, even though they were restricted. However, press conferences completed what defense orders had started, i.e., they explained and justified the orders in simpler ways. In addition, the number of positive cases and deaths mentioned in the conferences was an indication of how defense orders impacted the behaviors of the public, whether positively or negatively. In other words, if they abided by the orders, the number of cases and deaths would be less than the case if they did not.

5. Conclusion

This study mainly aimed to investigate the persuasive strategies used in defense orders and press conferences. Both defense orders and press conferences complemented each other. That is, the news shared in the press conferences is an indication of the extent to which people were persuaded, followed the orders, and abided by them. In other words, they worked as an indicator of the extent that the government worked hard on persuading the public to adhere to the orders issued by it to save the lives of themselves and others.

In comparison with press conferences, where intimate and simple language was used, defense orders demonstrated intimidation, were very direct and tough and used straight-to-the-point language. Nearly no persuasive strategies were used in defense orders as they took the shape of a list of orders that people must follow, or they will be sanctioned. On the other hand, press conferences were closer to the public, and officials were initiating talks with them that were similar to conversations, so more persuasive strategies were used. The most persuasive strategies used in press conferences are repetition and numbers, as they were an indication of how the case is being worse and that people need to abide by the rules. Metaphors, for example, were used in press conferences, but not in defense orders, because the latter is more formal and direct, and metaphors have cultural aspects and are less formal.

Findings also revealed that the body language used by government officials was very expressive and reflective. They showed that they are very disappointed by what people have been doing so far. This body language can be further studied in future research. In a nutshell, the situation of Covid-19 in Jordan, in the beginning, was bad and people did not immediately adhere to the rules, but with repetition, persuasion, and consistency, their behaviors started to change accordingly, and the case started to get better. In this regard, this study recommends that the government, and especially the media, shall pay more attention to the persuasive strategies used in the discourse delivered before its audience when it faces another crisis or difficulty in the future. In addition, it recommends that official government speakers who usually deliver public speeches shall be trained on how to persuade the public and what strategies they need to use in order to achieve their objective.

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