

Year: 2022

Volume: 12

Issue: 1

Journal of Current Researches
on Health Sector
(J o C R e H e S)
www.jocrehes.com
ISSN: 2547-9636



Research Article

 Crossref doi: 10.26579/jocrehes.12.1.1

A Variant of Concern, not a Variant of Panic: A Critical Discourse Analysis of WHO Director – General’s Remarks on Omicron

Ali Haif ABBAS¹

Keywords

Omicron, critical discourse analysis, hortatory texts.

Abstract

Omicron, the new COVID-19 variant, is identified as a variant of concern according to the World Health Organization (WHO). This paper presents a study in the representation of Omicron variant in the WHO director general’s remarks. The study aims to show how such representation can effectively contribute to the war against the pandemic. In order to achieve the aim, Fariclough’s (2001) framework and Longacre’s (1992) components of hortatory texts are used for the critical discourse analysis of WHO director general’s remarks on omicron. Based on data analysis, the results showed that the director general remarks on omicron contain a great amount of power in which the world can fight the variant. The remarks are presented clearly and simply to the public starting with establishing authority, presenting the problem and solutions, issuing commands and then resorting to motivations. The director general illustrates that the world possesses powerful tools to fight the virus. Such remarks can help in the war against the pandemic, raise people’s awareness, and uncover governments’ negative and weak preparations and responses.

Article History

Received
1 Mar, 2022
Accepted
30 Apr, 2022

1. Introduction

South Africa identified a new SARS-CoV-2 variant, namely B.1.1.529 on November 24, 2021 to WHO. WHO named the variant after Greek letters to avoid the public confusion and stigmatization of nations (Patel, 2021). The variant was first detected in specimens collected on 11 Nov, 2021 in Botswana and on 14 Nov, 2021 in South Africa. Since then, the Omicron variant has been detected in travel related cases in several European countries as well as Australia, Brazil, Canada, United States, Hong Kong, Japan, Israel, Nigeria, Norway, Sweden, and UK (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

On the basis of advice from WHO’s Technical Advisory Group on Virus Evolution, WHO declared that the variant B.1.1.529 is a variant of concern. According to WHO, Omicron is a highly divergent variant with high number of mutations including 26-32 mutations in the spike. These new mutations are concerning and may be associated with increasing transmissibility and immune escape potential. WHO then mentions uncertainties regarding the new variant: first to what extent is

¹ Corresponding Author. ORCID: 0000-0003-1408-3436. Wasit University, Iraq, ahaif@uowasit.edu.iq

omicron is transmissible and whether such increases are related to immune escape, intrinsic increased transmissibility, or both. Second, whether vaccines are active against omicron or not. Third, does the variant present with a different severity profile? (WHO, 2021).

The initial cases of omicron suggest that the variant may be associated with higher transmissible abilities than the Delta. The probability of omicron spread in different countries is assessed high to very high. The currently available evidence regarding the risks of the variant raises serious concern indicating that the variant may be associated with significant vaccines reduction and high risk for reinfections (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2021).

WHO director General, namely Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stresses that omicron is spreading faster than other previous variants of COVID-19. Tedros also emphasizes that vaccines alone cannot protect against omicron. In other words, the world should adopt other useful strategies together to limit and control the spread of the variant such as masks, hand hygiene, social distancing along with vaccines (Kimball, 2021).

Omicron is raising concerns and spreading faster in the planet. This paper aims to show how WHO Director General represents omicron crisis and expresses his fears from the variant on one hand and hopes for controlling and preventing the contagion on the other. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) has the best tools of analysis and served as a powerful theoretical framework to study WHO Director General's speeches on the new COVID-19 variant as Fairclough (1995) puts it:

By CDA I mean discourse analysis which aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes: to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power, and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony (132).

Discourse analysis does not only enable us to approach a problem and think about it, but also it can provide answers and solutions to the problem based on scientific research and critical theories of discourse. CDA purpose is to make the connections and relations between discourse practices, social practices, and social structures transparent and clear which might be vague to lay people. One of the main principles that CDA is addressing is that CDA addresses social problems. CDA focuses on language, language use, and the linguistic characteristics of social and cultural processes. CDA critically deals with social problems making power relationships explicit which are frequently hidden. CDA is then a type of discourse analytical research which primarily focuses on the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in social and political context (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Sheyholislami, 2001; Van Dijk, 2004; Hamuddin, 2012).

CDA job then is to show instances of ideologies, beliefs, sensitive issues, and social and political problems to the public. Such instances cannot be discovered by

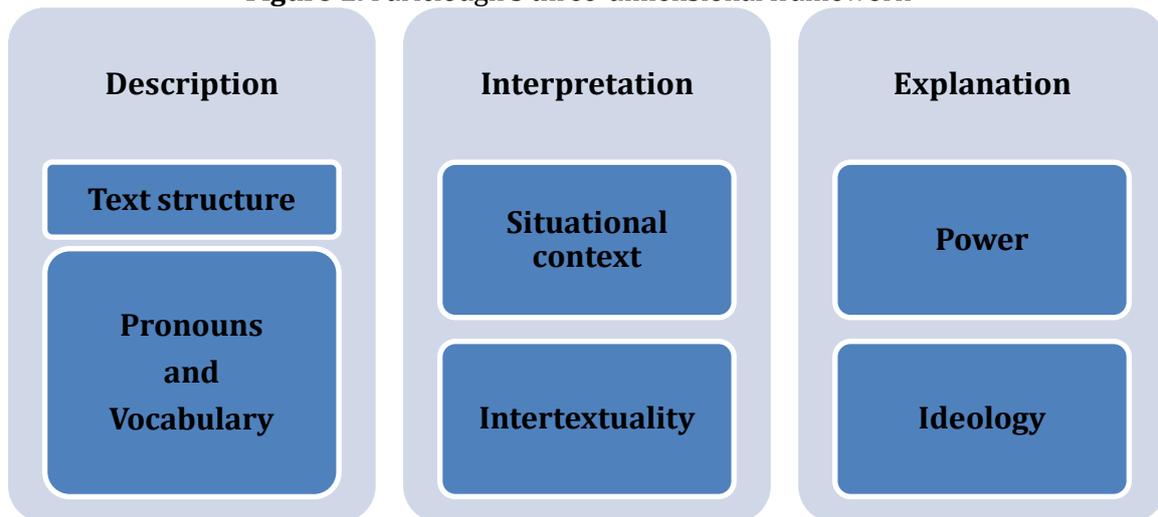
people; therefore, CDA equips them with useful critical awareness (Batstone, 1995; Hart, 2010). This paper uses tools of CDA for the analysis of Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus's speeches on omicron. CDA is a good analytical framework that can be used to analyse WHO director general remarks on the new COVID-19 variant namely, omicron.

2. Method

The selected data consist of two remarks related to WHO Director General namely, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on omicron. The remarks are taken from WHO main websites. The first remark was spoken by Tedros at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 8 - December, 2021. The second remark was spoken by the director at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 14 December, 2021. The selected remarks are analysed according to Fairclough's (2001) three dimensional framework and Longacre's (1992) components of hortatory texts.

In terms of Fairclough (2001), the analytical framework is divided into three main stages. They are namely, description, interpretation, and explanation. The description stage is branched into three sub-divisions namely, text structure, pronouns, vocabulary. Text structure is concerned with the arrangements and the contextual details of the text in terms of introduction, body, and conclusion. Pronouns are crucial in showing elements of solidarity, togetherness, and unity towards a sensitive issue or a problem. Vocabulary is crucial in showing the denotative (dictionary or the literal meaning) and the connotative meaning (the non-literal or metaphorical meaning) of certain lexical items. The interpretation stage consists of two components namely, situational context and intertextuality. The former is concerned with the time, place, and the environment of discourse. It also concerned with the speaker and the addressed audience, the involved actors, the relationship between them, and what the whole event is about. In terms of intertextuality, a text is an already made dictionary and an imitation of an already existed gesture. A new text is based solely on other previous texts. Intertextuality is similar to a plagiarism. Speakers and writers steal even if they do not know that they are stealing (Hussein, 2013). Their texts are always shaped by other texts either by quoting them directly or indirectly. Explanation stage is concerned with power and ideology. This stage questions whether the text contains power relations, authority, and powerful language and also whether the text contains hidden ideologies and questions whether such hidden ideologies are useful for certain societies or not.

Figure 1. Fariclough’s three-dimensional framework

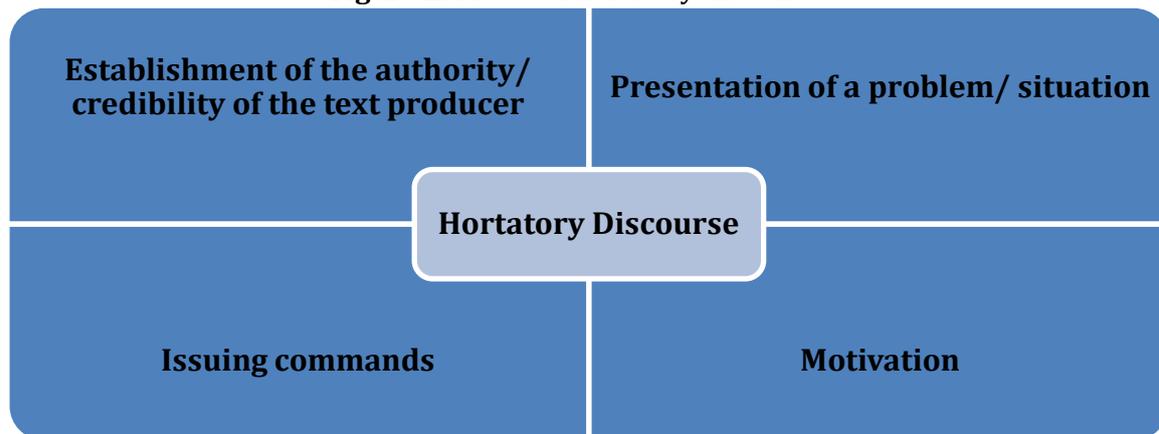


The word 'hortatory' is an act of exhorting. It is a language that is intended to incite and encourage. Hortatory discourse is used to incite, urge strongly, give warnings, advice, commands, suggestions, motivations, and make urgent appeals. According to Longacre (1992), hortatory discourse:

aims at influencing conduct that is, getting the receivers of the text to do something they are not currently doing, to discontinue something they are doing, to continue doing something they are already doing, to expend greater effort in an activity embarked on, to modify the nature of their efforts, and so on (p. 109)

A hortatory discourse contains four basic moves. They are: (1) establishment of the authority/ credibility of the text producer; (2) presentation of a problem/ situation; (3) issuing commands and urgent suggestions; and (4) resort to motivation. Hortatory texts are solely based on commands and suggestions. But presentation of a problem is important in hortatory texts. It is the problem which evokes commands and suggestions. The problem pushes hortatory texts to issuing commands and suggestions to solve the problem. Hortatory discourse is also not free from motivation. All of these moves imply the first move namely, establishment of the authority/ credibility of the text producer (Longacre, 1992; Cipriani, 2002).

Figure 2. Moves of hortatory discourse



Tedros' remarks on omicron are not free from the moves of hortatory discourse. In other words, the WHO director general discusses a problem (omicron) and attempts to find a solution by encouraging (motivating) the public to face, challenge, and overcome the problem through his orientation (commands and suggestions).

3. Data Analysis and Discussion

This section is concerned with the analysis of Tedros' remarks on omicron variant. The remarks are analyzed in terms of Fairclough's (2001) three-dimensional stages and Longacre's (1992) four moves of hortatory discourse.

Tedros starts his remarks with three salute expressions namely, good morning, good afternoon, and good evening. It is not just a salute to the audience at the media briefing; instead it is a salute to the whole world. During Tedros' speech, people in our planet have different times. Some people have morning; others have afternoon, while some others have evening. This indicates that Tedros is addressing the whole world and what is going to say is important.

After the intertextual salute, Tedros opens his two remarks with the presentation of the problem. Omicron, the new COVID-19 variant, is the problem which according to Tedros, we all need to take part to solve it. Omicron is represented as a powerful variant that is spreading quickly in the world. Tedros uses the progressive aspect to illustrate the fact that the variant number of cases and spread are in continuous increase (*The Omicron variant has now been reported in 57 countries, In South Africa, the number of Omicron cases is increasing quickly. Omicron is spreading at a rate we have not seen with any previous variant*). Large entity quantifiers and intensifying adjectives such as *a large number of mutations, a major impact, rapid increase in transmission, increasing quickly, the sheer number of cases, overwhelm unprepared health systems* are used to show the risk posed by omicron on the entire planet. In addition to this, the use of these powerful lexical items is to clearly present the problem that the world is facing. In both remarks, Tedros devotes the introduction to the presentation of omicron variant as the main problem.

After the presentation of the problem, Tedros skillfully used the other two moves of hortatory discourse namely, commands and motivation. Definitely, the problem

needs a solution. In case of omicron variant, such a problem needs several common solutions. Tedros solutions are not free from motivations. Motivations are not free from issuing commands and suggestions. In terms of text structure, the body of both remarks is full of commands and suggestions for solving the problem. Tedros' discourse on omicron has the basic elements of a good narrative. It has orientation as in (*The Omicron variant has now been reported in 57 countries. In South Africa, the number of Omicron cases is increasing quickly. 77 countries have now reported cases of Omicron, and the reality is that Omicron is probably in most countries, even if it hasn't been detected yet*). Tedros obviously refers to the position of omicron (in South Africa) and its rapid spread from 57 countries to 77 countries. The adverb "now" is used to refer to the length of time that omicron has been happening; from the time it began until the present. This also implies that the future might be even worse. Characterization is also another important feature of a good narrative. Tedros mentions many important organizations and experts that are working day and night to find more information and solutions that can help stop the risks of the new COVID-19 variant. Consider these quotations which are taken from both remarks:

1. *Every day, WHO is convening thousands of experts around the world to share and analyse data and drive research forward.*
2. *The Technical Advisory Group for Virus Evolution is assessing Omicron's effect on transmission, disease severity, vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics.*
3. *The Joint Advisory Group on COVID-19 Therapeutics Prioritization is analyzing the possible effects of Omicron on treatment of hospitalized patients.*
4. *The R&D Blueprint for Epidemics is convening researchers to identify knowledge gaps.*
5. *Technical Advisory Group for COVID-19 Vaccine Composition is assessing impacts of Omicron on current vaccines and determining whether changes to vaccines are needed.*
6. *I thank the scientists in South Africa who have been working closely with WHO to help us learn more about Omicron.*
7. *In the past 10 weeks, COVAX has shipped more vaccines than in the first 9 months of the year combined.*
8. *WHO and our partners are working closely with those countries to overcome bottlenecks.*
9. *WHO is concerned that such programmes will repeat the vaccine hoarding we saw this year, and exacerbate inequity.*
10. *WHO is not against boosters. We're against inequity. Our main concern is to save lives, everywhere.*

The aforementioned quotations are taken from both of Tedros remarks on omicron. Through these quotations and more, one can clearly see the characterization element and its crucial role in solving omicron problem. Tedros presents organizations such as *WHO, The Technical Advisory Group for Virus Evolution, The Joint Advisory Group on COVID-19 Therapeutics Prioritization, The*

*R&D Blueprint for Epidemics, Technical Advisory Group for COVID-19 Vaccine and Composition, scientists in South Africa, and COVAX as positive and good powerful agents of solving problems and spreading hopes and optimism. The progressive aspect, in verbs such as *convening, assessing, analyzing, determining, and working*, is strongly used to show the public the continuous work of science, scientists, and WHO to find immediate solutions for COVID-19 and its new variant. The scientific organizations along with the repeated word “WHO” are used to demonstrate for the public the first move of hortatory discourse namely, the establishment of authority and credibility of the text producer. The word “WHO” is repeated 7 times in the remarks. This shows the establishment and the role of WHO in containing and solving the problem. Mentioning scientific organizations along with WHO reinforces Tedros’ credibility. Omicron is a disease. Science is the best tool that can deal with this disease. This is how one can be believed and trusted when talking about diseases. Consequences, complex clauses, subordinating and coordinating clauses are also used to highlight the complex and ambiguous nature of omicron variant as in (*We are now starting to see a consistent picture of rapid increase in transmission, although for now the exact rate of increase relative to other variants remains difficult to quantify. Emerging data from South Africa suggest increased risk of re-infection with Omicron, but more data are needed to draw firmer conclusions*). Suggestions are another useful element of a good hortatory discourse. Tedros’ remarks are full of suggestions and plans against omicron. Suggestions are one of the best ways of motivation and problem solving, especially when the suggestion is used in a cause-effect complex clause as in (*To help us build a clearer picture of the severity and symptoms of disease caused by Omicron, we are calling for more countries to submit more data to our Clinical Data Platform, using an updated case reporting form available on our website*). Unity and togetherness are also another effective suggestion for facing omicron in Tedros’ remarks as in (*Together, we will save the most lives by making sure health workers, older people and other at-risk groups receive their primary doses of vaccines*).*

Issuing command is another crucial hortatory move in discourse. Tedros remarks are full of commands. All of these commands are used skillfully as part of the solutions of omicron problem. Powerful imperative verbs are used to direct and instruct the public about how to deal with and fight the pandemic. In Tedros’ remarks, we are in a war with a new variant of a dangerous disease. Therefore, we should know everything about this enemy starting from its strength, weaknesses to our plans and defenses. War metaphor is clearly and strongly used in Tedros’ discourse on omicron. In fact, we are currently in a war with a dangerous enemy. Imperative is an adjective relating or constituting the grammatical mood that expresses the will to impact the behaviour of others. Tedros’ attempt to influence the public is not ideological or political; instead it is positive and good working against the pandemic and for the sake of our lives and health. Consider the following commands used with strong language and stress to highlight the fact that the pandemic is a deadly disease that we all must work together to fight it:

11. *We call on all countries to increase surveillance, testing and sequencing.*
12. *Any complacency now will cost lives.*
13. *Don’t wait. Act now.*

14. *Every government and every individual – must use all the tools we have, right now.*

15. *All governments should reassess and revise their national plans.*

16. *Accelerate vaccine coverage in the most at-risk populations, in all countries.*

17. *Intensify efforts to drive transmission down, and keep it down, with a tailored mix of public health measures.*

18. *Scale up surveillance, testing and sequencing, and share samples with the international community.*

19. *Avoid ineffective and discriminatory travel bans.*

20. *Do it all. Do it consistently. Do it well.*

The commands in the aforementioned sentences are used to strongly influence, direct, instruct, and invite all the people to take part in this war against the pandemic. Aristotelian ethos is used skillfully by Tedros to show his establishment of authority, credibility, and motivation towards the audience making his narrative on omicron more hopeful, persuasive, and encouraging.

21. *It's not vaccines instead of masks.*

22. *It's not vaccines instead of distancing.*

23. *It's not vaccines instead of ventilation or hand hygiene.*

24. *Do it all. Do it consistently. Do it well.*

The aforementioned repetitions are used to emphasize the fact that vaccines alone cannot help fight the pandemic. The repetitions also emphasize the fact that health awareness and unity along with science are the best tools that can fight the disease. Tedros uses both exclusive 'we' and inclusive 'we' in the two remarks. When Tedros speaks about scientific solutions, he uses exclusive 'we' as in *we are calling for more countries to submit more data, we call on all countries to increase surveillance*. Notice how Tedros establishes authority to science and WHO. Other people are excluded. Inclusive 'we' is also used to refer to people generally as in *we can save lives from Delta, right now; We can prevent Omicron becoming a global crisis, right now; And we can prevent other variants emerging, right now*. Notice the way the inclusive 'we' is followed by the modal verb of ability stressing the need for unity and togetherness against the pandemic. There is a clear invitation for all to work together unified with one aim: to save lives and prevent omicron. Powerful vocabulary is used to describe and define the variant. This indicates that the variant is not an easy problem.

Ideology and power are in fact not hidden in Tedros' remarks. Ideology and power which are used by Tedros are not similar to those of politicians or media. In fact, ideology and power cannot be expressed without discourse. Ideology is a set of beliefs imposed by the speaker on the audience addressing a problem or a sensitive global issue. Tedros talks about a global problem. It is a pandemic, a disease that is killing millions and threatening millions of people all around our entire planet. His ideologies, beliefs, and power are all used against this disease. They are positive ideologies working for the sake of our lives.

4. Conclusions

COVID-19 is one of coronaviruses. Coronaviruses are a family of viruses which have the ability to develop itself and mutate to other risky variants. COVID-19 is a global problem facing the whole world. The disease has sickened hundreds of millions and millions have died. What is more catastrophic is that the virus is mutating and developing into other variants of concerns such as Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, and Omicron. Omicron is the later variant of COVID-19. It is described as a variant of concerns due to its high number of mutations in the spike and immune potentials.

Such diseases which are able to rapidly mutate, develop, and transform need urgent responses. They need good health systems, good training white armies, medical supplies, and health awareness. In addition to these, such diseases need good discourse, and more specifically good hortatory discourse. Tedros' discourse is hortatory in nature. It is full of encouragements, motivations, contextual details of the problem and solutions to the problem, powerful vocabulary, characterization, consequences, establishment of authority and credibility, unity, solidarity, and togetherness. All of these used hortatory moves and stages of discourse are skillfully employed in Tedros' remarks on omicron. Intertextuality is used widely in both remarks. Even the salute expressions are intertextual. Tedros copied the salute expressions of the first remark and paste it in the second. Intertextuality is not only used in the salute expressions, but also it is used in the representation of the problem of omicron variant, its mutations, and vagueness. Tedros starts both remarks with the representation of the problem, and then he shifts to the solutions of the problem through issuing commands, motivations, establishing authority and credibility. Intertextuality is used in all of these moves and stages of discourse. In other words, Tedros mentioned the same problem, the same motivations, commands, solutions, encouragements, and elements of persuasion. The only difference is that the second remark is a paraphrase of the first one.

Tedros' remarks are also not free from ideology and power. A set of beliefs and suggestions are used in both remarks. All of beliefs, suggestions, and ideas used in the remarks are ideological. But Tedros' ideologies are not against certain group or religion or creed. They are positive ideologies working for the safety and health of all humanities. They are not political ideologies. They are health and medical ideologies. Their purpose is to save lives. Ideology of equity is also used in Tedros' remarks. Tedros politely criticizes the countries that gave vaccine boosters or additional dosage to their people stressing the fact that equity should be fulfilled in other poor countries (*WHO is not against boosters. We're against inequity. Our main concern is to save lives, everywhere*). In terms of power, both remarks are powerful full of commands, complex clauses, characterization, and consequences. Since omicron is a powerful disease, the discourse that is addressing it must also be powerful.

References

- Batstone, R. (1995). Grammar in Discourse: Attitude and Deniability. In G. Cook and B. Seidlhover (eds.), *Principle and Practice in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2021). Science Brief: Omicron (B.1.1.529) Variant. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/science/science-briefs/scientific-brief-omicron-variant.html>
- Cipriani, A. C. (2002). Power in Religious Discourse: A discourse analysis of two sermons from the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. Unpublished Thesis. Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina.
- European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. (2021). Implications of the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 B.1.1.529 variant of concern (Omicron) for the EU/EEA – first update. 2 December 2021. ECDC: Stockholm.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London: Longman.
- Fairclough, N. & Wodak, R. (1997). Critical Discourse Analysis. In *Discourse as Social Interaction*, Teun van Dijk, ed. London: Sage. 258-84.
- Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and power*. 2nd Edition. New York: Longman.
- Hamuddin, B. (2012). A comparative study of politeness strategies in economic journals Doctoral dissertation, University of Malaya.
- Hart, C. (2010). *Critical Discourse Analysis and Cognitive Science: New Perspectives on Immigration Discourse*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hussein, A. E. (2013). Intertextuality and literary translation from Arabic to English. Unpublished MA thesis. An-Najah National University, Palestine.
- Kimball, S. (2021). Omicron is spreading faster than any other Covid variant, WHO warns. Available at <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/14/who-says-omicron-is-spreading-at-a-rate-not-seen-with-any-other-covid-variant.html>
- Longacre, R. E. (1992). The discourse strategy on an appeals letter. In W. C. Mann, & S. E. Thompson. (Eds.), *Discourse description: Diverse linguistic analysis of a fundraising text*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Patel, V. (2021). How Omicron, the New Covid-19 Variant, Got its Name. Available at <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.nytimes.com/2021/11/27/world/africa/omicron-covid-greek-alphabet.amp.html>
- Sheyholislami, J. (2001). Critical Discourse Analysis, Excerpts from the MA Thesis, September 2001, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada: Yesterday's "separatists" are today's "resistance fighters": A Critical Discourse Analysis of the representation of Iraqi Kurds in The Globe and Mail and The New York Times.

Van Dijk, T. (2004). Critical Discourse Analysis. In D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, H.E. Hamilton (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis*, Blackwell, Oxford, UK, pp. 352-371.

WHO. (2021). Enhancing Readiness for Omicron (B.1.1.529): Technical Brief and Priority Actions for Member States. Available at https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/2021-12-23-global-technical-brief-and-priority-action-on-omicron.pdf?sfvrsn=d0e9fb6c_8

Tedros' Remarks Websites

WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 8 December 2021. <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---8-december-2021>

WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 14 December 2021. <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---14-december-2021>

© Copyright of Journal of Current Researches on Health Sector is the property of Strategic Research Academy and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.