

# Transgressing Maxims of Politeness: Effects of Combative Language Used during Covid-19 Televised Updates in Kenya

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## Abstract

*Anchored on critical discourse analysis theory, this paper interrogates language used by Health Cabinet Secretary, Mutahi Kagwe and President Uhuru Kenyatta during the televised Covid-19 updates. It examines how the transgression of maxims of politeness in the daily updates resulted in linguistic impoliteness and further impacted the war against the pandemic across the country. Data for analysis and interpretation was obtained from purposively sampled televised daily updates from March 2020 to August 2020. To augment the data, social media postings and internet memes by Kenyans during this period were sampled and analysed. The paper demonstrates that the nature of language used during the televised updates prejudiced the fight against COVID-19 in the country, invariably impelled the public to shun COVID-19 recoveries, stimulated the victimization of families and relatives of the recoveries, and bred the public reluctance to voluntarily participate in mass testing and later, inoculation against COVID-19. The paper recommends that during pandemics, it is incumbent upon authorities, and necessarily so, to judiciously use gracious language for effective public health communication.*

**Key words:** *Transgressing, combat, contestation, maxims, health communication and government communication.*

## 1.0 Introduction

Government communication during a national catastrophe, such as the Covid 19 pandemic is a challenging task that demands the balance of professional communication skills and self-restraint. This is because public use of language during such communication and the ways in which it is interpreted potentially dictates the effectiveness of the communication and adherence to government regulations by citizens, such that the strategic use of language in itself becomes a constitutive part of governance. Government communication has been described as the oral, written and visual language used by, and on behalf of, government officeholders, directed at the general public or particular groups in society (Hanson 2018, p.349). It encompasses government produced “texts, talk and images that are made available to the public: news releases, social media postings, policy documents, televised speeches, broadcast interviews, advertisements, and so forth” (p. 350). Hanson further iterates that government communication is made through authorized government communicators whose role, revolves around the production, packaging and transmission of administrative

information aimed at, among other purposes, “giving advice and orders to people, for example, on how to submit annual tax returns, and how to behave in case of crises such as floods and pandemics” (p. 351). Based on this perspective, this paper reads the televised updates during the Covid 19 pandemic in Kenya as a form of government communication, whose purpose was to provide information on the pandemic and highlight containment measures to stem its spread. It also identifies Cabinet secretary Mutahi Kagwe and President Uhuru Kenyatta as key government communicators during the updates.

In line with communication guidelines<sup>1</sup> issued during the early stages of this pandemic by both the United Nations and the World Health Organization, the Kenyan government introduced the daily televised updates. As part of the global initiative to contain the pandemic, member states were required to ensure that they communicated intensively, constantly, and in an appropriate manner with their citizens. The updates were therefore directed at the general public and were broadcasted live on all major television channels and through the web. They generally followed the generic structure of government press conferences outlined by Bhatia (2006), that is; an opening and welcoming, presentation of a pre-planned speech, an interactional question-answer session and finally, closing.

As argued by Kumar (2003), government communication done through live updates and press conferences involves the delicate performances of politeness, meant to monitor the exercise and negotiation of power during all the phases of the communication, and, thereafter, influence the interpretation of this communique by the citizenry. Further, Wilcox et al underscore the importance of strategic communication during a public health crisis, arguing that during such outbreaks communicators must not only endeavour to provide accurate information, but also “identify and address the public’s concerns, recognize the public as a legitimate partner, anticipate hostility, respond to the needs of the news media, and always be honest” (p.300). This means that government communicators must ensure that they use linguistic strategies that are capable of conveying the communicative goals of their interaction with the public are met, especially during a public health crisis such as Covid 19. In view of this, our paper seeks to examine how instances of linguistic impoliteness by the communicators impacted on the communicative goals of the televised updates.

The analysis is based on the politeness frameworks suggested by Grice’s (1987) Cooperative Principle, Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Politeness Strategies and Culpeper Jonathan’s

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization. COVID-19 Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan Operational Planning Guidelines to Support

Country Preparedness. Available online: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3859863?ln=en>

Impoliteness principle. It is also anchored on critical discourse analysis theory that sees language as a form of social practice that informs ways in which social relations are (re) produced, contested, and social realities interpreted. Through an analysis of language use by the two government communicators, the paper aims to establish how flouting maxims of politeness in communication resulted in language that was combative, impolite and weaponized. Further, it demonstrates that the combative language used during the sampled daily briefs possibly bred public revolt against government measures to control the pandemic and later, contributed to the stigmatisation of infected persons and Kenyan youths by portraying them as voluntary Covid 19 super spreaders. This in turn led to the victimization and shunning of Covid 19 patients and their families in Kenya.

### **1.1 Politeness and Impoliteness**

The Politeness Principle is based on a set of politeness maxims (Leech, 1983) and politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987) that dictate linguistic politeness in conversational exchanges. Brown and Levinson's model of Politeness Strategies is based on the concept of face, fronted by Goffman (1967). They recognize that each individual "possesses a social face, a public self-image" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61) that is constantly negotiated and renegotiated in every conversation. They therefore posit that face is constantly threatened and can "be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (p. 61). Thus, when face is threatened, through face threatening acts (FTAs) participants in the conversation will engage certain strategies to minimize the face threats. These strategies are interpreted as politeness strategies that enhance the smoothness of a communicative event. Brown and Levinson argue that every individual in a society has two aspects of Goffmanian face, (pp. 17–18), one, positive face, (the desire to be socially appreciated and approved of), and, two, negative face, (the wish not to be imposed upon or impeded in their actions). Correlating to these two faces, there are two forms of politeness; positive politeness conveying the speaker's desire to attend to the audience's wants and desires and negative politeness which satisfies the negative face. Linguistic Politeness therefore attends to either the hearer's (or receiver's) positive face needs or negative face needs involves the use of words that mitigate the effects of FTAs.

Impoliteness on the other hand, as highlighted by Culpeper (2011) contrasts politeness and occurs when individuals continually engage in attacking face or aggravating the threats to the face(s) of others, rather than using politeness strategies to mitigate the threats to face. Based on the notion of impoliteness as a transgression and breach from the schematically expected norms of politeness (Mills, 2003), this paper examines impoliteness super strategies used

during the televised updates. It analyses how through these super strategies, language used during the updates transgressed certain maxims of politeness proposed by Leech (1983) and the effect of this transgression on the communicative function of the televised updates.

## **2.0 Methodology**

The findings of this paper are based on a qualitative approach and data for analysis was purposely selected from the Covid 19 updates that were aired live on Kenyan television and the web, between March and August 2020. For purposes of analysis, each televised update was divided into three segments. These segments were divided on the basis of Bhatia's (2006), postulations on the constituent sections of government press conferences, that is, the opening and welcoming, presentation of a pre-planned main speech and the question-answer session. We identified social media, specifically Facebook as one of the sites that provided data on the reception of the televised updates among Kenyans. We also examined news items from the national television networks that provided information on stigmatization of Covid 19 patients in both rural and urban Kenya. Finally, we compared the communicative behaviour of the Kenyan government communicators, displayed in the analysed updates with the internationally accepted principles of politeness in health and government communication, as prescribed in relevant professional literature, to come up with the conclusions in this study.

## **3.0 Findings and Discussions**

Within the months of January and February 2020, public information on the Covid 19 pandemic was scarce in Kenya, and was only available in short excerpts relating outbreaks in China and other parts of the world, during daily news briefs on mainstream media. However, in early March 2020, the Ministry of Health issued a circular, urging citizens to be vigilant and practice simple hygiene measures such as handwashing. Later, when the first patient was diagnosed on March 12<sup>th</sup> 2020, the Kenyan communication space was dominated by information about the pandemic, both from the public and the government. The findings on this paper are based on an analysis of the communicative aspect of The Ministry of Health updates as the Kenyan government's communiqué of the pandemic to its citizens, and how this impacted on government efforts to stem the spread of the virus. As earlier stated, the updates were examined in three segments, the opening and welcoming, presentation of main speech and the question answer session.

### **3.1 The Opening and Welcoming**

This session mainly consisted of greetings, welcoming remarks and introduction of Ministry of Health officials. The session was generally brief and well-coordinated. However, the televised updates often started hours later than they had been scheduled to. Hence, the main

impoliteness strategy noted during this session was withholding politeness, where the communicators did not apologize even after keeping their listeners waiting for hours.

### **3.2 Impoliteness Strategies in the Presentation of Main Speeches**

In an analysis of main speeches from the updates, we identified the following super strategies of impoliteness that were used by the communicators; bald on record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness and mock politeness.

#### **3.2.1 Bald on record impoliteness**

This involved the performance of Face Threatening Acts in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way, such that the audience's face appeared irrelevant or minimized. During the update on 5<sup>th</sup> May, Mr. Kagwe says;

When we start taking steps (clenching his fist)

For surely, we must... take steps.

When we start taking steps

Let not the same individuals (pointing a finger at the audience)

Start complaining, that eeh... You know....

The ministry of health is taking two steps forward and one step backwards...

If that is the case, (bangs on the table)

(Raises his voice) so be it

As has been argued by Tracy and Tracy (1998), impoliteness involves any communicative act that is perceived by members of a social community to be offensive. This means that impoliteness is not only manifested in words, but also through kinesics and paralinguistic elements. Further, as mentioned by Culpeper (2009:13), impoliteness “involves (a) an attitude comprised of negative evaluative beliefs about particular behaviours in particular social contexts, and (b) the activation of that attitude by those in the particular context-behaviours”. This means that impoliteness is context and culture specific, such that the context, cultural background or shared knowledge of the interactants in a conversation can contribute to the interpretation utterances as impolite. For instance, Mr. Kagwe's actions such as clenching the fist, banging the table and pointing at the audience are actions that are traditionally associated with aggressiveness and combative language within the Kenyan society. The use of such gestures during government communication therefore constituted what can be interpreted as a face threatening act by the intended listeners, that is, Kenyan citizenry.

As noted by Cupach (2007), no matter how well intended an utterance is, the speaker's body language, manifested through “lowered eyebrows, unpleasant facial expression, expansive gestures, indirect bodied orientation, and a loud voice communicates greater rudeness or a

lack of concern for face". This means that just like gestures, the paralinguistic aspects of an utterance can be used to interpret it as impolite. For example, the notion of sarcasm, which is one of the strategies of negative impoliteness is inherent in sound, such that one way of conveying this form of impoliteness is through the use of prosodic features that undermine the politeness of the expressed utterance. Examining the paralanguage in the cabinet secretary's final statement in this update, it is possible to argue that the rise in tone, employed after the three gestures, demonstrates linguistic impoliteness. As has been argued, the ways in which people interpret information involves attempts to blend new information with previous constructs and current beliefs (Hills, 2003). The possible outcome of such impoliteness therefore, is that that the citizens read the paralinguistic elements of the communication within contexts of previous knowledge (that raising one's voice amounts to expression of anger, fighting etc) to interpret the utterances as a form of combative language, creating the impression that the Cabinet Secretary was attacking them personally.

### **3.2.2 Positive impoliteness**

Positive impoliteness involves the use of strategies that are aimed at attacking the addressee's positive face wants through strategies such as ignoring the addressee by failing to acknowledge their presence and through disassociation, that is denying association or common ground with them, being disinterested and unsympathetic to their needs, and name calling (Culpeper 2011). By name-calling, Culpeper refers to the use of derogatory nomination or insults. He presents four subtypes of this strategy: the use of personalized negative vocatives, assertions, references and third person negative references in the hearing of the target (Culpeper, 2009b). In the first updates during the month of March, both the president and the cabinet secretary referred to the Covid 19 patients as 'cases' or 'suspects' and used terms such as 'surveillance' to refer to medical follow up on the patients. Patients whose Covid 19 status had not been ascertained were referred to as 'suspected cases'. These nominations, *cases*, *suspected cases* and *surveillance* have a negative semantic prosody and can therefore be described as derogatory. By describing patients afflicted by a global pandemic and the process of their medical follow-up through semantic terms that have connotations of crime, the president effectively equated contracting Covid 19 to a criminal offence. Hence, one of the strategies used for positive impoliteness during the Covid 19 press releases was the use of inappropriate identity markers and derogatory nominations against the patients.

President Uhuru Kenyatta in his speeches used the war metaphor, continually referring to Covid 19 as an invisible enemy and comparing health professionals to frontline soldiers. This metaphorical presentation impacted on the way people conceptualized the pandemic and others afflicted by it. It is important to also remember that the president's metaphorical representation of Covid 19 was not a new phenomenon in government communication. Globally, studies on government communication during previous epidemics such SARS, Cancer and HIV have shown that the war metaphor has been utilized in health communication in other countries during the past few years. However, this communication of health issues using the war metaphor has been criticized for being a "power based and violent" form of communication (Reisfield and Wilson, 2004) that contributes to the stigmatization of the patient by painting those who contract the disease as enemy collaborators. In line with this, it is possible to argue that President Uhuru's description of Covid 19 as "an invisible enemy" who "will find the most vulnerable of us and use them" painted the Covid 19 patients as voluntarily vulnerable enemy conduits of death and destruction.

In his utterances on 25<sup>th</sup> March, the cabinet Secretary speaks to Kenyans, through a certain media personality he calls Steve;

You know, so... Steve, you need to tell them  
You are the one in the media, tell them  
Because afterwards they will call and tell us  
*Serikali saidia* (Government, please help us)  
It doesn't work, this is the one time  
You *saidia* (help)  
The government won't *saidia*  
Because the government cannot help each and every home and every child.

The strategy of positive impoliteness utilized in the above utterance was the disassociation of the speaker with his interlocutors. Here, the cabinet secretary disassociates himself from his listeners by, one, speaking to them through a third party in their hearing, and, two, making it clear that the government is unsympathetic to their plight. This act of referring to the other using the third person in their presence is linguistically impolite and an ineffective mode of communication. Further, the utterances lacked empathy, which is one of the recommendations for government communication during a pandemic (Hyland- Wood et al, 2021). As has been argued by Pfattheicher et al (2020), when citizens feel that the government empathises with them, they are more likely to respond to health guidelines given by the government.

### **3.2.3 Negative impoliteness**

This involves the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's negative face wants. Tactics involved here include frightening, scorning or ridiculing the interlocutor or explicitly associating certain persons with a negative aspect. During the first week of the updates, on 21<sup>st</sup> March, Mr. Kagwe states;

As soon as the young people come into proximity with the older people the older people begin to die.

The above utterance is a blanket association of young persons with the deaths of older people. By associating young people, whether Covid 19 positive or not with the deaths of the older Kenyan citizens, the above utterance depicts them as the sole carriers of death. This is a strategy of negative impoliteness in which the speaker associates his interlocutor with a negative aspect. Again, on 18<sup>th</sup> April 2020, speaking about the first patient that tested positive in Homa Bay, he says

This person has now taken the disease to Homa Bay.

On 27<sup>th</sup> May, he states

If people are going to die, they will have been killed by other people.

One of the output strategies of negative impoliteness identified in the utterances of Mr. Kagwe at the time was the strategy of frightening and instilling a belief that an action detrimental to the other (in this case death) would occur if they associated with certain persons. Through this strategy therefore, the above utterances can be perceived as shifting the blame for the cause of the deaths from Covid 19 as a disease and placing it on the Covid 19 patients. Further his utterances present a discursive construction of the youth and Covid 19 patients as 'death carriers'. Consequently, though his utterances aimed to discourage physical movement, they unconsciously performed the illocutionary act of creating fear of the patients as disease 'importers' within the community. This, coupled with the fact that the pandemic was fairly new and the citizens had very little information on how it is spread contributed to the shunning of suspected victims and their families as people sought to protect themselves from the 'disease carriers'. Thus, during the month of May, the cabinet secretary consistently urged the people from Nairobi not to 'take' the disease to *Ushago* (upcountry). This too, was a discursive reconstruction of the stranger as a willing carrier of Covid 19 who needed to be avoided. On 5<sup>th</sup> June 2020, a few days after the May 27<sup>th</sup> utterance in which he stated that people who died would have been killed by other people, residents of Elgeyo Marakwet sub county, in Uasin Gishu, took to the street to demand the evacuation of five Covid 19 positive truck drivers, who had been admitted in a health facility within their sub-county. Waving



placards and twigs, the residents complained that the patients had come to kill them and their children. An elderly woman speaking on KTN television states;

*Sisi tulikua tumejichunga kabisa*

(We had taken all precautions)

*vile tuliambiwa na waziri*

(Just as instructed by the cabinet secretary)

*tulijichunga kwa area yetu*

(We were careful in our area)

*Lakini tumeshangaa, wametuletea kifo*

(But we are surprised they have brought us death)

*Wametuletea kabisa mpaka nyumbani*

(They have brought death to our home)

According to the news anchor, the residents felt that the admission of Covid 19 patients in a facility within their vicinity put their lives at risk and threatened to forcefully evict the patients from the facility. The above utterances, by the cabinet secretary and their subsequent interpretation by the society, as seen in the elderly woman's construal, show that any instance of instrumental-language use by a government communicator, must be sensitive to the fact that it could be interpreted by the citizens in various ways and therefore fail to achieve the purpose it may have been designed to serve.

### **3.3 The Question-and-Answer Session**

The televised updates also involved a question-and-answer session where journalists were permitted to ask questions. On June 4<sup>th</sup>, asked about law enforcement officers using excessive force on citizens, Mr. Kagwe states;

Am I concerned that law enforcement officers are taking people's lives?

(Violently shaking his head) I am not aware.

As seen above, the cabinet secretary denies knowledge of police brutality during enforcement of containment measures. This is despite the fact that there was documentary evidence that two men had died as from such brutality in Mombasa. During the question-and-answer sessions the cabinet secretary often evaded questions and provided answers that were not relevant to issues raised by the journalists. The cabinet secretary in the above utterance flouts Grice's maxim of quality that requires one to be as informative and as truthful as possible during a conversation, and, as argued by Mills (2003), any transgression of the maxims of politeness results in impoliteness. On the same issue, Mr. Mutahi continues;

Who...? Who are those who taking people's lives?

And when you say taking people's lives,  
I don't know whether you mean by killing them?  
I don't know whether you mean by allowing eeh  
Infected people, to infuse themselves with them?  
Notwithstanding what the meaning of the question was  
The law will take its course  
But the law must at all times be followed

Here, Mr. Mutahi employs the impoliteness meta-strategy of sarcasm and mock politeness. In this strategy, the FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realizations. In his response, he also presents the police killings and the persons infected with Covid 19 as binary causes of death. He therefore appears to covertly evade the question of police killings and puts emphasis on strict adherence to the law, which was not the issue under question. In this context, Mr. Kagwe's remarks appear to suggest that those infected with Covid 19 are the life takers from whom the police are protecting the general citizenry. This is a veiled mockery of what he is expected to answer since it is clear that he is ignoring the fact that the police are being accused of excessive force leading to the death of citizens. The communication here appears to suggest that abidance to law is selective only insofar as it serves the interests of the government. That is, the reference to the killing of people by the police is cast as inconsequential thus amplifying the cause of death through Covid 19 infection as more terrifying.

In an update on 10<sup>th</sup> July, he feigns amnesia about a question he is asked.

Mambo hio ingine,  
(something else)  
Kuna mtu mwingine ameuliza  
(that someone else asked)  
Lakini sikumbuki  
(but I don't rememeber)  
Sikumbuki ulisema nani  
(I don't remember who you asked about)

*The journalist attempts to clarify the question, but the cabinet secretary cuts him short.*

Unaweza kuuliza swali  
(You can ask a question)  
Na mimi niseme sikumbuki

(And I will say I don't remember)

Lakini hata ukiuliza tena... pia sikumbuki

(But even if you ask again, I still don't remember)

The above impoliteness strategy gave the impression that the communicator was insincere and was trying to cover up information on Covid 19. It also demonstrates a powerplay in which he attempts to show that he is in command by selectively responding to certain issues while ignoring others. Again, the act of cutting the journalist short was impolite and demeaning, and therefore, made it difficult for the other journalists to ask critical questions. As has been argued, during a crisis, an open style of persuasive communication not only upholds the credibility of the communicating institution, but also eliminates public suspicion and builds public trust (Wray and Jupka 2004). Public trust has been hailed as a key resource in harnessing public collaboration and sustaining the behaviour change required to manage pandemics (Agle, 2020; Devine et al, 2020). Thus, the cabinet secretary's dismissal of journalist questions implied that he/the government was withholding vital information from the public. This seeming secrecy may have contributed to mistrust of the government by the public, further fuelling fears, myths, misconceptions and mysteries held by the public about Covid 19.

On August 9<sup>th</sup>, responding to a question that sought to know if indeed his son was not adhering to containment measures as evidenced in a video that was trending on social media, he states;

I do not have a son in my house who is less than 18 years,

Which means he is an adult, you can follow them and ask them

When this update was posted on Facebook, various Kenyans expressed their displeasure with this response, some argued that it was a rude answer, while others felt that the government was not enforcing the curfew equally among all citizens. From comments posted on Facebook under this update, most Kenyans state that Covid 19 was a hoax, in that privileged persons could flout containment measures and not get infected.

In all the above examples, the cabinet secretary used impoliteness strategies to overtly or covertly evade questions, shift the agenda of certain questions and perform actions not asked for. As argued by Ekström and Eriksson, (2018), mediatized communication from the government is organized with the overall purpose of "releasing public statements and making officials available for questions from the public (or, more specifically, from journalists who are assumed to act on behalf of the public)" (345). Because of the above strategies of impoliteness, the daily updates translated to an authoritative communication system that only allowed one-

way communication, avoiding questions from the journalists, and effectively, the public about what they actually needed to know.

#### **4.0 Effects of Combative Language**

It has been argued that in a pandemic such as Covid 19, effective government communication is vital for governance, for the efficacious response of the general public to government directives and for the public's adaptation into the new normal (Huang, 2020). Studies also show that successful reduction of Covid 19 infection rate is highly dependent on how communities perceive information provided by the government. (Hyland- Wood et al, 2021). This therefore, means that viable linguistic strategies of persuasion in government communication are critical for fighting the pandemic and stabilizing the society. Jane Mulderrig (2011) examines the subtle linguistic strategies employed by modern governments to convince, rather than coerce people into behaving in certain ways. She argues that government communicators do this through what she calls 'Managing Actions' realized through the use of managing verbs (such as *let, allow, help, enable, require* and *expect*). Governments therefore present certain actions by the interlocutors as voluntary and their outcomes as desirable, presuming their necessity, and assuming volition of the 'managed actors' (the citizens or manipulees) rather than giving them direct orders. Examining the verbs used during the updates by both President Kenyatta and Mr. Kagwe, it is evident that they used words such as *must, will, shall, ensure* and *adhere* to give guidelines on how citizens were expected to conduct themselves during the pandemic. On 22<sup>nd</sup> March, Mr. Kagwe stated;

You will be observing enforcement measures

You must stay home

Go home (raising his voice)

In the above communication, Mr Kagwe addresses the interlocutors in second person pronouns, excluding himself and the government from observing the enforcement measures. An empathetic style of communication has been identified as crucial in persuading the public to take a positive action or refrain from potentially harmful acts (Reynolds and Quinns, 2008). Reynolds and Quinns argue that public compliance to government guidelines during a pandemic is dependent on persuasive strategies used during communication. In the above utterance by Mr. Kagwe, language use is explicitly backed up by coercion in that an order is given that the hearers are expected to obey without question. It is important to note that the main agenda of government communication during a pandemic is to harness public resilience and solidarity (Jetten et al, 2020). Thus, communicues that address citizens as partners (using pronoun *we*) and appeal to them to act, are superior to directives that imply that citizens are

passive recipients of directives (such as *you must*) that they are not part of. Utterances such as the above by the cabinet secretary, therefore, produce the inverse of the intended communication. This is because people are more likely to rebel or disobey strongarmed messages, as opposed to when there are opposed to conciliatory or engaging communication. It is from this rebellion of directives issued by the communicators that Kenyans produced memes on social media demanding for “freedom”.

It has been argued that as part of responsible communication by the government, directives should be accompanied by appropriate measures to facilitate the desired behaviour change and action (Peters et al, 2018). People were therefore likely to observe the enforcement measures if they had been advised on how their daily needs would be met (Hyland- Wood et al, 2021). The utterances by Mr. Kagwe assumed that the govt had met its obligations to the citizens: ensuring medical supplies and food access. A week after these utterances, residents of Kangemi, in Nairobi County demonstrated against mass testing, arguing that they needed to be tested for hunger and not Covid 19.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

The objective of this study was to identify and analyse impoliteness strategies in the utterances of President Uhuru Kenyatta and Health Cabinet Secretary Mutahi Kagwe, generated from daily televised updates on the COVID-19 pandemic and the possible implication of these utterances on government efforts to stem the pandemic. From the discussions, it is evident that the impolite use of language in Covid-19 communications threatened the face want of the interlocutors, that is, the Kenyan Citizenry. An examination of the paralinguistic aspects of communication used by the two communicators revealed that their language appeared combative and coercive to the intended recipients of the updates. In addition to this, the both the president and the cabinet secretary, in their utterances depicted Covid 19 patients as willing carriers of the virus, hence the perlocutionary act of their utterances was stigmatization and victimization of Covid 19 survivors. This paper therefore, recommends that, Given the role and indispensability of linguistic politeness in government and health communication, there is need by government communicators to self-censure in language use. In a pandemic like Covid 19, this would effectively them to share knowledge, ensure public compliance with directives and build public confidence in government, thereby fulfilling the communicative goal of government communication during a health crisis.



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