

## Persuasive Interactional Strategies In The Abdullah Al-Mudaifer-Mohammed Bin Salman Interview On Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030: Ecolinguistics Study

Hamed Marzuq Alaifi<sup>\*1</sup>, Samuel Gyasi Obeng<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Linguistics Department, Islamic University of Madinah, Saudi Arabia,

<sup>2</sup>Linguistics Department, Indiana University of Bloomington, United States

hmoufi@iu.edu.sa<sup>\*1</sup>, sobeng@indiana.edu<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Studies on political interviews abound in the linguistics, sociology, psychology, literary studies, cognitive science, and critical discourse analysis literature. Working within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, this study identified and discussed discursive strategies employed by Abdullah Al-Mudaifer and Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) in an interview on Saudi's Vision 2030. The identified discursive strategy used by MBS indexed power, control, and ideology and included stroking and political pronouns, indexing agency, closeness, and group identity. Others were positive self-representation, the number game, address and reference, antithetic constructions, relational processes, admitting errors and promising change, and questioning the interviewer's questions. Abdullah Al-Mudaifer produced texts of resistance and enacted status asymmetry. The interview participants' communicational goals and ideologies were relevant in managing delicate speech acts.

**Key Words:** Political Interviews; Critical Discourse Analysis; Discursive Strategies; Saudi Arabia; Abdullah Al-Mudaifer; Mohammed Bin Salman.

### INTRODUCTION

The work of Lauerbach (2004) dealing with political interviews as a unique and hybrid genre, that by Clayman & Heritage (2002) on news interviewing, and Clayman's (2001) work on answers and evasions in political interviews are some of the well debated works in political interviewing. Others such as those by Heritage and Roth (1995) dealing with questions and questioning in broadcast news interview point to political interviews' unique characteristics. The above referenced works point to such political interviews' distinctive features as *openings* (introductions), *question-answer sequences*, *closings*, and issues relating to *neutrality* and *bias* in interviewing (see Calyman, 1988). Also well studied are the analysis of the turn-taking system of political interviews such as that by Greatbatch (1988) on British news interviews, and Rendle-Short's (2007) study on the ways in which politicians and their interviewers orient to each other's turns during interviews.

On face-threat in political interviews, Bull et al's (1996) work on face and equivocation led to the development of a typology of interview questions based on the face-threatening properties inherent in such questions. The authors identified 19 subcategories that they grouped into three broad categories of face which politicians must defend, namely: (a) their own personal face, (b) their party's, and (c) that inherent in (not) supporting significant others. They proposed a model of question-answer sequences with face as the most central factor in establishing whether a politician answers a question.

An important aspect of Bull et al.'s (1996) model, they note, is its potential in helping to envision the direction of politicians' responses to questions and a framework for assessing politicians' and their interviewers' performance. Their model provides a means of evaluating politicians regarding their relative skill in avoiding mistakes in interviews, and, interviewers, their skill at interviewing and determining (non)bias. They note that, "if an interviewer asks a high proportion of questions to which replies are highly face-threatening, this may have the effect of making the politician look extremely evasive" (Bull et al: 283). Asking a high proportion of face-threatening questions, they contend, is indicative of interviewer bias. They surmise that the occurrence of both replies, and non-replies must be understood within a unitary theoretical framework.

Blum-Kulka (1983), working on Israeli television political interviews, discovered a highly structured rule-based speech event governed by genre-specific rules. She concluded that both interviewers and interviewees negotiate and conform to interviews' discursive norms. She also found that to enhance the status of the interviewed politicians as public figures, interviewers used deferential address forms, while interviewees avoided addressing the interviewers. Familiarity, she discovered, led to interviewees questioning interviewers' facts, assertions, and questions even though by their role, interviewers are officially in charge of the interview domain. Ekström (2001) also studied television political interviews and found that politicians divorce answers from preceding questions and present stories in fragmented forms. Original questions, Ekström notes, are removed and replaced with others. Ekström concludes that recontextualization is employed, and shapes the meanings of interviewees' answers, actions, and characters.

An observation of the literature on political communication in Saudi Arabia shows that not much has been done on interview(s) of the *de facto* ruler, Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS), especially, on MBS' views on the Kingdom's *Vision 2030* within the critical discourse analysis (CDA) principle. A study of the MBS' interview by Abdullah Al-Mudaifer (AAM) within CDA will thus contribute to the literature on the impact of power dynamics on political interviewing in general, and political discourse in Saudi Arabia and in the Arab in particular. This study aims at analyzing AAM's interview of MBS on Saudi Arabia's *Vision 2030* within the framework of CDA. Particularly, the study identifies and explicates the discursive strategies employed by MBS and AAM within the interview domain, how such features index and are indexed by the institutional power dynamics (power relations) and ideologies.

## METHOD

The data for this article is a transcript of a TV interview that appeared on the *Liwan Al-Mudaifer Show* on Saudi television <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnKoES8rcKA> on April 27, 2021. The program was broadcast on Saudi television and transcribed on the Arab News website with English subtitles and captions. The interview was selected for this study because of its *political content* (e.g., governance and economic development in Saudi Arabia) and *timing* (it marked the fifth anniversary of Saudi's *Vision 2030* plan and dealt with ways of transforming the Kingdom's economy and preparing its citizens for a post-hydrocarbon age). Moreover, due to the actors involved in the interview, the interview gained immense attention in both Saudi Arabia and the Arab world.

In the analysis, excerpts are drawn from the data to support analytical assertions to enable such assertions to endure or withstand any kind scrutiny, and to guide readers

through the reasoning behind the interpretations made (Campbell and Obeng, 2023). Although only a few excerpts are cited and discussed, the analytical statements made in Section 4 are based on the whole corpus. The analyses are done within the framework of *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) as elucidated in the works of Van Dijk (2015, 2001), Wodak and Meyer (2015), Fairclough (2013; 1992) among others. According to Van Dijk (2015, 2001) CDA investigates how individuals or groups engage in or react to social power abuses (such as, misrule or maladministration, tyranny, etc.), control, inequalities, and such issues as discrimination and racism, while using language. Van Dijk (2015) highlights the role of CDA in uncovering ideologies and power relations that are embedded in interlocutors' discourses. Thus, working within CDA analytical framework will help to determine the power dynamics of the interview, especially, who is in charge of the interview event, whether and how the one with power controls the discourse, and what the consequences of this power are. As Van Dijk (2001) notes, whoever has control of a discourse also controls the mind of the dominated actor; we will thus explore how this is manifested in the interview process.

Van Dijk (2015) and Wodak and Meyer (2015) emphasize, the interdisciplinary nature of CDA that enables the researcher to observe how it (CDA) integrates sociological and linguistic analysis, cognitive science, among other disciplines. Therefore, it is anticipated that employing CDA will highlight its interdisciplinarity given how and the extent to which underlying Saudi political climate and social institutions impact interlocutors' language; thereby emphasizing the intersection of politics, sociology, language (linguistics) among other disciplines. Following Van Dijk (2015), we hope to link what he refers to as the *micro*—language use, discourse proper, interaction, and communication (Van Dijk, 2015)—and the *macro* (issues of power, social dominance, and inequalities) aspects of political communication (the political interview).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An inspection of the interview transcript points to the use of such discursive strategies such as *stroking*, *political pronouns*, *positive self-representation*, *the number game*, *address and reference*, *contrastive pairs*, and *agency* to index power in the main, and solidarity sometimes. Other discursive tools employed in the interview discourse are *relational processes* (Hita and Lavid, 2001; Hosking, 2006) involving temporality of past-present-future actions and *admitting errors and promising a change*. Stroking is discussed first.

### Stroking

The literature on stroking in political interaction such as those by Goshgarian (2014) and Erickson (1980) involves discussions on the use of communicative tools that recognize other(s) by showing how important they are to a speaker and to the interactional ecology in which they operate. As Goshgarian (2014) notes, politicians seek recognition to confirm and authenticate their importance whether at political interviews, political campaign rallies, parliaments, house of representatives, or in any political committee or action group. Stroking, Erickson (1980) argues, is transactional, and its efficacious use can have positive effect on interactional participants. Excerpt-1 exemplifies the above-mentioned assertions.

Excerpt-1: (*Duration: 0:29-0:40 in the original Arabic tape*)

Context: MBS strokes AAM about his worth as a journalist in the Arab World.

AAM: *Greetings to you, Your Highness. It's a pleasure to have been given this opportunity.*

(Arabic) (حيالك الله سمو الأمير وممتن جدا لإتاحة هذه الفرصة لي)

MBS: *It's my pleasure also to meet with you, Abdullah. You're one of the best interviewers in Saudi Arabia and the Arab World. It's my honor to be with you.*

(أنا سعيد عبد الله بالالتقاء معك يعني إنت من خيرة المحاورين في المملكة العربية السعودية والعالم

العربي وأتشرف إنني أكون معك)

In Excerpt-1, one observes an interactional *opening*—an *adjacency pair* (Sacks, 1992, Schegloff, 2006), involving *greeting-greeting*. AAM's first utterance, *Greetings to you, Your Highness*, opens the interview and indexes politeness by AAM towards MBS. By ending his utterance with the deferential address form, *Your Highness*, AAM refers to MBS' status and thus indexes the power asymmetry between him and MBS. AAM's second sentence, *It's a pleasure to have been given this opportunity*, could be interpreted as implying that despite being in charge of the interview and hence having power in the discourse domain, AAM is acknowledging MBS's political status as someone with power such that he (MBS) can give him (AAM) an opportunity to perform his task of hosting the interview. The noun, *opportunity*, supports the assertion that MBS has the power to give AAM a chance to interview him.

MBS' pleasantry, *It's my pleasure also to meet with you, Abdullah*, is immediately followed by his stroking of AAM with the sentence, *You're one of the best interviewers in Saudi Arabia and the Arab World. It's my honor to be with you*. Describing AAM as one of the best interviewers in Saudi Arabia and the Arab World authenticates AAM's status as an accomplished journalist capable of functioning competently in the interview domain. Thus, one observes AAM and MBS negotiating their interactional, social, and political (power) roles. MBS' utterance above also acts as a *positive-other-representation* that is capable of easing any 'tension,' that may occur in the interactional domain. By stroking AAM MBS affirms the fact that it is an honor to be interviewed by AAM, an act that gives credibility to AAM's credential as a respected journalist. It is argued that MBS' use of stroking may have been intended to make AAM feel or look credible, and to establish closeness between them. One could also argue that MBS' stroking was likely intended to get AAM to be respectful, act professionally towards him (MBS), and not to make the interview adversarial but informational and beneficial to him and the audience. These observations bolster conclusions drawn by Goshgarian (2014) and others, on the discursive import and impact of stroking in social (including political) practice.

### Political Pronouns

The first-person plural subject pronoun, *we*, occurred 54 times in the interview. None of the other personal pronouns occurred more than 10 times. The high frequency of occurrence of *we* were most likely due to its 'power' of ambiguity; that is, how it can be used to index a speaker, group, or an entire country. MBS used *we* to index the people of Saudi Arabia and to create agency with him being the agent speaking on behalf of the government and the Kingdom, an act that indexes power. Excerpt-2 exemplifies the above-mentioned assertion.

Excerpt-2: (Duration: .0:41-42...0:43...0:56-1:03, 2:18)

Context: MBS uses *we* to index Saudis, those in government, and he as a person who oversees decision-making and implementation of such decisions.

AAM: *It's my honor, Your Highness. Today, Your Highness ... what if we were to continue with the same previous way as an oil-producing country, a rich country, proceeding down the same path?*

(الشرف لي سمو الأمير... اليوم، سمو الأمير... ماذا لو استمرينا على نفس الطريقة السابقة، دولة غنية نفطية تسير على نفس الطريقة)

MBS: *If we were to proceed with the same manner; without doubt, in the light of the increased population number this will have quite an impact in 20 years on the standard of living, we've become accustomed to for about 50 years. So, this was risk number one. Without a doubt, we all; as Saudis, need to maintain the same standard of living. In fact, we do aspire to improve to an even better level, and we aim to increase growth continuously.*

(إذا استمرينا بنفس الحال، ما فيه شك مع نمو عدد السكان، يباثر هذا الشيء بعد عشرين سنة... على مستوى وجودة الحياة التي تعودنا عليها لمدة ٥٠ عام، فهذا يعني خطر رقم ١ بلا شك إحنا كلنا كسعوديين نبغى نحافظ على نفس مستوى الحياة، بل بالعكس نطمح لأفضل وأفضل مع الزمن، ونستمر في النمو)

In Except-2, to the question regarding continuance of dependance on oil, MBS speaks about the risk of solely depending on oil revenues and calls for continued economic growth increase. In the stretch, *if we were to proceed with the same manner*, MBS' intention is to use *we* in the interview to speak for himself and his administration because they are responsible for making decisions regarding governance and economic growth, a discursive strategy intended to show his role as being socially and politically powerful. Thus, MBS' use of *we* indexes a socio-political role associated with power and status; he and his administration have the authority of decision-making because they constitute the executive branch of government. Note that as Wilson (1990) notes, the pronoun, *we*, could be addressee exclusive; in this interview, AAM is not part of the, *we* cognizant of the fact that he is not part of the ruling group and hence the decision-making group.

In, *we've become accustomed to for about 50 years*, MBS uses *we* to refer to the people of Saudi Arabia. Irrespective of wealth imbalance within the Saudi polity, Saudis have enjoyed a certain relative measure of prosperity in the last fifty years. In the expression, *we all; as Saudis, need to maintain the same standard of living*, MBS uses *we*, to refer to Saudis, especially, those who have benefitted from the oil-related wealth. Here, MBS uses the pronoun *we* as a solidarity 'call agent' to rally Saudis around the need and urgency to accept diversification of the Saudi economy instead of total dependence on oil revenues.

In the last sentence, MBS uses two clauses: (a) *we do aspire to improve to an even better level*, and (b) *we aim to increase growth continuously*, to display his intention of drumming up support for the *Vision 2030* by explaining how urgent it is for him, his government, and the Saudi people to improve the Saudi economy. The auxiliary verb, *do*, in utterance (a) above, and the main verbs, *aspire* and *aim* in utterances (a) and (b), signal the intention and urgency about the needed and expected action to improve the Kingdom's prosperity. One also observes the use of, *we*, in stretches (a) and (b) above, to index

distinct institutional and interactional role. MBS' role as the Kingdom's *de facto* leader empowers him to make these pronouncements, take the above-mentioned decisions, and rally support for the *Vision 2030*. More is said about the use of *we* in Section 4.3.

The above discussion shows how pronouns are used in political talk to show identity via agency (self-as-agent) and aligns with Wilson's (1990) observation of pronouns being used to show varying degrees of distance from 'self' in political talk, a fact also identified by Bramley (2001) who calls for political pronouns to be viewed in terms of their achieved identity work within an interactional domain. Also, like Alavidze's (2017) study on political pronouns, the discussion in this section shows how political pronouns are used to show interlocutors' social relationship, socio-political statuses, and motivation to draw an audience to one's side to get things done or to get support for a policy whose aim is to get political (including economic) actions taken or implemented. Section 4.3 examines the use of *positive-self-representation*.

### 1. Positive-Self-Representation

An observation of the data shows that MBS engages in positive self-representation with the view to influencing or even controlling the minds of the audience and getting them to support his political course of action; acceptance of the *Vision 2030*. The point about political actors in power using language to control the minds of their audience is well elucidated in the work of Van Dijk (2015). The discursive strategies used in Excerpt-3 to achieve the above-mentioned assertion include: (i) *first-person plural pronoun, we*, usage; (ii) the *number game*; (iii) *relational processes* involving temporality of past-present-future actions, and (iv) *admitting errors and promising change*. Excerpts-3 and -4 are cited for exemplification and discussion.

Excerpt-3: (Duration: 4:02-4:07, 6:24-7:16, 3:31-3:43)

Context: MBS continues to talk about his important achievements by talking about the elimination of bottlenecks that hindered economic growth and how this has led to increase in private sector performance and in foreign investments.

AAM: *In five years, what are the most important achievements made?*

(خمس سنوات، ما أهم الإنجازات التي تحققت؟)

MBS: *We shall break the 11 percent, this year, and reach 10 percent and a bit over until we reach 7% by the year of 2030. The non-oil revenues rose from 166 billion to 350 billion Saudi riyals roughly. The commercial license used to take days to be produced, going through six governmental entities. Now, you can get it done in half an hour online. The foreign investments tripled from 5 billion up to 17 billion a year. The Saudi market, we were sticking after the last crisis between 4000 points to 7000 points. Now, it exceeds 10000 points, which means that the private sector has started to grow. So, these are huge numbers compared to what has been achieved in the four years. It would take a lot of time to explain this "even if we didn't have any problem in terms of oil then, there still would be enthusiasm and a big drive towards achieving these enablers that we aspire to benefit from as Saudis for our beloved country."*

(وسوف نكسر حاجز ١١٪ إن شاد الله في العام الحالي وصولاً إلى ١٠٪ وكسور حتى نصل إلى ٧ في المائة بحلول عام ٢٠٣٠. وارتفعت الإيرادات غير النفطية من ١٦٦ ملياراً إلى ٣٥٠ مليار ريال سعودي تقريباً. وكان إنتاج الرخصة التجارية يستغرق أياماً، ويمر عبر أكثر من ٦ جهات حكومية. الآن، يمكنك إنجاز ذلك في نصف ساعة إلكترونياً. وتضاعفت الاستثمارات الأجنبية ثلاث مرات تقريباً أو أكثر من

٥ مليارات إلى ١٧ ملياراً سنوياً. أما السوق السعودي، فقد كنا عالقين بعد الأزمة الأخيرة بين ٤٠٠٠ نقطة إلى ٧٠٠٠ نقطة. والآن تجاوزت ١٠٠٠٠ نقطة، مما يعني أن القطاع الخاص بدأ ينمو. فالأرقام كثيرة جداً فيما تحقق في السنوات الأربع الماضية. قد أستغرق وقت طویل جداً لشرحها. "حتى لو كان ما عندنا مشكلة في الجانب النفطي، لا يزال يكون هناك فيه حماس ورغبة ودافع قوي جداً لتحقيق هذه الممكنات التي نطمح انه نستفيد منها كسعوديين لوطننا الغالي"

MBS, in Excerpt-3, while answering the question about, *the most important achievements made*, projects Saudi's unemployment rate improving to become 11% or 10% and thus recording the best unemployment rate among the world's biggest economies, the G20. According to MBS, Saudi Arabia was the 6th best economy but the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and Saudi's low growth rate, put the unemployment rate at 12%. He notes that the government was doing its best to make the economy bounce back. MBS' use of *we* in the utterance, *We shall break the 11 percent and reach 10 percent and a bit over*, is in reference to the Saudi people in general, but more explicitly to himself and his administration who have the institutional role of putting in place policies that will make the economy improve. The second *we* in the stretch, *until we reach 7% by the year of 2030* is in reference to Saudis. In the expression, *a big drive towards achieving these enablers that we aspire to benefit from as Saudis for our beloved country*, *we*, refers to MBS and his administration; it is they who are engaged in negotiation and the development and implementation of policies associated with the projected growth.

Moreover, MBS unites himself with Saudis when he speaks about their 'beloved' country in the excerpt, *our beloved country*. The intention behind the use of the above strategy, was most likely to persuade the audience about group solidarity (he being part of the Saudi community) and his planned reinvigoration of his economic policies. Thus, his use of the first-person plural pronoun, *we*, indexed power as well as ingroup-ness. He has the political power to enact and implement policies, but then 'shares' such power with the mass of Saudi population by making them a part of that political course of action.

MBS engaged in the number game by quoting huge figures in such phrases as; *166 billion to 350 billion Saudi riyals, 17 billion, between 4000 points to 7000, and 10000*. His words not only 'glitter' but are also intended to give credence to the enormity of growth rarely seen in the Kingdom's history. The figures also index MBS' power and status; if he has the political and economic knowhow to achieve or bring in the billions of dollars mentioned, something which his predecessors could not achieve, then such an achievement is a manifestation and an affirmation of his political and institutional power and economic shrewdness.

Also, citing huge figures gives the idea or appearance of economic achievement and has the power to index respect for MBS as a person, the royal family, the people in his government, and the Saudi people. Furthermore, the cited figures potentially give the impression of him being an educated person who understands huge figures and can quote them in a right discursive (interview) domain. Thus, it portrays him as someone with education and its associated social and political power. Noteworthy is the fact that MBS' promotion of the *Vision 2023* through the number game presents himself as a credible, competent, and trustworthy person; these align with those of Stiff and Mongeau (2003) in their work on persuasive communication strategies.

Excerpt-4: (Duration: 8:17-8:24, 10:49-11:26, 11:38-11:59, 14:20-15:02)

Context: MBS answers the question about achieving the ambitious objectives of the Vision 2030. He states that he needs hardworking leaders and active ministers. He made it clear that in 2015, the state lacked such hardworking leaders 'in the first and the second line' of the ministries.

AAM: *In terms of implementation, the Vision when you say 70 percent. When you say housing 70 percent for example.*

(التنفيذ، يعني الرؤية يوم تقول ٧٠٪، يوم تقول في الإسكان ٧٠٪)

MBS: 4a) *2015 was a very difficult year. 80 percent of the ministers were not efficient. I wouldn't even appoint them in the smallest companies. In the Public Investment Fund, the second line was somewhat nonexistent those who are deputies, vice presidents, and leaders at the ministries were barely absent, most of those that worked were working on a routine work just to finish certain transactions but nothing strategic, no planning to achieve the objectives or future goals so there wasn't a team, no good governance, no Royal Court, nothing that would be able to support decision making...*

(كان عام ٢٠١٥ عاما صعبا للغاية. يعني عندك ٨٠٪ من الوزراء لم يكونوا أكفاء. لن أقوم بتعيينهم حتى في أصغر الشركات. في صندوق الاستثمارات العامة، كان الخط الثاني شبه معدوم، من نواب أو وكلاء وزراء والقيادات في الوزارات بنسبة عالية مفقودة، معظم الذين عملوا كانوا يعملون في عمل روتيني فقط لإنهاء معاملات معينة ولكن لا شيء استراتيجي، ولا تخطيطي لتحقيق المستهدفات أو الأهداف المستقبلية، فما عندك فريق، ما عندك حوكمة جيدة، ما عندك ديوان ملكي، وأمانة عامة لمجلس الوزراء تستطيع أن تدعم صنع القرار)

4b) *So 2015 was a very difficult year. A small part was implemented for restructuring the government, establishing The Council for the Economic Affairs, for the Social Affairs, Security Affairs, restructuring certain sectors, restructuring certain ministries, appointing new ministers, and a second wave for appointing deputy ministers...*

(فكان عام ٢٠١٥ عامًا صعبًا جدًا. تم فيه جزء بسيط في ذلك الوقت من إعادة هيكلة الحكومة، من إنشاء مجلس الشؤون الاقتصادية، مجلس الشؤون السياسية والأمنية، بإعادة هيكلة بعض القطاعات، وإعادة هيكلة بعض الوزارات، وتعيين وزراء جدد، وموجة ثانية لتعيين وكلاء الوزراء...)

4c) *So, this work has taken around 3 years from 2016 to develop the position of the state till 2018, until we started our launching. If you notice the achievements were somewhat weak compared to 2019 where most of the economic achievements were reached ... and no worries about 2020 we will have like a V-shape recovery. We can see this year hopefully what will be done. So, this has taken quite some effort to establish it. As we said we have covered like 70 percent for establishing a position for the state highly efficiently and then just 30 percent will probably be done next year.*

(فهذا العمل استغرق حوالي ٣ سنوات من عام ٢٠١٦ لتطوير مركز الدولة حتى عام ٢٠١٨، ألين بدينا ننتقل، فلو تلاحظ ٢٠١٦، ١٧، ١٨ كانت المنجزات يعني ضعيفة جداً مقارنة بـ ٢٠١٩ اللي حُقيقت فيه أغلب المنجزات الاقتصادية والخدمية... ولا ني قلق من ٢٠٢٠ يعني احنا بيكون عندنا V-shape recovery نقدر نشوفه في السنة هذي بإذن الله إن شاء الله فهذي استغرقت جهد كبير جداً لإنشائها)



فمثل ما ذكرت لك قطعنا ٧٠٪ شوط من وضع مركز الدولة بكفاءة عالية باقى ٣٠٪ أعتقد سوف ننتهي منها في السنة ونصف القادمة)

In Excerpt-4 paragraphs a-c above, MBS responds to AAM's question by accepting past mistakes and promising change, a discursive strategy viewed in Saudi culture as "honest and realistic". Specifically, MBS employs *relational processes* (Hosking, 2006; Hita and Lavid, 2001) in criticizing various arms of government—deputies, vice presidents, and leaders—during different time periods. Thus, MBS' construction of reality dealt with different times—past, present, and future—, by utilizing a relational process construction referred to as *sentences of being*. Such sentences, according to Hosking (2006), contain the verbs: *was/is* and *were/are*. As Higgins and Walker (2012) note, by admitting the failure of the past and present and giving hope for future success, one builds credibility for oneself. One observes MBS engaging in relational processes dealing with the past and future along with an ongoing present to affirm the fact that he was not afraid to admit past failures and thereby creating the appearance of honesty and pragmatism about himself. In Saudi society, a leader who accepts past mistakes and promises to rectify them and to do better in the future is viewed as possessing power, not being afraid of criticism and having the strength of character and will to improve upon one's standing or future actions.

Excerpt-4(a) describes the past, Excerpt 4(b), what MBS' team is doing at the time of the interview, and Excerpt 4(c) anticipates what will be done in the future. In the clause, *80 percent of the ministers were not efficient*, the verb, *were*, attributes the weak performance to the past incompetent ministers. MBS continues his criticism by mentioning the non-performance of those ministers termed 'second place of the ministries' namely deputies, vice presidents and leaders. The expression, "*those who are deputies, vice presidents, and leaders at the ministries were barely absent*" supports the above-mentioned assertion.

In Excerpt-4(b), MBS states what he and his administration had been doing from 2015 to 2017. His use of such growth-oriented verbs as "*restructuring*", "*establishing*", and "*appointing*" indicate important development-oriented activities being undertaken by his administration in the current political and socio-economic process; these are glittering generalities indicating a current action-packed development-oriented activities instead of the non-performing past era.

In Excerpt-4c, one recognizes projection into what could be termed 'a bright future'. Use of such phrases such as "*hopefully what will be done*" and "*will probably be done next year*" anticipates progress in the coming years.

In sum, one observes that MBS' use of relational processes involving temporality of past-present-future actions helped to create a link between different realities in Saudi's political economy in different time periods. Use of relational processes enabled MBS to make projections about anticipated good times. The relational processes also pointed to strength of a political actor who admits past errors and promises a change of a course of action to make things better for his people.

## 2. Antithetic Constructions

According to Atkinson (1984), antithetic constructions (contrastive pairs), are patterns of discourses used to highlight differences between two ideas. For Heletk and Ryzhkova (2019), antithetic constructions, as tools used to constitute suggestive strategy, are of great audience controlling or manipulative potential given their argumentative

content. Structurally, Heletk and Ryzhkova (2019: 73) note that antithetic constructions may involve the ‘use of paradigmatic and syntagmatic antonyms that appeal to axiological (value-tagged) binary concepts’. Such use of antonymy, the authors note, enables an audience to target and construct their presuppositions and assumptions around the associatory relations obtaining between the positively or negatively marked value concepts and personality of people in political leadership. This impact, Heletk and Ryzhkova (2019: 73) note, helps ‘political leaders realize their primary communicative intent that consists in discrediting opponents and creating their own positive images’.

A look at AAM-MBS’ interview shows that MBS uses antithetic constructions to show differences between his administration’s policies and those of previous administrations. In terms of content or topic, MBS uses antithetic constructions to reference and discuss such topics as commercial licensure, foreign investment, unemployment, revenue generation, and Saudi’s overall economic growth topical governance areas that portray him as a leader with the power to administer a nation’s governance (especially fiscal and commercial) system. Excerpt-5 is cited to in support of the above assertions.

Excerpt-5: (Duration: 4:04-4:06,6:40-6:49, 6:50-7:16 02)

Context: MBS compares the issuance of commercial license and the extent of foreign investment in the two different eras with the intention of showing that things are better now than before.

AAM: *What are the most important achievements made?*

(ما هي أهم الإنجازات التي تحققت؟)

MBS: *5a The commercial license used to take days to be produced, going through six governmental entities, now, you can get it done in half an hour online.*

(السجل التجاري كان يستغرق أيام حتى تستخرج سجلك التجاري، تمر على أكثر من ٦ جهات حكومية. اليوم، إلكترونياً تستخرجه في نصف ساعة)

MBS: *5b ...The foreign investments tripled from 5 billion up to 17 billion a year. The Saudi market, we were sticking after the last crisis between 4000 points to 7000 points. Now it exceeds 10000 points, which means that the private sector has started to grow. So, these are huge numbers compared to what has been achieved in the four years. It would take a lot of time to explain this.*

(وتضاعفت الاستثمارات الأجنبية ثلاث مرات تقريبا أو أكثر من ٥ مليارات إلى ١٧ ملياراً سنوياً. أما السوق السعودي، فقد كنا عالقين بعد الأزمة الأخيرة بين ٤٠٠٠ نقطة إلى ٧٠٠٠ نقطة. والآن تجاوزت ١٠٠٠٠ نقطة، مما يعني أن القطاع الخاص بدأ ينمو. فالأرقام كثيرة جداً فيما تحقق في السنوات الأربع الماضية. قد أستغرق وقت طويلاً جداً لشرحها)

In Excerpt-5(a), the verb phrase, *used to*, introduces the past (a not-so-good activity) being compared to the current good activity. The temporal conjunction, *now*, introduces the current activity; an activity of which he wants the audience to take note. Such a strategy is elucidated in the work of **Brown, Coman and Hirst (2009) who discovered that** mentioning an activity last (as part of a list) has cognitive import because it is such last-mentioned activity that is often left in listeners’ memory.

In 5(b), MBS states what happened in the past, *the Saudi market, we were sticking after the last crisis between 4000 points to 7000 points*. As in 5(a), the temporal conjunction, *now*, indexes the time for the Saudi stock market jumping by 10,000 points; thus, demonstrating an improvement. MBS goes on to describe the 10,000 points as huge thereby giving further indication regarding improvement in the fiscal growth of the Kingdom. Thus, one observes MBS extracting figures from the past and current time periods and using them not only to project prosperity in/for the future, but to also show the power and success of his leadership.

The discoveries made about antithetic constructions in this study bolster those of Allen (2007) who also identifies contrastive pairs as some of the most important devices used by Australian politicians in campaign speeches. Allen notes that contrastive pairs tend to draw applause from an audience during political speech-making (see also Atkinson, 1984; Heletk and Ryzhkova 2019). The findings in this study also align with research that identifies antithetic constructions as important communicative tools for persuading an electorate. By singling out his political and economic achievements, group identities, and unique social practices for comparison, MBS uses the different time frames to distinguish his successful governance and economic achievements from those of past leaders and by that amplify achievements associated with his leadership in contrast with/to the mediocre achievements of his predecessors. In Section 4.5 we examine MBS' discursive strategy of *questioning-the-question* as it related to power in controlling the interview discourse and the interviewer.

### 3. Questioning-the-Question

An observation of the data shows that MBS questions some of AAM's questions. Obeng (1997) notes that in political interviews, when journalists ask questionable or communicatively difficult questions, politicians may either ask their own questions and answer them, say that the question being asked has already been answered, provide an answer that avoids the content/locus of the question, or question the question. Note that in political communication questionable questions often turn out not be answerable, or, if politicians decide to answer them, the norm typically involves avoiding the obvious or seeking 'clarification'. Excerpts-6 and -7 are cited to exemplify and support the above assertions.

Excerpt-6: (Duration: 7:18-8:06)

Context: AAM questions MBS whether the Saudi economy was growing faster than normal.

AAM: *I want to ask about a particular sector now, the Vision is one of the best transformative programs (Inclusive vision), we are talking about economic, political, social... But Your Highness, are we growing at a faster speed than we should? Are we trying to burn these stages by this way of operation?*

(قبل أدخل في القطاعات، الرؤية هي من أكبر البرامج التحويلية في العالم ورؤية شاملة)، يعني تتكلم

على اقتصادي واجتماعي وسياسي،... لكن سمو الأمير، هل نحن نسير بسرعة أكبر مما يجب؟ هل

نحن نحاول نحرق المراحل بهذا المسير؟)

MBS: *There's nothing called too fast. If you have an opportunity and is achievable and I do not achieve it with the pretext that I don't want to hurry, then it means I'm procrastinating, and I don't want to work. If we have an opportunity, we should grab it whether it's 10, 100, 1,000, or 10s of thousands of opportunities, and we shall develop*

*our human resources and abilities of the government to achieve these opportunities, as soon as possible, and once we achieve them all, they will open new horizons.*

(ما فيه شيء اسمه سرعة أكثر مما يجب. إذا يا طويل العمر عندك فرصة وقابلة للتحقيق ولا أحققها فقط بحجة إنه والله ما أبي أسرع، معناته أنا متعاس، ولا أريد أن أعمل. إذا أمامنا أي فرصة سوف نعمل عليها سواء كانت ١٠ فرص أو ١٠٠ فرصة أو ١٠٠٠ فرصة أو عشرات آلاف فرصة، ونطور قدراتنا البشرية ونطور قدرات الحكومة لتحقيق هذه الفرص، بأسرع وقت ممكن، ومتى ما حققناها كلها سوف تفتح آفاق جديدة)

In Excerpt-6, AAM's utterance, *But Your Highness, are we growing at a faster speed than we should? Are we trying to burn these stages by this way of operation*, is a questionable question because it suggests that the government might be doing something too difficult to succeed, a situation capable of resulting in implementation problems and possible failure. Thus, the question presupposes that the action taken by MBS and his administration involving seeking accelerated growth is possibly not backed by structures put in place to make it work or be sustainable. Such accelerated growth without 'proper' implementation or sustainable strategy, the question implies, could cause the economy to collapse along the way. An important strategy used by AAM is by prefacing the communicatively difficult utterance, that of 'unchecked' excessive accelerated growth, with a polite address form, *your Highness*. The word, *but*, is used as a hedge to the face-threatening act (FTA) inherent in the question and is thus a politeness tool (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

On the intersection of language and power, one could argue that AAM, despite using politeness strategies such as deferential address forms and hedging, demonstrates his own power and status; the power to oversee the interview and hence being able to ask a communicatively difficult or questionable question. Also of import is the fact that being in charge of the interview gives him the power to control the discourse event and to determine what questions are possible and which are off limits. This aligns with Van Dijk's (2015, 2001) work that points to the fact that whoever oversees the interview event has the power to control the dynamics of the discourse; in the current case, the power to determine the kind of information needed and how to get it.

With the expression, *There's nothing called too fast*, MBS attacks AAM's question by disagreeing with its premise. In his explanation, MBS appeals to the audience's reasoning by arguing that not taking advantage of the condition for growth is procrastination; an act that could hinder or slow down the nation's economic development. He then engages in the number game with regards to possible growth rates, 10, 100, 1000, etc. and then ends with new opportunities that come with growth.

Noteworthy also, is the fact that in questioning AAM's question, MBS uses the first-person pronoun, both singular and plural, *I*, and *we*, to give agency and hence power to the growth activity by putting him and his government at the center of an economic management and the implementation of a policy that he wants his audience to see as being effective and necessary at that point in the nation's economic trajectory.

In Excerpt-7 below, MBS questions AAM's question directly.

Excerpt-7: (Duration: 8:08-...10:24-10:43, 11:2<sup>v</sup>-12:07)

Context: AAM questions MBS about the implementation of the Vision 2030. AAM rephrases the question and asks it again.

*AAM: The vision, the objectives of the vision are so ambitious, but the question now is how should we ensure implementation?*

(الرؤية ومستهدفاتها جدا جدا طموحة، ولكن السؤال هنا عن كيف نضمن التنفيذ؟)

*MBS: In terms of what?*

من ناحية؟

*AAM: In terms of implementation, the Vision when you say 70 percent. When you say housing 70 percent for example.*

(التنفيذ، يعني الرؤية لما تجي تقول لي ٧٠٪، لما تجي تقول في الإسكان ٧٠٪.)

*MBS: ...For example, for the housing, after we worked and established a State position and we believe that we've done about 70 percent...this has to be translated into reality because it became not just the work of the Ministry of Housing but it's the work of municipalities, the Ministry of Trade, the Ministry of Finance, the Central Bank, the Experts Commission for enacting legislations....*

(الإسكان، بعد ما عملنا وأسسنا مركز دولة نعتقد قطعنا فيه شوطاً ٧٠٪... استطاع أن يترجم هذا الشيء على الأرض لأنه أصبح عمله مو فقط وزارة الإسكان، وزارة الإسكان، وزارة البلدية، وزارة التجارة، وزارة المالية، البنك المركزي، هيئة الخبراء لسن القوانين والتشريعات)

*...So, before you achieve anything you need to establish the team. You need to establish the machinery that will assist you to achieve and accomplish all these opportunities and aspirations that we're all looking forward to, so 2015 was a very difficult year. A small part was implemented for restructuring the government establishing The Council for the Economic Affairs for the Social Affairs Security Affairs, restructuring certain sectors, restructuring certain ministries appointing new ministers and a second wave for appointing ministers' deputies and under-secretaries so one of the most important things we've worked on at the end of 2015 that we have classified, in every ministry, the most important 20 leaders.*

(فقبل تحقق أي شيء تحتاج تبني الفريق وتحتاج تبني الماكينة التي بتساعدك على إنجاز هذه الفرص وهذه التطلعات التي نطمح لها كلنا كسعوديين، فكان عام ٢٠١٥ عاماً صعباً جداً. تم فيه جزء بسيط في ذلك الوقت من إعادة هيكلة الحكومة بإنشاء مجلس الشؤون الاقتصادية مجلس الشؤون السياسية والأمنية، بإعادة هيكلة بعض القطاعات، إعادة هيكلة بعض الوزارات، تعيين وزراء جدد، الموجة ثانية على تعيين نواب الوزراء الوكلاء، يعني مثلاً أتذكر من أهم الأشياء التي عملنا عليها في آخر عام ٢٠١٥ إنه صنفنا في كل وزارة أهم ٢٠ قيادي)

In Excerpt-7, MBS finds AAM's first question questionable. The question: *The vision, the objectives of the vision are so ambitious, but the question now is how we should ensure implementation*, presupposes that there is an overambition coupled with no explicit implementation strategy for the Vision's success. The question thus poses a face-threat to MBS, so he questions the premise and legitimacy of the question by throwing it back to AAM to ostensibly seek clarification.

From the perspective of the participants' role relations and power dynamics, MBS (the guest) is seen challenging AAM's (the host's) validity claim and his questions'

authenticity. AAM in his role as the host and hence having the power and institutional authority to ask questions, stands his ground by rephrasing the question citing percentage growth in housing as the basis of his question. Consequently, MBS answers the question by noting that his administration was performing creditably and would achieve expected targets earlier than originally anticipated. The sequential organization of the *question-answer adjacency pair* (Levinson, 1983) provides an insight into how MBS and AAM produced and oriented to each other's turn, an analysis that provides us with a window of opportunity to their status, role, and purpose in the talk-in-interaction.

Referring to MBS questioning AAM's question, we observe that MBS puts the burden on AAM to rephrase his question which AAM does. As part of his answer, MBS refers AAM to what had already been said. The strategy of referring a questioner to a previously given answer to an earlier question helps avoid giving an obvious or expected answer that can potentially ruin one's reputation. Specifically, giving an answer to a previous question instead of a current one suggests that the interviewee recognizes the fact that the interviewer potentially already knows the answer to the question and that the question is either unnecessary or a trap to ensnare the interviewee (See Blum-Kulka 1983, Clayman 2001, Clayman and Heritage 2002, Lauerbach 2004)

Note that after several insertion utterances/sequences (utterances/turns which come between a question and its expected answer), MBS provides an answer to the original question noting that the Vision 2030 was attainable because implementation strategies, such as structural changes, have been put in place to ensure its success. Thus, besides its indexing of power, the language behavior or argumentative practice by MBS of questioning AAM's question, was a strategic initiative at seeking an interactional space from AAM to present the point of his *Vision 2030*'s targets being achievable. Also, MBS' use of the number game involving citing of percentage (70%) potentially depicted him as someone with precise knowledge about what was going on regarding pertinent results in the Vision's implementation and expected goals.

Finally, one observes from the Excerpt-7, the extent to which MBS presented himself as someone capable of getting things done. He uses the expression, *You need to establish the machinery that ...looking forward to*, to assert knowledge, and hence power, about what needs to be done to ensure success. The semi-modal verb, *need to*, in the expression, *You need to establish*, denotes necessity or obligation to undertake the action expressed in the main verb, *establish*. It also denotes confidence on the part of MBS and portrays him as someone who knows his facts. Also, MBS in questioning AAM's questions demonstrates his institutional role and capability in executing the implementation strategies via his choice of such words as *restructuring* and *appointing*; words that denote institutional role of overseeing the implementation of the economic policy, *Vision 2030*. Thus, those words depict him as having the institutional authority to *restructure* the economy and *appoint* ministers, deputy ministers and under-secretaries, into positions of authority to ensure policy management and implementation.

## CONCLUSION

Political interviews provide contexts in which language is used to fulfil specific political, economic, and social goals. Specifically, it has demonstrated that political interviewing in Saudi Arabia is influenced by its cultural mores, socio-political and historical contexts, as well as its value systems. It was observed that MBS and AAM's statuses, political and cultural ideologies, and their intended interactional goals and

outcomes shaped what was deemed appropriate in managing such delicate speech acts as questioning, answering, criticizing, and persuading. Importantly, this study has shown that even though interviewers possess more power than interviewees because they (interviewers) wield the power to open and close interviews, determine the topics to be discussed, formulate and manage the content of questions, manage turn allocation, and even influence perceptions of respondents' character, contextual factors such as the cultural conventions on interviewing, the persons involved in the interview, their status relationships, the time for the interview, and overall context of the interview guide and shape the interviewing. The above factors were observed altering the power dynamics of the interview event by sometimes turning the interviewer to an interviewee. Such interactional role shift gave the interviewee, MBS, power that was used to gain quantitative speech dominance, and the questioning or reformulation of AAM's questions, acts needed to achieve his interactional goals. The institutional role relationships of the interview participants (AAM and MBS) impacted the content and sequential organization of the discourse. The institutional (interview) ecology in which language was used was linked with issues of interpretability of actors assertions and understandability. Accordingly, by working within critical discourse analysis, this study has shown the behavior of interviewers and interviewees in the reproduction of power and domination, and resistance against such power and domination. Such behaviors, it has been demonstrated, are better understood in authentic interview talk-in-interaction. Also, the language behavior of MBS and AAM indexed important strategic political functions including power ideologies, ingroup solidarity, and agency indexing. An important implication of this study for Saudi politics is that there is now a public forum for Saudi's most important politicians, including MBS, to be questioned or interviewed about the effectiveness of their governance, development policies, and implementation strategies. This channel of communication is healthy for Saudi politics specifically, and for the Middle Eastern politics in general; this must be nurtured and expanded.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The first author received funding from The Deputyship of Research & Innovation, Ministry of Education, Saudi Arabia, through the Research Project #1034. He would also like to express his appreciation for the support provided by the Islamic University of Madinah.

### REFERENCES

- Alavidze M (2017) The use of pronouns in political discourse. *International Journal of Arts & Sciences* 9(4):349–356.
- Albalat-Mascarell A and Carrió-Pastor M (2019) Self-representation in political campaign talk: A functional metadiscourse approach to self-mentions in televised presidential debates. *Journal of Pragmatics* 147: 86-99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2019.05.011>
- Allen W (2007) Australian political discourse: Pronominal choice in campaign speeches. In: *Selected Papers from the 2006 Conference of the Australian Linguistic Society* (eds M Laughren and I Mushin) 1-13.

- AlShehri A (2019) Argumentation strategies of the Saudi political discourse: A critical analysis of oral messages. *Journal of Advances in Social Science and Humanities* 5(2): 568-583.
- AlShehri A (2022). A critical discourse analysis of the speech of Her Royal Highness Princess
- Reema Bint Bander Al-Saud: A Saudi woman empowerment model. *Arab World English Journal* 13(1): 256-272.
- Atkinson JM (1984) *Our Masters' Voices: The Language and Body Language of Politics*. London and New York: Methuen.
- Blommaert J and Bulcaen (2000). Critical discourse analysis. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29:447–66
- Blum-Kulka S (1983). The dynamics of political interviews. *Text* 3(2): 131-153
- Bull P, Elliott J, Palmer D and Walker L (1996) Why politicians are three-faced: The face model of political interviews. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 35: 267-284.
- Bramley NR (2001) Pronouns of politics: the use of pronouns in the construction of 'self' and 'other' in political interviews. *Semantic Scholar*. DOI: 10.25911/5D7A2A869749A
- Brown AD, Coman A and Hirst W (2009) The role of narratorship and expertise in social remembering. *Social Psychology* 40: 113–29
- Brown P and Levinson SC (1987) *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Campbell AA and Obeng SG (2023) Language and power: Discursive strategies employed by court interpreters in Ghanaian district courts. *Interpreting: International Journal of Research and Practice in Interpreting*. <https://doi.org/10.1075/intp.00099.cam> | Published online: 24 November 2023.
- Clayman S (2001) Answers and evasions. *Language in Society* 30: 403-442.
- Clayman S and Heritage J (2002) *The News Interview*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ekström M (2001) Politicians interviewed on television. *Discourse and Society* 12(5): 563-584.
- Erickson K (1980) Jimmy Carter: The rhetoric of private and civic piety. *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44(3): 221-235.
- Fairclough N (2013) *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge
- Fairclough N (1992) *Discourse and Social Change*. Polity Press
- Goffman E (1955) On Face-Work. *Psychiatry* 18(3): 213.
- Goshgarian G (2014) *Exploring Language* 14th Edition. New York: Pearson.
- Greatbatch D (1988) A turn-taking system for British news interviews. *Language in Society* 17: 401-430.
- Heritage JC and Roth A (1995) Grammar and institution: Questions and questioning in the broadcast news interview. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 28 (1)1-60.
- Higgins C and Walker R (2012) *Ethos, Logos, Pathos: Strategies of Persuasion in Social/ Environmental Reports*. Australia and New Zealand: Victoria University and Massey University.



- Hita JA and Lavid J (2001) *The Grammar of Relational Processes in English and Spanish: Implications for Machine-aided translation and multilingual generation*. Complutense University of Madrid.
- Hosking DM (2006) *Discourses of Relations and Relational Processes*. Utrecht University.
- Lauerbach G (2004) Political interviews as hybrid genre. *Text* 24 (3): 353-397.
- Obeng, Samuel Gyasi (1997). "Language and Politics: Verbal Indirection in Political Discourse." *Discourse and Society*, 8 (1): 49-83.
- Rendle-Short J (2007) "Catherine, you're wasting your time": Address terms within the Australian political interview. *Journal of Pragmatics* 39(9): 1503-1525
- Sacks H (1992) *Lectures on Conversation, Volumes I and II*. Edited by G. Jefferson with Introduction by E.A. Schegloff. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Schegloff EA (2006) *Sequence organization in interaction: A primer in conversation analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stiff JB and Mongeau PA (2003). *Persuasive Communication*. Second Edition. New York: Guilford Press
- Van Dijk TA (2015) Critical Discourse Analysis. In Van Dijk, T.A. (ed.) *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. 466-485. London: John Wiley & Sons
- Van Dijk TA (2001) Multidisciplinary CDA: A plea for Diversity. *Methods of Critical Discourse analysis* 1:95-120.
- Wilson J (1990) *Politically Speaking: The Pragmatic Analysis of Political Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wodak R and Meyer M (2015) *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*. Thousand Oaks: Sage