

Doublespeak in the Public Statements of Indonesia's Public Officials: A Post-truth Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

Doublespeak is a form of linguistic manipulation frequently employed by public officials to obscure truth, evade accountability, and distort reality. In the current post-truth era, where objective facts are often subordinate to political agendas and personal beliefs, this phenomenon has become increasingly prevalent in Indonesia. This article examines the use of doublespeak by Indonesian public officials in mass media statements and analyzes its relationship with the concept of post-truth and power dynamics. Using a schema of language analysis, this study investigates news coverage from major online media platforms regarding critical cases, including the Nusantara Capital City (IKN) project, the Rempang conflict, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings demonstrate that officials utilize various forms of doublespeak—primarily euphemism, jargon, and inflated language—to deny scientific evidence, shift responsibility, and frame political narratives. The study concludes that in Indonesia's contemporary political landscape, doublespeak functions not merely as a rhetorical strategy but as a mechanism of governmentality designed to regulate societal behavior and maintain ideological supremacy in a society increasingly indifferent to absolute truth.

Keywords: doublespeak, governmentality, Indonesian public officials, post-truth

INTRODUCTION

Doublespeak is a form of linguistic manipulation. However, beyond that, it also serves as an attempt to obfuscate the truth. The term "doublespeak" originates from the amalgamation of "doublethink" and "Newspeak," two concepts introduced by George Orwell in his magnum opus, *1984*. *Doublethink* refers to the cognitive process of holding two contradictory opinions and believing in both simultaneously (Orwell, 1949). Meanwhile, *Newspeak* is an artificial language intentionally designed with a limited vocabulary to constrict the range of thought and control society (Orwell, 1949). By combining these two concepts, doublespeak is defined as the use of language that obscures meaning: making the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, and the detrimental seem beneficial (Lutz, 1989).

The use of doublespeak differs from general linguistic manipulation, which typically lacks malicious intent. Euphemism, for instance, is defined as "a more subtle expression used as a substitute for something unpleasant, blunt, or offensive" (Jewad, 2024). In daily life, euphemisms are typically employed to address taboo and sensitive subjects, to show respect, and to avoid causing offense. For example, using "restroom" to replace "toilet" or "fallen" to replace "killed." In practice, doublespeak may employ euphemisms; however, the distinguishing factor is that in doublespeak, euphemisms are utilized to manipulate or deceive. An example of this is the use of the term "climate change" to replace "global warming." This terminological substitution aims to portray the occurring natural phenomenon as a mere "change" or a neutral event not caused by any specific entity, rather than "warming" or an occurrence that should be avoided and is caused by something or someone (Reinhardt et al., 2023). In this instance, the shift in terminology creates a displacement of responsibility, as if no one can be blamed other than nature itself.

Politics is a field that frequently employs doublespeak. When used as a political tool, much like doublethink and Newspeak, doublespeak is synonymous with language used to maintain power and justify oppression. In the Russia-Ukraine war, Russian President Vladimir Putin used the terms "peacekeeping" and "denazification" to describe the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Faulconbridge & Soldatkin, 2023). During the 2016 United States presidential election process, Donald Trump repeatedly applied the "fake news" label to any news report that cast him in a negative light (Timm, 2020).

A similar phenomenon occurs in Indonesia. The use of doublespeak by public officials to distort and conceal information is a common occurrence. In the case of the Nusantara Capital City (IKN) project, the IKN Authority stated that they were conducting a "relocation" of local residents surrounding the project site (Ulya & Ihsanuddin, 2024). The term "relocation" was selected because it implies consent from the residents, as opposed to "eviction," which carries a nuance of coercion. Another term employed by public officials to avoid the word "eviction" is "shifting" in the case of the Rempang residents (Nugraheny & Meiliana, 2023). In both instances, officials utilized euphemisms to create the impression that their actions were peaceful and consensual procedures, regardless of how those procedures were actually executed.

The utilization of doublespeak is a characteristic of a post-truth society (Allen & Andrews, 2022). Although doublespeak and post-truth are not entirely synonymous, both share a common ground regarding the manufacturing of truth. Post-truth can be defined as circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. In other words, in a post-truth era, truth becomes irrelevant (Block, 2019). According to Lee McIntyre (2018), post-truth is a form of ideological supremacy: a condition that occurs when an individual attempts to compel something they consider more important than the truth. This individual then attempts to influence others to believe it as well, even in the absence of strong evidence supporting that belief. Doublespeak is a suitable tool for this purpose. Consequently, post-truth and doublespeak are frequently intertwined with power and the will to control others.

This article will examine how public officials in Indonesia employ doublespeak in mass media statements and how this phenomenon relates to the concept of post-truth and the theory of power. Through an analysis of the communication strategies of public officials, we can explore how doublespeak serves not only as a tool to manipulate public opinion but also as a reflection of the political and social dynamics in the post-truth era. The method employed in this article is the collection of news coverage from online mass media such as Kompas.com, Tirto.id, Tempo.co, Detik.com, and Kumparan.com regarding statements by public officials containing doublespeak. The identification of doublespeak within the news follows the principles proposed by Rank (1974, as cited in Lutz, 1989), namely language analysis within a whole context. In this analysis, Rank posits five questions that must be asked: 1) who is saying what to whom, 2) under what conditions, 3) in what circumstances, 4) with what intent, and 5) with what result. The initial identification of doublespeak was conducted through the selection of headlines and coverage descriptions. Subsequently, identification continued to the overall content to ensure the relevance of the selected coverage to the topic of this article.

DOUBLESPEAK IN MASS MEDIA

Doublespeak is readily observable in the statements of Indonesian public officials in the mass media. In the example alluded to in the Introduction, the Nusantara Capital City (IKN) Authority employed the term "relocation" to describe the removal of local residents from the project site. In this statement, the IKN Authority can be viewed as a power holder attempting to convince its audience that this displacement process is entirely peaceful and consensual. This

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statement was issued against the backdrop of the ongoing construction and land acquisition for the IKN. Given this context, the intended audience may refer to the local residents of the IKN themselves or the Indonesian public at large. The local residents need to hear this statement to be reassured that none of their rights are being violated and consequently, they might comply with the displacement process without generating conflict. Meanwhile, the Indonesian public also needs to be reassured that no party is being disadvantaged in this process, ensuring that the "relocation" can be executed without significant friction. Thus, the construction of the IKN, which is the primary objective, can be achieved more readily.

The use of the term "relocation" constitutes a form of euphemism. The characteristic nature of euphemism, specifically the substitution of terms to avoid taboo or harsh language, allows it to be employed as doublespeak. When euphemism is utilized with the intent to deceive or mislead, it transforms into doublespeak. According to William Lutz (2016), euphemism is merely one of four types of doublespeak. The other types include jargon, gobbledygook, and inflated language.

Euphemism

Euphemism is the most prevalent form of doublespeak (Martenev, 2025). Another example can be found in the statement by a former Indonesian Vice President, Ma'ruf Amin, regarding the residents of Yahukimo, Papua. Amin stated that the cause of death among Yahukimo residents was not "starvation," but rather a "food shortage" (Fadilah, 2023). Additional examples can be drawn from statements by the Minister of Agriculture, Andi Amran Sulaiman, and the South Lampung Police Chief, AKBP Yusriandi Yusrin. Sulaiman claimed that the rise in chicken and beef prices approaching Ramadan was "alms for the farmers" (Mubarok, 2024), while Yusrin denied that traffic congestion occurred on the Trans-Sumatra Toll Road, referring to it instead as an "increase in vehicle volume" (Almuhtarom, 2024). By employing euphemisms, these three public officials sought to portray the events not as significant problems for which they must be held accountable, but as inevitable occurrences that simply need to be accepted without question. Meanwhile, the campaign team of the 2024 Indonesian president-elect, Prabowo Subianto, (TKN) issued a denial regarding plans to cut fuel subsidies and called it "energy subsidy efficiency" instead (Putra, 2024). This statement emerged shortly after Subianto and his running mate, Gibran Rakabuming, were declared president-elect and vice president-elect based on quick count results. As the incoming ruling party, this statement can be viewed as their attempt to quell public unrest.

Jargon

Jargon is a specialized language used by a group of people with specific affiliations, such as doctors or lawyers. Jargon is generally employed to convey information efficiently among group members who understand one another (Okrent, 2005, as cited in Munyangeyo, 2015). However, given that jargon is often pretentious and esoteric, it can be utilized as doublespeak to deceive those outside the group who lack understanding of the relevant field (Martenev, 2025). During the COVID-19 pandemic era, for instance, the then-Minister of Health, Terawan Agus Putranto, issued several statements to the public. In one instance, Terawan claimed that the COVID-19 infection is a "self-limiting disease," or a disease that can resolve on its own (Evanalia, 2020). Existing in a vacuum, this statement is factual. COVID-19 infection can indeed resolve on its own. However, the truth within Terawan's statement can also be viewed as a partial truth. This is because the statement disregards the fact that, although it may resolve on its own, a COVID-19 infection can still cause bodily damage or even death during the process. A COVID-19 patient can only recover once they have passed the critical phase and entered the recovery phase (Maragakis, 2022).

Beyond containing a partial truth, when viewed within the context of the statement, Terawan used medical jargon not for the purpose of public education. He issued the statement during the initial period of the pandemic when Indonesian society was still gripped by panic. Even prior to that, he had issued statements such as "if no Corona has been detected yet, we should be grateful" or "the power of prayer is the reason the Corona virus has not entered Indonesia" (Purnamasari & Erdianto, 2020). This was part of a narrative construction suggesting that COVID-19 was not a cause for concern. Consequently, this statement can be interpreted as an attempt to quell public panic and control societal behavior.

Gobbledygook

The third type is gobbledygook. This is the act of piling word upon word, which may not necessarily be relevant, in order to confuse the listener or message recipient. In practice, gobbledygook may be interspersed with jargon; however, the speaker is typically not someone accustomed to using or understanding such jargon (Lutz, 2016). The crucial element here is overwhelming the listener with words: the bigger the words and the longer the sentences, the better. Relating to the previous example, Terawan's statement could be categorized as gobbledygook if it were uttered by another public official who did not actually understand medical jargon but employed it for the government's interests.

Inflated Language

The final type is inflated language. This language is designed to make the ordinary seem extraordinary and the simple seem complex. Its purpose is to engineer something or someone into appearing more important than they actually are (Lutz, 2016). As the reigning Indonesian President, Subianto has repeatedly issued statements regarding the "free nutritious meal" program (MBG) to extol its significance for the student beneficiaries. On one occasion, he even asserted that the program constitutes part of a plan to achieve the "resurgence of the Indonesian nation" (Fajri, 2024). In this instance, Subianto's statement can be viewed as an attempt to inflate the magnitude of the MBG program in order to justify the substantial expenditure required and to deflect criticism directed at the initiative.

DOUBLESPEAK AND POST-TRUTH

As mentioned previously, post-truth is a state in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief (Block, 2019). McIntyre (2018) details in his theory several elements that contribute to the emergence of post-truth: 1) science denial, 2) cognitive bias, 3) the decline of traditional media, 4) the rise of social media and fake news, and 5) postmodernism. These post-truth elements serve to explain how the doublespeak employed by public officials is effective.

Science Denial

Science denial can be observed in the statements of public officials during the COVID-19 pandemic era. Apart from the previously discussed statement by Terawan, other statements with a tone downplaying the pandemic are easily found from other public officials, including a former President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo. Widodo, for instance, adopted a policy to continue boosting the tourism sector amidst the pandemic by providing incentives in the form of airline ticket discounts for prospective passengers. To justify this policy, Widodo stated that "airline ticket discounts do not increase the spread of COVID-19" (Friana, 2020). This certainly directly contradicts the recommendations of public health experts to restrict societal mobility during the pandemic. Restricting mobility is necessary to minimize direct contact between two

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or more individuals. The ultimate goal is to break the chain of transmission within the population. The doublespeak employed by Widodo is clear evidence of science denial aimed at shaping public perception regarding the lack of urgency of the pandemic situation and maintaining the stability of the economic and tourism climate.

Cognitive Bias

The second element, cognitive bias, is palpable in the polarization of society during periods of political contestation. In this context, society is fractured into opposing factions and is willing to heed only one side. For instance, during the 2019 general election, Indonesian society was divided into supporters of Widodo and supporters of Subianto (Utami et al., 2025). Individuals identifying as Widodo supporters would only listen to statements from the Widodo camp or statements that were pro-Widodo. The converse applied to Subianto supporters. More precisely, each camp of supporters only regarded statements supporting their preferred figure as the truth, while statements disparaging their figure or supporting their opponent were not considered truth, regardless of the actual content of those statements (Widyaningsih et al., 2025).

This factor supports the proliferation of doublespeak because biased supporters are no longer willing to verify the actual truth, as long as the statement aligns with their a priori reasoning. No matter the nature of Widodo's statement, his supporters would still regard it as truth. The same applies to supporters of other figures. Conversely, biased supporters are also no longer willing to listen to statements that contradict their thinking. Absolute truth no longer holds meaning for a biased society. What is of greater importance is the attainment of political interests.

The Evolution of Media

The subsequent elements are inextricably linked. The rise of social media and fake news has emerged concurrently with the decline of traditional media. The most critical focus here is the diminishing effort to verify facts and truth. Behind its egalitarian nature that allows anyone to write, this same attribute renders social media a breeding ground for misinformation (Chen et al., 2023). There is no effective verification or moderation on unregulated social media. In the modern era, where social media users have reached a massive scale, the content circulating within it becomes difficult to verify. Users, as consumers of information, are frequently deceived by fake news from illegitimate sources (Del Vicario et al., 2016; Muhammed T & Mathew, 2022). Even users who have not fallen victim find it difficult to determine whether the circulating information is the truth or not (Domenico et al., 2021). In such a climate, the truth must once again be relegated to a secondary status.

In relation to doublespeak, the role of social media is intertwined with the role of its biased and polarized users. Supporters of political figures can easily fabricate fake news to construct narratives that favor the figure they support, or conversely, design narratives to attack opposing figures. Doublespeak employed by public officials can be readily amplified and justified by their supporters to influence public perception. Due to the free climate of social media, as long as there is no counter-narrative of equal strength, the manufactured narrative will eventually be accepted as truth.

The strengthening role of social media is bolstered by the diminishing role of traditional media. In contrast to free social media, traditional media is expected to be more rigorous and standardized in filtering and sharing information. However, according to McIntyre (2018), traditional media currently face issues regarding objectivity in reporting. Bias may occur if the media or media owners also hold interests within the political process (Theine et al.,

2025). In this situation, the media can frame news angles to push a specific agenda. Bias can also occur when the media apply the principle of "cover both sides" without considering power relations. In asymmetrical power relations between two involved parties, the "cover both sides" principle results in the dissemination of biased information favoring the party with greater power (Kirby, 2023). Media attempting to maintain "objectivity" and "balance" by applying this principle inadvertently provide space for injustice.

Postmodernism

The final element is postmodernism. Like the preceding elements, the role of postmodernism lies in its rejection of absolute truth (McIntyre, 2018). In a society that does not deem absolute truth as essential, truth is rendered easily manipulable—a prerequisite for doublespeak to function effectively.

DOUBLESPEAK AND GOVERNMENTALITY

Beyond serving as a direct instrument of power, doublespeak also functions as a method of governmentality, or a way for the government to regulate and control the population. Governmentality, according to Michel Foucault (1980, as cited in Li, 2007), is a series of strategies and techniques employed by the government to steer societal behavior in a subtle and indirect manner. Doublespeak is one of the primary tools in this strategy, as it allows the government to communicate policies in a way that mitigates the likelihood of resistance.

Doublespeak assists in the formation of identities and social norms desired by the government. Through language control, the government can determine what is considered acceptable or unacceptable within society. For instance, returning to the issue of the Nusantara Capital City (IKN) development process, aside from the polemic regarding the displacement of local residents, the IKN development is also frequently referred to as "sustainable development" (Alexander, 2024). The use of the term "sustainable development" in policies that have direct environmental implications can condition the public to be more accepting of development projects that might actually be environmentally destructive, yet are presented as something positive and responsible. In this way, societal values and beliefs can be aligned with the government's agenda.

In the long term, the use of doublespeak as a method of governmentality can create a society that unconsciously accepts and internalizes the views desired by the ruling authority. This can diminish the public's ability to think critically and question implemented policies. In this manner, doublespeak functions not merely as a communication tool, but also as an effective mechanism of social control, reinforcing government power and ensuring societal compliance with established norms.

CONCLUSION

Doublespeak is prevalent in the statements of public officials within the mass media. This phenomenon serves as a reflection of the post-truth era, where truth becomes subordinate to political power. Public officials manipulate the truth by employing doublespeak as an instrument of power control as well as a method of governmentality to regulate societal behavior.

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