

The construction of agency in the discourse of Barbados' prime minister Mia Mottley

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Abstract

Informed by a critical discourse analytical approach to agency, this paper examines the construction of agency in the speeches of Mia Mottley, the prime minister of Barbados. The analysis reveals that she enacts her agency in three main ways: (1) constructing strong and decisive leadership, (2) sculpting a 'prophetess' image and (3) issuing a clarion call to action. These processes enable her to project her voice, foreground the issues that are relevant to her and establish her legitimacy and authority. The study finds that Mia Mottley's construction of agency is expressed via referential terms, personal pronouns, modal verbs and the representation of social actors. This paper extends existing work on discursive agency and illustrates the role of language and Global South leaders in the decolonization of political processes. It also affirms the view that research that foregrounds female agency is important in dismantling repressive patriarchal structures and building inclusive communities.

Keywords: agency, Barbados, decolonization, critical discourse analysis, Global South, identity construction

1. Introduction

Political discourse analysis continues to engender substantial scholarly attention in the communication, rhetorical and discourse studies literature. Focusing on the strategic use and manipulation of political notions and language choice to achieve socio-political objectives, this literature has examined politics and ideology (Fairclough 2001), politics and terrorism (Bhatia 2008), politics and media (Ciaglia 2013), politics and colonialism (Narte 2019), politics and nationalism (Mwinlaaru & Nartey 2022), politics and emancipatory discourses (Narte & Ernanda 2020), political rhetoric and metaphor (Charteris-Black 2005), political discourse and resistance (Narte 2020), political myth-making (Narte 2023) as well as war and military discourses (Hodges 2013). This scholarship has illustrated what socio-political actors do with their words, the identities they sculpt for themselves and others, how they formulate their worldviews and how they frame themselves vis-à-vis different groups (e.g., the populace, other politician and real or perceived enemies).

The construction of agency by politicians has been the focus of various studies on language and/in politics (see Fairclough 1992; Fowler 1998; Oktar 2001; Dumire 2005; Chilton & Schaffer 2011). These studies have discussed various discursive strategies that realize agency. Van Dijk (2002), for instance, analyses agency framing in parliamentary debates with a focus on the cognitive interface between discourse and society. Ghachem (2015) also examines the construction of agency in the pre-election speeches of David Cameron and finds that personal pronouns, transitivity patterns, nominalization and representation of social actors

enabled him to interact with his audience based on shared knowledge in order to recruit mass support and establish a Conservative ideology. In another study, Jones (2021) analyses the illness narratives of Boris Johnson and Donald Trump and demonstrates how they discursively constructed agency in their narratives in ways that promoted a masculinist discourse designed to depict them as ‘strong leaders’ and to detract attention from their reckless behaviour leading up to their infections. Apart from the language of politicians, discursive agency has been explored in other political texts as can be found in the study of Leipold & Winkel (2017). In this paper, the authors investigate how policy documents are constituted through the agency ascribed to their proponents in dynamic discursive processes and how actors acquire political relevance through discursive means. Among other things, the existing research on agency in political discourse analysis and critical discourse studies, more broadly, sheds light on the articulation of political legitimacy and authority in discourse as well as how the discourse structures and practices employed by politicians are aimed at producing a particular effect.

It can also be observed from the literature reviewed above that the existing research has mainly focused on male leaders, making it necessary for other studies to highlight the agency of female leaders and women in general. Several studies have also been situated in Western contexts, resulting in a paucity of studies in settings like Barbados. Hence, research that examines the construction of discursive agency by female politicians in non-Western contexts will build on the literature on agency from a PDA perspective and is also relevant in centring issues that border on the voice and empowerment of female leaders. In light of global calls for gender equity, female empowerment and social justice for women, research that foregrounds the voice and agency of women is important not only in dismantling oppressive patriarchal ideologies, but also in re-imagining and building fairer and more inclusive communities (see Sarfo-Kantankah, Ngula & Nartey in this issue). To address the research gap identified above, this paper examines how Mia Mottley, the prime minister of Barbados, enacts agency in her speeches. This study extends research on discursive agency in political communication by focusing on a female politician from the Global South. It also throws light on identity construction and (de)legitimation in political leadership in a context underexplored in the literature and highlights the role of Global South leaders in the decolonization of political processes.

In the rest of the paper, I provide a biographical note on Mia Mottley to contextualize the study. Next, I delineate the theoretical framework that informs the study and outline the data and methodological procedures. I then present the findings and discussion where I

illustrate Mia Mottley's enactment of agency. I conclude the study by recapping the main findings and echoing its significance to the extant scholarship.

2. Context

Mia Amor Mottley is a Barbadian politician and attorney who has served as the 8th prime minister of Barbados since 2018 and as leader of the Barbados Labour Party since 2008. She is the first woman to hold both positions. She is also Barbados' first prime minister under its republican system, following constitutional changes she introduced to abrogate the country's constitutional monarchy in November 2021. An attorney-at-law and senior counsel, Mia Mottley has been active in the political life of Barbados for three decades. She was first elected in 1994 and is currently serving her 6th term as member of parliament for the constituency of St. Michael North East. Between 1994 and 2008, she served in the cabinet of three successive administrations as minister of education and culture, attorney-general and minister of home affairs and minister of economic affairs. In 2003, she was appointed deputy prime minister. Currently, she holds the additional portfolio of minister of finance, economic affairs and investment as has historically been the case for prime ministers in Barbados.

Outside Barbados, she was chair of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community between January and June 2020 and the co-chair of the Development Committee of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund between November 2020 and October 2021. Currently, she serves as co-chair of the Americas Cruise Tourism Task Force for the Caribbean, Mexico, Central and South America markets and the co-chair of the World Health Organization's Global Leaders Group on Antimicrobial Resistance. She has delivered notable addresses at the United Nations General Assembly and the United Nations Climate Change Conference. Other major speeches of hers include the inaugural Kofi Annan Memorial Lecture and the Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture. Mia Mottley is known for her strong views on climate change as well as her resistance against imperialism, neocolonialism and all forms of (indirect) control and foreign domination of developing countries by advanced countries typically from the Global North (www.pmo.gov.bb).

3. Agency and discourse

This study is informed by a critical discourse analytical approach to agency. Agency can be defined as the socioculturally mediated capacity to act (Ahearn 2010). It is linked to issues of representation, responsibility, legitimacy and stance-taking, and it signals the relationship between text producers and their audience. Consequently, agency can be used to do ideological

and identity work. Agency is evident in discourse processes and structures and can be realized by grammatical resources such as pronouns, nominalization, transitivity, active and passive voice, attribution and predication and foregrounding and backgrounding (Ghachem 2015). Ahearn (2010), however, submits that the grammatical realization of agency does not necessarily correspond with social definitions of agency and hence the need to consider situational context in determining the presence or absence of agency. Duranti (2004) has discussed the performance and encoding of agency and opines that the two dimensions are mutually constitutive since the performance of agency depends on and simultaneously affects its encoding. Ahearn (2010) has also introduced the notion of ‘meta-agentive discourse’, which is relevant to the current study. This refers to “how people talk about agency – how they talk about their own actions and others’ actions, how they attribute responsibility for events, how they describe their own and others’ decision-making processes” (Ahearn 2010, 41). Previous work on women’s agency has explored the role of various linguistic processes in the enactment of agency (Barca 2018; Karimullah 2020). Other studies have examined the representation of women’s agency in news reports (Barca 2018), referendum campaigns (Strange 2022) and picture books (Netz & Kuzar 2020). Another strand of research has analysed how women construct their own agency (Ndambuki & Janks 2010; Cresswell 2017; Mills & Jones 2014). The current study contributes to this latter line of research and contends that this ‘bottom-up’ perspective is useful in amplifying the voices of women and centring their power and worldview.

As an approach to critical social research, critical discourse analysis (CDA) examines the relationship between language, power and ideology, and it is informed by the underlying assumption that discourse does ideological work (van Dijk 1998; van Leeuwen 2008; Fairclough 2010). CDA pays attention to both the structural and sociocultural aspects of discourse. This paper therefore argues that CDA provides a framework through which agency can be conceptualized as the capacity of social actors to get their message across by producing, distributing and interpreting texts (Fairclough 2005). That is, the workings of texts as well as their situational elements can index the framing of agency as will be demonstrated in the present study.

Bearing in mind that different versions of CDA have been outlined in the literature, this paper adopts Fairclough’s (1995) approach to CDA. It is a dialectical-relational approach that combines description, interpretation and explanation of texts. It pays attention to the following things during the analysis: (a) the context in which the text is produced, (b) the way the text is

produced and (c) the details of the text itself. These aspects of discourse are examined with recourse to a three-dimensional analysis that includes analysis at the textual, discursive practice and sociocultural practice levels. The textual level of analysis centres on how linguistic structures and content are used to communicate specific goals, including agency. The discursive practice level focuses on the production, distribution and consumption of texts. The sociocultural level engages with the social and situational contexts within which a text is produced and hence analyses the text in relation to macro issues on a broad dimension. The performance and encoding of agency, as Ahearn (2010) correctly notes, is both linguistic and social. Hence, Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis that examines linguistic structures, discursive strategies and social practices is useful for examining Mia Mottley's construction of agency as part of doing identity work around her experiences as a female political leader from the Global South.

4. Data and methods

The data for this study comprise 60 speeches delivered by Mia Mottley in her official capacity as the prime minister of Barbados. This was the total number of speeches with full transcripts when the data collection ended. The speeches were delivered between 2018 and 2022 and were collected from the official website of the government of Barbados (www.pmo.gov.bb). Some of the speeches were directed at the people of Barbados (e.g., state of the nation addresses, updates on the COVID-19 pandemic, budget statements, ministerial announcements) and others addressed the international community (e.g., addresses at the independence anniversary celebration of other countries, statements at regional and international summits). Regarding the latter, some notable speeches include remarks at the United Nations General Assembly, the Summit of Americas, the United Nations Climate Summit and the Climate Action Summit. Key issues discussed in the speeches include (neo)colonialism (and the accompanying issues of racism and white supremacy), climate change and global warming, the Barbadian identity, the role of Barbados and the Caribbean in world affairs and the relationship between Africa and the Caribbean. Both domestic and international speeches were collected and analysed together to provide a comprehensive understanding of Mia Mottley's discursive construction of agency, bearing in mind that when politicians address any audience, they are aware that how they communicate is often scrutinized by a global audience and that the implications of their language use transcend their immediate audience even if their audience is a local one.

In terms of analytical procedure, the discursive means by which Mia Mottley framed her agency were first identified by reading the speeches repeatedly and noting her

representation of social actors and her use of language that signals action or intervention that is intended to produce a particular effect. The linguistic means (e.g., pronouns, modals, voice, referential expressions, specific vocabulary) by which the strategies were realized was also analysed. Next, Mia Mottley's discursive agency was interpreted with recourse to situational and sociocultural context, including the circumstances surrounding the speeches, the history of Barbados and background information about Mia Mottley. This is important because the linguistic manifestation of agency may not necessarily correspond with its social construction (Ahearn 2010). The contextualized analysis therefore helped to provide a nuanced understanding of Mia Mottley's discursive positioning, especially in terms of her critical evaluation of the leaders of advanced countries and international organizations like the World Trade Organization, World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Finally, the possible implications of her agentive posture for identity construction, sociopolitical legitimacy and audience perception were explicated. The method of analysis thus follows a three-step process of identification, interpretation and explanation implemented simultaneously (Fairclough 2010).

5. Mia Mottley's enactment of agency

The analysis revealed that Mia Mottley's construction of agency is evident in three main ways: (1) constructing strong and decisive leadership, (2) sculpting a prophetess image and (3) issuing a clarion call to action. These mechanisms enable her to do ideological and identity work in a manner that suggests that she has the power and capacity to initiate actions that produce a particular effect.

5.1. Constructing strong and decisive leadership

To frame herself as an agent of social change, Mia Mottley constructs strong and decisive leadership in her speeches. This is evident in the directness of her discourse as she speaks truth to power. The extracts below illustrate this.

- (1) We are facing a double jeopardy. Our countries were those from whom wealth was extracted in order to build the developed world. Our countries were left at independence with no compact, no money to finance basic rates of housing and health care and education. And when we fought to do it, now we find ourselves having those efforts crowded out literally by our inability to be able to face and find the money, because we are using it to recover from climate crises, not of our own making. (9th Summit of the Americas, June 11, 2022)

- (2) Mr. Secretary-General forgive me for my bluntness. We all know the difficulties of small states and I will not avoid the elephant in the room ... These rules were not developed for such a time as this, and we need to change these rules that deny access to successful small countries, and we need to remove the bureaucracy attached there too. (United Nations Climate Action Summit, September 23, 2019)
- (3) How many more times will we then have a situation where we say the same thing over and over and over, to come to nought. How many more variants of COVID-19 must arrive? How many more before a worldwide action plan for vaccinations will be implemented? How many more deaths must it take before 1.7 billion excess vaccines in the possession of the advanced countries of the world will be shared with those who have simply no access, no access to vaccines? (76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, September 24, 2021)
- (4) Growth in the economies of the developed states, we contend, must not come at the existence of the very viability of small development statements. Small children have a phrase for it. They call that cowardice. They call that bullying. They call that crowding out. We ask for fairness, equity, an opportunity to take our legitimate place in a global community. (2019 Caribbean Forum, November 6, 2019)

In the extracts above, Mia Mottley confronts the leaders of developed economies (especially countries in Western Europe and North America), calls out what she considers to be injustices on their watch and demands change. She foregrounds her agency by presenting herself not only as the prime minister of Barbados, but also as a representative of so-called third-world countries and suggests that it is unacceptable to have first-class and second-class citizens or nations in the global community (2, 3, 4). The representation of social actors is an essential aspect of agency (Karimullah 2020). It is therefore unsurprising that apart from positively presenting herself as an agent of positive change, Mia Mottley refers to the actions of developed countries as ‘cowardice’, ‘bullying’ and ‘crowding out’ (1, 4). These expressions can be interpreted as a negative other-presentation strategy aimed at condemning international policies that deny access to small countries (2). By contrasting the positive actions of Barbados with the negative actions of developed countries (1, 3, 4), Mia Mottley engages in meta-agentive discourse (Ahearn 2010) by talking about her and others’ actions, attributing responsibility for events and evaluating her and others’ decisions. Her criticism of the actions of advanced countries that reinforce imperialism illustrates the use of language in the decolonization of political processes and demonstrates her agency in initiating action that can instigate positive change.

The frankness with which Mia Mottley presents her ideas as part of her agentive posture is evidenced by expressions such as ‘contend’ (4), ‘bluntness’ (2), ‘double jeopardy’, ‘crises’ (1), ‘I will not avoid the elephant in the room’ (2) and asking rhetorical questions (3). The

rhetorical questions, particularly, are worth mentioning as the entire speech from which they were culled is largely made up such thought-provoking questions. Based on these questions, she concludes that “This age dangerously resembles that of a century ago, when we were on the eve of the Great Depression” (Mia Mottley 24/09/2021). The conclusion she makes amplifies her agency by suggesting that she has the knowledge and ability to diagnose the current state of deterioration of the world. When this judgement is analysed in conjunction with the declarations “There is so much trouble in the world” (Mia Mottley 11/06/2011) and “The pandemic has taught us that national solutions to global problems do not work” (Mia Mottley 01/11/2021), a sense of an urgent situation that requires immediate redress is created. This enables her to proffer various solutions throughout her speeches, thereby implying that she is taking an active role in instigating positive change in world affairs. The carving of a strong leader image has been found to be a key component of agentive discourse (Jones 2021). Hence, this paper contends that Mia Mottley’s confrontational and straightforward language allows her to project the identity of a strong, decisive, forward-looking leader as an integral aspect of her agency. That is, she portrays herself as ‘having the right intentions’, ‘thinking right’, ‘sounding right’ and ‘telling the right story’ (Charteris-Black 2014, 14).

Although Mia Mottley is generally blunt in her addresses, there is also indirection in her language. For instance, in (2), she apologizes for her bluntness and in (4) when she describes leaders of developed economies as cowards and bullies, she attributes her description to ‘small children’. I argue that such indirection forms part of her ‘diplomatic’ posture as a politician. As Gyasi (1997) notes, the language of politics can be characterized by indirectness and face-saving strategies. Hence, it sometimes becomes necessary for Mia Mottley to ‘soften’ her confrontational rhetoric, illustrating her tactfulness in the construction of her agency.

The strong, decisive leadership constructed by Mia Mottley as part of her agency is also apparent in how she foregrounds her voice as illustrated in the following extracts.

- (5) As Chair of the Development Committee, I’ve been making this call and again I’m calling for an agreement on a multidimensional vulnerability index which would replace historic per capita income. (20th Session of the United Nations High-Level South-South Committee, June 1, 2021)
- (6) Let me be very clear, this Debt Service Suspension Initiative is welcome. But to spend much time debating whether we should extend it by a few months will not address the crisis that we face today. (Conference of African Ministers of Finance, March 22, 2021)
- (7) The Government that I lead is determined that Barbados will be viewed as one of the world’s top countries, a place of energy and enlightenment, of opportunity. It is my judgment, that the Cabinet

which would best deliver therefore, on the agenda that we have developed as a political party ...
(Announcement of New Cabinet, January 24, 2022)

- (8) I have done more listening, internalizing and analysing in the past two weeks than perhaps at any other period of my 30-plus years in public life. I've heard appeals made. I've witnessed directives given ... I've seen one or two hotels functioning. I've gone to supermarkets, hardware stores. I have been all over, and I've listened, I've watched and I've consulted. It is now my judgment that it is time for us as a people and as a nation to act. (Address to the Nation, January 26, 2021)

Mia Mottley foregrounds her voice in the extracts above by using the first-person pronoun 'I', 'me' and 'my'. Pronouns are one of the main grammatical resources for expressing agency given their ideological value (Ndambuki & Janks 2010). Hence, Mia Mottley's use of first-person singular pronouns enables her to invest credibility into her pronouncements to make them more compelling. The judicious use of first-person singular and plural pronouns by political leaders this allows them to depict themselves as authentic and agentive leaders as well as ingratiate themselves with the masses (Stănculete 2019). By using the first-person pronouns, Mia Mottley presents herself as one who is action-oriented (5), one who takes responsibility (8) and one who can bring about change (7). In other words, she engages in self-promotion to give legitimacy to her leadership (see Igwebuike & Chimuanya in this issue). To further project her voice, she combines her pronouns with expressions of emphasis such as 'been making this call and again ...' (5), 'Let me be very clear' (6) and 'my judgement' (7, 8). Together, such lexicalization imbues her utterances with power and portrays her as one with the capacity to take decisive actions and make interventions that can result in transformation.

Additionally, her use of parallel structures alongside first-person singular pronouns, as can be seen in (8), intensifies her agency given the oratorical impact of parallelism, including reification, reiteration and reinforcement of ideas (Tannen 1989). Furthermore, Mia Mottley does not only project her voice through her use of first-person pronouns, but also emboldens her audience by deploying these pronouns as can be seen in the statement "I don't place that burden on the United States of America alone". I place it on all of us, including my country" (11/06/2022). This empowerment function realized by her discourse, I argue, enhances her agency and foregrounds her formulation of strong and decisive leadership.

It is noteworthy that Mia Mottley uses 'we' in (1) – (4) and 'I' in (5) – (8). I submit that this usage is strategic rather than coincidental and further echoes her tactfulness in constructing agency. That is, depending on situational context, she constructs agency for the Barbadian people and by extension other developing countries or she foregrounds her personal authority

and legitimacy. This dual construction is necessary to emphasize collective action as a basis for transforming the lives of the Barbadian people as well as underscoring the instrumentality of her personal responsibility as prime minister to safeguard the welfare of Barbados (Ndambuki & Janks 2010). The performance and encoding of agency, Duranti (2004) affirms, is mutually constitutive. Hence, Mia Mottley's enactment of agency relies on and is informed by the linguistic means through which she encodes her agency. As shown in the analysis above, pronouns, voice, foregrounding and the semantic roles she attributes to herself are the linguistic resources she utilizes in her agentive discourse.

5.2. Sculpting a 'prophetess' image

Mia Mottley's agency is also reflected in her sculpting of a 'prophetess' image. To this end, she ponders the past and present and ascribes to herself the power to divine Barbados' future and the future of world affairs or global governance. In the extract below, she reflects on the current state of the world and emphatically concludes that it is fraught with danger.

- (9) Mr. Secretary, there is so much trouble in the world. Excellencies, there is so much trouble in the world. Heads of Government, there is so much trouble in the world. Heads of State, there is so much trouble in the world. I've chosen the language of Bob Marley this morning not because I'm an apostle of Bob, as you probably have realized by now, but because he reminds us of the day-to-day reality of our people and of our citizens. (9th Summit of the Americas, June 11, 2022)

Speaking at the 9th Summit of the Americas, Mia Mottley adopts a diagnostic posture and presents a poor prognosis for the world. She reiterates the refrain 'there is so much trouble in the world', thereby casting herself in the mould of a prophetess who ponders the past, meditates on the present and contemplates the future. With this prophetic identity, she foregrounds her agency by reminding world leaders of the 'day-to-day reality of our people and our citizens'. In her speech, she identifies three global crises (global warming, the COVID-19 pandemic and inflation) and 'warns' the leaders at the summit not to merely engage in speeches or platitudes, but to commit to make a difference in the lives of their people and the world at large. It is instructive that she references Bob Marley and the Wailers' (1979) hit song 'So much trouble in the world' as it helps her to highlight what she believes to be the world's predicament and to strongly condemn what she considers the uncaring attitude of political leaders. This intertextuality can thus be said to achieve a two-fold function of visionary leadership and scathing criticism aimed at social transformation. Therefore, one can assert that she arrogates to herself the ability to divine the Americas' true interests.

Given the iconic and legendary status of Bob Marley not only as an artiste, but also as a ‘prophet-leader’ of social change (Hewitt 2015), this paper argues that Mia Mottley’s association with him strengthens the prophetic image she sculpts for herself. That is, she identifies with Rastafari discourses of consciousness that speak of agency, liberation from mental slavery and a socio-political and spiritual awakening that promotes positive change (Stokke 2021). In other words, it can be said that she adopts an interventionist stance that underscores her agency and action-orientedness. It is therefore not alarming that later in her speech, she states that “I don’t need you to join me in the words of this song. I need you to join us in the chorus of action that our people need, not want. Our people need immediate intervention” (Mia Mottley 11/06/2022). Her formulation of such a result-driven persona is reiterated elsewhere in her address when she says “I have not come here just to use words. Let us be practical. We have a duty to solve a few problems. [So,] We need to engage and see how we can make a difference in a real way” (Mia Mottley 11/06/2022). The explicit articulation of attitudes, feelings, beliefs and wishes is an indicator of agency because this type of information impacts others, entities and events (Duranti 2004). Therefore, the diagnostic posture Mia Mottley adopts to verbalize her feelings about global crises and the role of world leaders in addressing them shows that her actions and communication affect other entities (especially countries from developing countries whose interests she champions) and are the object of appraisal. Mindful of this double effect of her agency, she holds herself and other world leaders accountable and stresses the need for them to act decisively and find lasting solutions to the global problems she has itemized.

The prophetic image Mia Mottley constructs for herself as part of her agency can also be seen in the solutions that she proffers for the challenges that she has identified. The extracts below demonstrate this point.

- (10) If we did nothing else in the next decade in the OAS but to allow our people to become bilingual and trilingual – people under 18 and adults – then we would change economic possibilities of this hemisphere in ways that we can’t even contemplate. (9th Summit of the Americas, June 11, 2022)
- (11) The simple priority must be people, not ideology. If we can make progress for people, if we can allow people to speak different languages, if we can create a minimum floor of education and health care for the people of the Americas, then my friends, the City of Angels would have played its role in the history of the Americas. (9th Summit of the Americas, June 11, 2022)
- (12) Whether it is in the area of agriculture and food security, whether it is in the area of housing, whether it is in the area of the logistics, whether it is in the area of the gold exchange, whatever it is, we have recognized that in this world you are not going to be able to succeed if we try on our own. That is why

regional unity is needed now more than ever if we are going to turn the corner and to move away from these multiple crises. (Agrofest Barbados, May 27, 2022)

Casting herself in the mould of a deliverer on a messianic mission of saving the Americas, Mia Mottley offers various solutions to the problems she has identified. Among other ideas, she presents bilingualism/trilingualism (10, 11), basic education and healthcare (11) and regional unity (12) as actionable steps that can be taken to address these challenges. It is important to note that she presents her ideas as suggestions whose implementation will inevitably lead to positive outcomes. In this regard, she uses conditional clauses such as ‘If we allow our people to become bilingual and trilingual, we will change economic possibilities’ (10) and ‘if we can create a minimum floor of education and healthcare, then the City of Angels would have played its role in the history of the Americas’ (11). These conditionals can be analysed as a form of pontification that realizes an agentive function. The strong manner in which Mia Mottley offers her suggestions as well as the authoritative tone that accompanies her voice is also highlighted by deontic modality such as ‘must’ and ‘need to’. Through these modals of compulsion, she suggests that she has clarity about the future and hence is convinced about the feasibility of her suggestions. That is, she presents herself as a seer of a sort who has the capacity to divine the future. The projection of such divination quality and/or the claim to (accurate) prophetic insight has been found by Nartey (2020) to characterize the voice and agency of socio-political actors, especially in their construction of a resistance discourse. Hence, the actionable steps that Mia Mottley provides via her declarations in the extracts above can be interpreted as divine injunctions from an individual positioning herself as a prophet-leader or prophet-messenger and therefore ‘chosen’ by God to rescue the citizens of especially developing countries from (imminent) crises.

Furthermore, the prophetess image Mia Mottley carves for herself as part of her agency is reflected in the glorious future she predicts for Barbados as shown in the extracts below.

(13) I entreat my government to remain steadfast in its determination that Barbados shall be a country of innovation, opportunity, productivity, prosperity, fairness, equity, justice, kindness, peace and good vibes. Together always on our common mission which puts Barbados first; when times are hard, we will share, when times are good, we will share. Together we will make it. Opening of Parliament, September 15, 2020)

(14) Today, let us look forward therefore my friends, with optimism, with hope! We’ve braved the showers, we can see the rainbow, and even the pot of gold at the end of it but we are conscious that we cannot take our eyes off what makes us work ... We know, as well, that if we hold on to all of that,

buttressed by the Barbadian spirit that is so resilient, yes, my friends, we shall make it! (Christmas Day, December 25, 2021)

(15) This is who we are. This is who we can be. This is what Barbados can become for we are truly one people, born of struggle, but charting our destiny, committed to collaboration; understanding that not only must we create the future we want, we are capable of so doing and we shall be successful. (Announcement of New Cabinet, January 24, 2022)

In these extracts, Mia Mottley prophesies a strong, resilient and prosperous Barbadian economy. Assuming the role of an Old Testament prophetess like Deborah (see Judges 4: 4) or Huldah (see 2 Kings 22: 14-20), Mia Mottley paints an imaginative and a bright Barbadian future, thereby delivering an uplifting message that is intended to inspire hope. As Nartey (2020) notes, the positive predictions politicians make about the future of their countries can function as an uplifting discourse that provides inspiration in despairing times. It is therefore unsurprising that despite the several challenges of Barbados as a small island nation, Mia Mottley forecasts a great future for Barbados and boldly asserts “Barbados is a proud nation, long respected for punching way above its weight” (Mia Mottley 13/09/2018). I submit that foretelling the prosperous future of Barbados has the potential of creating a powerful positive feeling among the people of Barbados and to encourage them to repose their confidence in an agentive and visionary leader who lays claim to seeing the Promised Land of Bliss.

The positive energy Mia Mottley invests into her discourse as well as the prosperous future she conceives for Barbados is amplified by emphatic pronouncements such as ‘Together, we will make it’ (13), ‘Yes, my friends, we shall make it’ (14) and ‘We can see the rainbow and even the pot of gold at the end of it’ (14). Such declarations can be said to carry the pontifical force of an encyclical and thus vests the speaker with supernatural qualities (here, prophetic insight). The message of optimism Mia Mottley conveys to the Barbadian people as well as the Promised Land of Bliss she designs for them is intensified by the deontic modal ‘shall’ (13, 14) and lexical items such as ‘innovation’, ‘opportunity’, ‘productivity’, ‘prosperity’, ‘justice’, ‘peace’ and ‘good vibes’ (13). Together, these expressions can be argued to function as a conviction rhetoric (Charteris-Black 2005) aimed at underlining the prophetic image projected by Mia Mottley.

In addition to pondering the past and present, divining the future and proffering solutions, Mia Mottley’s speeches realize a form of ritualistic political discourse that has the effect of providing instant commonality between her and her audience (Gastil 1992). In this vein, she assumes the role of the nation’s high priest and offers prayers and intercessions for

Barbados as the extracts below illustrate. These prayers-cum-blessings accentuate her prophetess image and foreground her result-oriented approach by suggesting that she believes in all form of actions aimed at positive change, including spiritual actions like prayer and supplication to God.

(16) I pray truly, that this world does not need to see greater calamity or greater loss of life to understand that what is required of each and every one of us as we stand in trust on behalf of the people whom we represent is decisive action ... I pray that this organization recognizes that 2020 is but 15 months away and that there will be a point of no return. (United Nations General Assembly, September 28, 2018)

(17) I ask you to help us continue to pray for our country. May Almighty God continue to bless Barbados, to bless Barbadians ... [May] God bless this nation of ours. (Announcement of New Cabinet, July 22, 2020)

(18) May God keep his guiding and merciful hand on my government, the citizens and country of Barbados. (Opening of Parliament, September 15, 2020)

(19) May God Bless us all and May God Bless our beloved Barbados. (Announcement of New Cabinet, January 24, 2022)

5.3. Issuing a clarion call

Mia Mottley issues a clarion call to world leaders and international organizations in a manner that reveals the social transformation she wants to see, thereby lending credence to her agency. As the extracts below show, the specific demands she makes and the tone of her illocution depict her as a woman on a mission and as a leader with a critical assignment.

(20) We need to recognize that adaptation has no private-sector-follower because there is no return on investment in adapting to the climate realities. That is the function of the State and therefore the international community is required in the justice of the moment to help us prevent loss of life and property for a crisis we didn't create. (9th Summit of the Americas, June 11, 2022)

(21) I ask us in the name of our people, to find the global moral strategic leadership – global because our problems are global; moral, because we must do the right thing and; strategic, because we cannot solve every problem of the world, but we must solve those within our purview immediately. (76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, September 24, 2021)

(22) Now is the time for us to get the equation correct. Get it correct in terms of eating what we grow and growing what we eat. Get it correct in terms of not using the kinds of pesticides and fertilizers that will cause us harm as human beings. Get it correct in terms of ensuring that we don't simply use a plantation model to the development of agriculture going forward, but that we use a combination of technology, investment and education of our young people to ensure that we get the best returns out of agriculture. (Agrofest Barbados, May 27, 2022)

The extracts above highlight Mia Mottley's issuance of a clarion call as she expresses a strong demand and/or request for action. In (20), she demands actions from groups such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In (21), she issues a clarion call to the international community, specifically to developed economies in the Western world whom she believes are culpable for the climate crisis Barbados and other countries in the Caribbean are grappling with. In (22), she calls on leaders of the Caribbean to act in harmony to strengthen their agricultural sector and achieve what she describes as Caribbean Food Security. In all three extracts above and throughout the entire dataset analysed for this study, it can be observed that Mia Mottley projects confidence and courage and hence discursively positions herself as one who is willing to take bold steps to tackle the world's crises she has identified. This daring disposition of hers is articulated via expressions such as 'I ask us in the name of our people' (20), 'the international community is required in the justice of the moment to help us' (21) and 'Now is the time to get the equation right' (22).

The combination of these assertions with modals of obligation like 'must' (20) and 'need to' (22) strengthens the force of her demands and can be argued to form an authoritarian language indicative of moral toughness (Fairclough 2000). That is, she strongly believes that it is the moral right of citizens in developing countries to have a better quality of life. Consequently, she queries the United Nations General Assembly, "Who will stand up for all in our countries who remain and suffer the indignity of unemployment and underemployment"? (Mia Mottley 24/09/2021). This thought-provoking question and her demand for justice for developing countries (21) reinforce her use of language to decolonize political processes and promote positive intervention. That is, she adopts a decolonial stance intended to oppose (neo)colonial policies/practices and safeguard the welfare of developing economies. I submit that the formulation of a resistance discourse that undermines hegemony signals the agency of social actors. Hence, Mia Mottley's call for justice and her critical appraisal of the international community lends credence to dominance-subversive agency (Cresswell 2017; Netz & Kuzar 2020).

A clarion call is typically expressed in a tone of urgency or emergency (Nartey & Yu 2023). In this regard, Mia Mottley uses the adverb 'immediately' (20) and the expressions 'a crisis we didn't create' (21) and 'now is the time' (22) to underline the immediate intervention she believes the people of Barbados and other developing countries need. It can therefore be deduced from her enunciation that she demands concrete and decisive actions from world

leaders and the international community, and she asks them authoritatively. This emphasizes her agency and underscores her bold-cum-courageous discursive positioning as echoed by the following rhetorical questions: “Who will get up and stand up? Who will get up and stand up for the rights of our people? Who will stand up not with a little token, but with real progress”? (Mia Mottley 24/09/2021).

Apart from issuing a clarion call to action as part of her agentive posture, Mia Mottley constructs solidarity and collective agency to recruit mass support as demonstrated in the extracts below.

(23) We can change how we save water, we can turn off the tap each time we brush our teeth. We can change how we save energy. We can turn off the lights and the air conditioners as we leave rooms. We can change our oceans ... My friends, my friends across the world, the time for talk is past. This is truly the time for action; not just the action of leaders and Governments but the actions of you, and you, and you, and you, and you, and me. (Global Climate Action Summit, September 13, 2018)

(24) We ask you what kind of country you want to live in? What do you want people to say about Barbados ten years from now? What do you want people to read when they Google Barbados, 10 years, 20 years, 30 years from now? We have to ask ourselves these questions because where we want to be will not happen by accident or by serendipity. It happens because we have set out to build a nation and mould the people. (Barbados' Independence Day, November 30, 2019)

(25) We must focus, all of us, not just government securing growth for our nation and by extension, for the society, because the issue of growth is not a governmental path alone. It depends on all of us. Fair and equitable growth must be our mission as a nation. That must be our goal. (Christmas Day, December 25, 2021)

In the extracts above, Mia Mottley constructs solidarity and collective agency by explicitly tasking all Barbadians with the responsibility of making Barbados a great nation. She suggests that the work of building the Barbados brand is the task of every Barbadian working together with her government and thus constructs the people of Barbados as agents of their own change. Drawing on lexico-syntactic resources such as the inclusive pronouns ‘we’, ‘our’ and ‘you’ as well as the platonic address term ‘my friends’, Mia Mottley interacts with her audience based on common knowledge and attitudes and implies via her utterances that the future belongs to the Barbadian people as a responsibility rather than a right. By placing such a moral imperative on the people of Barbados, I opine that Mia Mottley foregrounds her agency through an empowering discourse aimed at enlisting the people’s support and galvanizing them for action.

Her use of the inclusive pronouns ‘we/our’, the address term ‘my friends’ and the repetition of ‘you’ in the phrase ‘the actions of you and you and you and you and you and me’ (23) can be asserted to be strategic. This is because such lexicalization helps her to ingratiate herself with the populace in her quest to make them co-workers in the creation and building of the Barbadian economy. When these referential words are analysed in conjunction with assertions found in other parts of the data such as “we have a duty to do as our forebears did”, “join me in this effort”, “we can make this country shine again” and “we got this”, the collective agency constructed by Mia Mottley is strengthened and her representation of the people of Barbados as architects of the great Barbadian future and as instigators of positive change becomes more pronounced. As already indicated, the representation of social actors is essential to the framing of agency (Karimullah 2020). Hence, by assigning the role of nation-building not only to herself and the government that she leads, but also to the people of Barbados, Mia Mottley can be said to impose a social obligation on the people in a way that reinforces her agency. From this position of power, she declares: “When this country acts together as one, there is no battle that we cannot win. We may be bruised. We may be battered, but there is no battle that we cannot win” (Mia Mottley 26/01/2021).

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined how Mia Mottley, the prime minister of Barbados, frames agency in her discourse. It analysed various identities enacted by Mia Mottley that contribute to her discursive construction of agency and her positioning as an instigator of social transformation. The findings revealed that Mia Mottley articulated her agency via three main procedures: (1) constructing strong and decisive leadership, (2) sculpting a ‘prophetess’ image and (3) issuing a clarion call to action. Together, these mechanisms helped her to project her voice, underscore the issues that are most relevant to her as well as establish political legitimacy and authority in her rhetoric. It was also found that Mia Mottley’s construction of agency was realized by linguistic resources such as referential terms, personal pronouns, modal verbs and the representation of social actors. As one of the few studies to have examined the framing of agency by female political leaders, this paper extends research on discursive agency and underlines the view that research that foregrounds the voice and agency of women is important in dismantling repressive patriarchal structures as well as re-imagining and building fairer and more inclusive communities.

By focusing on a female politician from Barbados, this study elucidates identity construction and (de)legitimation in a context under-researched in the literature and highlights

the role of Global South leaders in the decolonization of political processes. In her speeches, Mia Mottley's position against neocolonialism and all forms of exploitation of developing countries is explicit. She positions herself as a freedom fighter advocating the complete emancipation of Barbados and other developing countries. Hence, she formulates an anti-imperialist discourse intended to extricate the people of Barbados/developing countries from constricting systems. As Nartey (2020) asserts, the language as well as posture of post-independence leaders is essential in the decolonization of political processes. Hence, I maintain that Mia Mottley's criticisms of advanced countries who hoarded COVID-19 vaccines and her clarion call for the re-evaluation of sociopolitical and economic structures, policies and practices of the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organization and the Group of Twenty constitute a decolonial stance aimed at disrupting (neo)colonial ideologies and divesting and decentering power. Her discursive positioning offers ideas to Global South leaders for tackling neocolonialism and opposing Western dominance and Eurocentric/Anglo-American perspectives that undermine the knowledge and experiences of countries from the Global South. This paper contributes to decolonial research, and the findings illustrate the important role of language in advancing the goals of marginalized groups in order to instigate progressive social change.

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