

(Re)Defining heroism: A Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) analysis of a president's speech

Jhonas S. Lumanlan^{1, 2, 4, *}, Hoa Do^{3, 4}, Cecille F. Genuino⁴

¹National University, Philippines

²NU Clark

³Academy of Policy and Development, Vietnam

⁴Philippine Normal University, Manila

Received: 09. 09.2025 • Accepted: 05.11.2025 • Published: 12.11.2025 • Final Version: 28.11.2025

Abstract: From a sociolinguistic perspective, language choice reveals a speaker's ideologies. One among various sociolinguistic theories that could be relevant to this work is Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), in which approach it is claimed that language is a resource of meaning situated in certain contexts. This study is an attempt at making use of such framework, aided by qualitative content analysis, to surface the ideologies of heroism in Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s 2023 National Heroes' day speech. The researchers thematically analyzed the speech manuscript into a total of 6 themes: Heroes as historically significant figures; heroes of the past as part of the Filipino identity; breaking free from the traditional definitions of a hero; heroes as today's ordinary men and women being products of their circumstances; that anyone can be a hero in their own way; and stories and recognition of everyday, modern and ordinary heroism. The 3 major process types, along with the other 3 minor types, were used to identify the extracts: Material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential processes. The significance of this work lies in its role in filling in the gaps in the academic literature surrounding the use of SFL as an approach in emerging conceptions from texts of sociopolitical relevance. Ultimately, this paper also brings to fore the relevance of semantics, syntax, and sociolinguistics as tools towards making sense of national and local consciousness, conceptions, and experiences.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, semantics, Systemic Functional Linguistics, heroism, transitivity analysis

1. Introduction

From a sociological perspective, there is not yet a consensus among scholars in the field regarding the clear, and formal definition of the concept of heroism (Frisk, 2018). Research literature on the matter, at least according to Frisk, for instance, is still fragmented. There are those that view heroism as relating to deeds of great men and women of the past; or involving historically significant acts of bravery of specific individuals that culturally and otherwise shaped the society they belonged to. Meanwhile, an interesting description of a hero or the concept of heroism is articulated by Bigazzi et al. (2021):

“a hero is not a hero by his/her inner characteristics, but by the normative reference frame adopted by those judging him/her as a hero. The choice of a hero is embedded in the historical and social context of the one who judges, such as the cultural and communicative aspects of the collective memory, the

* Corresponding Author: jslumanlan@nu-clark.edu.ph

dominant and alternative cultural narratives providing a context for heroic characters and actions, the accepted and contested norms, and the system of competing values as the existence or emergence of counter-normative sources of active minorities in dialogical relation with the majorities” (pp. 831-832).

In the Philippine context, heroism, nationalism, and identity, are constructs closely related to one another (Ramones, 2008; Mendoza, 2011; DeStephano, 2015; Encinas-Franco, 2015; Parba, 2018; Mason & Istvandy, 2018; Roman, 2020). Heroism is an important theme in the making of the Filipino identity; the study of which is critical and a rich source of insights in sociolinguistics, among others (Monje, 2017; Beord, 2017). Heroism in the Philippines usually tends to refer to those who valiantly fought or emerged in the country's history of struggles for independence; and against foreign invaders of the much earlier times (Umali, 2021). Close to this depiction of a hero in the Philippine context is what historian Esteban de Ocampo (as cited in Galang, 2012) offered: “a hero means a prominent or central personage taking an admirable part in any remarkable action or event; a person of distinguished valor or enterprise in danger, or fortitude in suffering; and a man honored after death by public worship because of exceptional service to mankind.” In the same text, Galang (2012) enumerated 10 standards for any historical or otherwise figure to be considered as a hero (as provided for by the National Heroes' Committee): (1) extent of a person's sacrifices for the welfare of the country; (2) motive and methods employed in the attainment of the ideal; (3) moral character of the person concerned; (4) influence of the person concerned on his age and/or the succeeding age; (5) concept of nation and aspiration and struggle for the nation's freedom; (6) contribution to a system of life of freedom and order of a nation; (7) contribution to quality of life and destiny of a nation; (8) being a part of people's expression; (9) thinking of the future, especially of the future generations; and (10) the entire process that the particular person concerned has undergone to be considered a hero after all.

These criteria, however, seem to still be insufficient to completely capture the essence and meaning of what a hero truly is for the Filipinos. How Filipinos define heroism or what a hero is, keeps on changing over time, relative to their changing values and the changing society (David, 2022; Pedregosa, 2019; Mabbayad, 2015). On 18 November 2016, the Philippines was once again a divided nation as its then-president Rodrigo Duterte finally allowed the burial of late president and former dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. in the Libingan ng Mga Bayani. Such a move called into question, even challenged the Philippine notions of heroism and nationalism (Ueda, 2016; Peracullo, 2017; Monje, 2017; Jeresa, 2020; Benedicto, 2021). About 6 years after which, the only son and namesake of Marcos Sr., Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr. (PBBM) won an apparently landslide victory the 2022 national elections for the seat of the 17th president of the Philippines. Once again, such a historical event revealed not only a deep divide but also cracks and fissures in the Filipino sociopolitical landscape (Novio, 2022; Deinla et al., 2022; Dulay, et al., 2023; Tehankee, 2023).

Just recently, PBBM delivered his National Heroes Day speech as the president of the Philippines last August 28 at the Libingan ng mga Bayani in Taguig City during the commemorative wreath-laying ceremony event on the said day. In his speech, he particularly paid tribute not only to the heroes of the past, but of also the modern times, the “new ones” who “continue to emerge...in the daily bustle of modern-day society, in our communities, in our own families and inner circles.” In the same speech, he went from encouraging the Filipino people to “collectively recall the heroic deeds of those who have fought for our honor and our dignity as a blossoming nation throughout the centuries” to “break free from the notion that heroes are only those who have earned a place in the National Pantheon, immortalized in monuments, or those whose names are inscribed in streets, or whose lives are chronicled in biographies.” Reading the transcript of his speech, PBBM seemed to have cited various descriptions and distinctions of what a hero is, relating to the listeners a multifaceted concept in the context of a national commemorative event. Critical to this, therefore, is a question of meaning or

conception. Who and what a hero exactly is; against the backdrop of an arguably historically ironic government (Caballero-Anthony, 2022; Tuquero, 2022; Arao, 2022).

In this paper, the August 2023 National Heroes Day speech manuscript of PBBM is analyzed through the lens and framework of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), "a theoretical approach that analyzes the relationship between social contexts and linguistic aspects" (Halliday & Matthiesen, 2004 as cited in Nakao, 2019, p. 1). According to this approach, language is a resource of meaning situated in certain contexts. Within the said framework, language is described to have so-called "metafunctions". The notion of metafunctions considers language to "construe" human experience; a "theory of human experience". In other words, human experiences are embedded in their languages. There are three basic metafunctions of language, namely, (a) ideational; (b) interpersonal; and (c) textual. Halliday and Matthiesen (2014) explain that these metafunctions "serve to express three largely independent sets of lexicogrammatical choice" (p. 361). One such choice (that a speaker or writer may choose to encode their experience into) is based on the so-called, System of Transitivity, "a key element that deals with the representation of participants, processes, and circumstances involved in the clause" (Halliday & Matthiesen, 2014 as cited in Nakao, 2019, p. 7). More specifically, according to Halliday (1973 as cited in Bartley, 2018), "transitivity is the set of options whereby the speaker encodes his [sic] experience of the processes of the external world, and of the internal world of his own consciousness, together with the participants in these processes and their attendant circumstances" (p. 2). The system or theory posits that a clause generally is made up of 3 main components: (a) process [a verbal group]; (b) participant [a nominal group]; and (c) a circumstance [an adverbial or prepositional phrase]. Under the process component, there are 6 semantic roles identified as: (a) material processes; (b) behavioral processes; (c) mental processes; (d) verbal processes; (e) relational processes; and (f) existential processes. All these processes apparently describe how the speaker or writer encodes their experiences in language. As a linguistic analysis tool, SFL therefore serves a critical function in relevant contexts to aid in purposeful meaning-making across various contexts (Banks, 2002; Hood, 2013; Wu, 2023).

Specifically, the object of analysis is examined through the thematic patterns, transitivity processes, and metafunctions inherent in the text. The significance of this work lies in its role in filling in the gaps in the academic literature surrounding the use of SFL as an approach in surfacing or emerging conceptions or ideologies from texts of sociopolitical relevance and context (Wu, 2023; Malkawi & Fareh, 2023; Al-Badri & Al-Janabi, 2022; Darong, 2022; Triyanto, 2018; Mwinlaaru & Xuan, 2016; Koussouhon & Dossoumou, 2015). Furthermore, this paper is aimed at contributing to the as yet growing local literature particular to the ideals and definitions of heroism in the Philippine arena. Ultimately, this paper also brings to fore the relevance of semantics, syntax, and sociolinguistics as tools towards making sense of national and local consciousness, conceptions, and experiences.

1.1. Systemic Functional Linguistics

This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), a linguistic theory developed by Michael Halliday. SFL views language as a social semiotic system, emphasizing that language functions as a resource for making meaning in social contexts rather than merely a set of abstract grammatical rules. The theory foregrounds the concept of linguistic choice along the paradigmatic axis, where communication involves selecting from a range of available language options to fulfill specific social functions and convey meaning (Halliday & Matthiesen, 2014).

Central to SFL are three simultaneous metafunctions of language: the ideational, the interpersonal, and the textual metafunctions. The ideational metafunction relates to construing human experience

and representing reality by encoding processes, participants, and circumstances. It includes the experiential metafunction, which deals with direct experience and events, and the logical metafunction, which constructs logical relations. The interpersonal metafunction enacts social relations, roles, and attitudes between communicators, reflecting how language expresses social interactions and stances. The textual metafunction organizes language to produce coherent and contextually relevant discourse, ensuring that messages are thematically structured and cohesively linked (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

These metafunctions interact dynamically with social contextual factors, represented in SFL as field (the nature of the social activity), tenor (the roles and relationships of participants), and mode (the channel and role of language in communication). Through this integrated view, SFL connects linguistic choices not only to language structure but to social meaning-making processes (Martin, 1992).

The present study applies the system of transitivity, a key component of the ideational metafunction, to analyze the president's speech. Transitivity analyzes how language encodes different types of processes (material, mental, verbal, relational, behavioral, and existential), the participants involved, and the circumstantial elements. Through this lens, the analysis reveals how the speaker constructs the concept of heroism and surfaces underlying ideological meanings embedded in language use (Halliday, 1973).

Utilizing SFL enables an exploration beyond surface-level content to uncover how linguistic choices shape and reflect sociopolitical ideology, identity, and cultural narratives about heroism, particularly in the Philippine context characterized by complex historical and contemporary dimensions. This approach offers a robust tool for linking semantics, syntax, and sociolinguistics to national consciousness, enriching the academic discourse on heroism and political communication.

1.2. Heroism in the Philippine Context

Heroism in the Philippine context is best approached as a historically situated, culturally mediated, and discursively constructed phenomenon rather than a fixed trait of individuals. Combining a systemic-functional linguistic (SFL) perspective with cultural-historical and memory studies permits an analysis that links clause-level choices to broader processes of national meaning-making, commemoration, and civic pedagogy (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Anderson, 1983).

Contemporary literature identifies heroism in the Philippines as a dynamic construct evolving alongside societal changes. It is typically associated with historic acts of bravery against colonization and struggles for independence by figures such as Andres Bonifacio, José Rizal, and other national heroes (Cabrera et al., 2016). Such heroism is also linked to the values of nationalism, discipline, determination, and sacrifice, reflecting both historical remembrance and present-day identity formation.

Philippine heroism studies reveal that the societal recognition of heroes shifts with the nation's sociopolitical landscape, highlighting the influence of collective memory and contested historical narratives. Recent political events and leadership speeches further complicate and expand the definition of heroism beyond the traditional pantheon of national heroes, acknowledging modern and everyday forms of heroism within communities and families (Ramones, 2008; Umali, 2021).

However, there remain gaps in the comprehensive linguistic and discourse-based examination of how heroism is constructed and conceptualized in the language of political speeches, media, and public discourse. SFL offers a fertile approach to fill these gaps by systematically analyzing the language choices that both reflect and shape ideological constructions of heroism. Recent applications of SFL in Philippine linguistic research illustrate how this framework can reveal culturally specific

sociolinguistic phenomena and embedded ideologies (Quinto-Pozos, 2021; Martin & Cruz, 2019). Yet, specific SFL-based studies on heroism discourse in Philippine political contexts, such as presidential speeches commemorating national heroes, remain scant. This research can contribute by uncovering the nuanced ways language constructs heroism as an ideological and evolving social construct in the Philippine national context.

2. Methods

Along with Halliday's SFL, Qualitative content analysis (QCA) was also employed as one of the overarching methodological approaches in this study. In Hsieh and Shannon (2005), QCA is considered typical in examinations of language as communication in context and as content. The same scholars further defined QCA as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278). However, to specifically conduct QCA of the speech transcript in question, Bengtsson's (2016) typology or conception of QCA was followed for its more structured yet direct manner of study protocol. In it, Bengtsson introduced four steps in analysis: (1) decontextualization; (2) recontextualization; (3) categorization; and (4) compilation.

As the present study involved two phases of analyses, Bengtsson's QCA comprised the first one. To identify themes or patterns in the transcript, the text was examined by having it segmented into meaning units, or discrete portions of text that reflected single, coherent ideas. These units were then recontextualized and ensured to remain faithful to the text's or speaker's intended meanings. The meaning units were then grouped into categories according to recurring ideas and conceptual similarities. Inductively, these categories were refined into themes that conveyed the central ideas emerging from the data.

Table 1. Sample analysis schedule used in extracting manifest themes from PBBM's 2023 National Heroes' Day speech

Meaning Unit	Condensed meaning unit	Code	Category/Theme
From the warriors of old, revolutionary fighters, visionary thinkers, war veterans, and the countless patriots who have helped shape our country into what it is and what we are today—free, independent, and self-determined.	warriors of old who helped shaped our country to what it is today	Historical significance	Heroes as Historically Significant Figures

Next, in the second phase of analysis, the themes that were identified were used to reorganize the transcript accordingly. The thematized or reorganized texts under each theme were then subjected to SFL analysis following Halliday's (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) Transitivity Framework. The transitivity framework is a key component of the ideational metafunction; and analyzes how language encodes different types of processes such as material, mental, and verbal; in consideration of the participants involved, and the circumstantial elements. Through this lens, the analysis reveals how the speaker constructs the concept of heroism and surfaces underlying ideological meanings embedded in language use (Halliday, 1973). Such analysis made it possible to formulate informed interpretations of the underlying intentions and ideologies reflected in the discourse, particularly the ways in which notions of heroism were articulated and reinforced through language.

3. Findings

3.1. Qualitative Content Analysis of the Speech

Below is the QCA of PBBM's speech, yielding a total of 13 meaning units, coded and thematized. These meaning units yield a total of 6 themes. Narratively, the speech began with the definition of heroism, and a historical depiction of a hero, being that they played roles in the historical past of the country. Next, while the speaker indicated that these heroes of the past form part of the Filipino identity of today, he proceeded to call for a going away from the traditional, historically oriented definition of heroism and instead see the concept placed in the modern time, being that heroes are ordinary men and women emerging as they are as products of their own circumstances. The speaker next encouraged the listeners that anyone can be a hero, so long as there is genuine service for the good of others. Finally, the speaker provided instances of everyday, ordinary acts and lives of heroism, and through which reminded the listeners to be inspired and reminded to do and be good.

Thematically, based on the meaning units comprising them, the first theme, "Heroes as Historically Significant Figures", is operationalized as that heroes are those who have important contributions and roles in the storied past of such a nation as the Philippines. These heroes may be those who fought or revolted against colonizers, or those who influenced the formation or beginnings of the Filipino society. The second theme, "Heroes of the Past form Part of the Filipino Identity", underscores how the transcript defines heroism as a source of Filipino identity. The third theme, "Breaking Free from the Traditional, Common Definitions of a Hero", is how the transcript seems to redefine, if not add to the typical conception of heroism; suggesting through the meaning units that there must be a "breaking free" from these usual notions. The fourth theme, "Stories and Recognition of Everyday, Modern and Ordinary Heroism as Sources of Inspiration and Reminders to do Good", captures how the text cite current or modern instances of present-time heroism; and that these must be sources of inspiration and reminders to do good as people. The fifth theme, "Heroes Today are Ordinary Men and Women as Products of their Circumstances", seems to further the narrative focus on present and modern heroism; and suggests that circumstances create such heroes from among even the ordinary men and women. Finally, the sixth theme, "Anyone can be a Hero in their Own Way", suggests similarly on modern-day heroism, but furthers the definition to include not only those who are products of their circumstances, but also those who do or conduct themselves even in small acts of kindness and other actions.

Table 2. Meaning Units and Themes extracted from the Manuscript Text

Meaning Unit	Condensed meaning unit	Code	Category/Theme
From the warriors of old, revolutionary fighters, visionary thinkers, war veterans, and the countless patriots who have helped shape our country into what it is and what we are today—free, independent, and self-determined.	warriors of old who helped shaped our country to what it is today	Historical significance	Heroes as Historically Significant Figures
May the stories of their courage and wisdom continue to be told and imparted to our youth, that they might be inspired and to strengthen their identity and cohesion of our nation for not today alone but for centuries to come	stories of their courage and wisdom continue to inspire and strengthen identity of nation	National identity	Heroes of the Past form Part of Filipino Identity

...we must break free from the notion that heroes are only those who have earned a place in the National Pantheon, immortalized in monuments, or those whose names are inscribed in streets, or whose lives are chronicled in biographies.	break free from the notion that heroes are only those who have earned a place in the National Pantheon, immortalized in monuments, or those whose names are inscribed in streets or whose lives are chronicled in biographies.	Break free from traditional definitions	Breaking Free from the Traditional, Common Definitions of a Hero
Like the "Unknown Soldier" buried in this hallowed ground, unnamed and unheralded heroes too deserve their due recognition.	unnamed and unheralded heroes too deserve their due recognition	Break free from traditional definitions	Breaking Free from the Traditional, Common Definitions of a Hero
While the memories of our heroes of our storied past will never fade, new ones continue to emerge.	new ones continue to emerge	New ones emerge	Stories and Recognition of Everyday, Modern and Ordinary Heroism as Sources of Inspiration and Reminders to do Good
They are here amongst us, in the daily bustle of modern-day society, in our communities, in our own families and inner circles.	they are here amongst us	Heroes among us	Heroes Today are Ordinary Men and Women as Products of their Circumstances
In their own ways—more often than not in less dramatic, less tragic circumstances—their selfless deeds and sacrifices have the same ability to inspire and to create a positive ripple effect in society.	their selfless deeds and sacrifices have the ability to inspire and create positive effect	New ones emerge	Stories and Recognition of Everyday, Modern and Ordinary Heroism as Sources of Inspiration and Reminders to do Good
It can be said that "Most heroes are ordinary men and women." But faced with the challenges of life, faced by the challenges to their lives, to their country, to their families, to their community, and to their beliefs, it is them who rise up and which show us the act of heroism that is extraordinary.	Most heroes are ordinary men and women	Heroes among us	Heroes Today are Ordinary Men and Women as Products of their Circumstances
All of us can be heroes, one way or another. We unleash the hero in us when we act genuinely for the good of another, impelled by causes and motives greater and more noble than mere personal interest or vainglory.	All of us can be heroes	All of us can be heroes	Anyone can be a Hero in their Own Way
Heroism is not only to be found in the grand battles and struggles; it also resides in the simplest acts of kindness, of	Heroism also resides in simple acts of kindness, empathy, and solidarity	Break free from traditional definitions	Breaking Free from the Traditional, Common Definitions of a Hero

empathy, [and] solidarity that not only move hearts, but also influence minds and actions, and change lives for the better.

We need the unfading memories and shining examples of our heroes not only to continually remind us of the noble causes that have led them to their heroic deeds. We also draw inspiration from them for our self-improvement, and to possibly develop our own heroic potential.

So, let us always tell the tales of the heroic deeds of our kababayans, whether they are in the country or – they are in the country or in outside in the rest of the world.

Collectively, their heroic acts, small or large, go a long way and make our country and the world a better place. To them, we once again earnestly dedicate this special day.

unfading memories and shining examples of our heroes to draw inspiration for self-improvement and develop own heroic potential

tell the tales of heroic deeds of our kababayans here and abroad

heroic acts, small or large, go a long way to make our country the world a better place

National identity

New ones emerge

All of us can be heroes

Heroes of the Past form Part of Filipino Identity

Stories and Recognition of Everyday, Modern and Ordinary Heroism as Sources of Inspiration and Reminders to do Good

Anyone can be a Hero in their Own Way

3.2. Transitivity Analysis of the Text

The following table lists the types of processes involved in the manuscript text, reflecting the linguistic choices of the speaker as to how he will embed in to, and express through his ideologies of heroism in the speech manuscript.

Notable in this analysis is how the speaker or the writer of the manuscript speech embedded ideologies of heroism in the text by carefully choosing the words and phrases to use to firstly, establish how instances of “new” kinds of heroism “continue to emerge”; and to secondly, encourage the listeners or audience to “break free from the notion” of heroism based on historical significance, even while at the same time inviting the same listeners to also “recall the heroic deeds” of these historically significant individuals. Interestingly, the relational processes in the text illustrate how the speaker relates heroism of the old to the heroism of the new or modern times by indicating that “they are here amongst us”; and that these ordinary, modern heroes demonstrate “selfless deeds and sacrifices” that “have the same ability to inspire and to create a positive ripple effect in society.” This notion is continued to the summing up of the idea that, thus, “most heroes are ordinary men and women” and that “it is them who rise up and which show us the act of heroism that is extraordinary.” Next, the speaker continue on the linguistic choices reflecting the behavioral processes that the speech is supposed to ask the listeners to embed their experiences into, such as that “all of us can be heroes” and that “we also draw inspiration from them for self-improvement”; and to “give a genuine appreciation” to them, not taking their heroism for granted, etc.. Summarily, the speaker concludes or wraps this speech and the ideology of heroism as that which is “not only to be found in the grand battles and struggles,” but “also resides in the simplest acts of kindness, off empathy, [and] solidarity that not only move hearts, but also influence minds and actions, and change lives for the better.”

Table 2. Transitivity Processes in the Manuscript Text

Process Types	Sample Extracts
Material	...new ones continue to emerge.
	We need the unfading memories and shining examples of our heroes...
Mental	We commemorate today National Heroes Day...
	...let us collectively recall the heroic deeds...
Relational	...we must break free from the notion that heroes are only those who have earned a place in the National Pantheon...
	...unnamed and unheralded heroes too deserve their due recognition.
Behavioral	They are here amongst us.
	their selfless deeds and sacrifices have the same ability to inspire...
Verbal	Most heroes are ordinary men and women.
	it is them who rise up...
Existential	The tale might be the electric lineman from Bacolod City...
	We unleash the hero in us...
Behavioral	All of us can be heroes...
	We also draw inspiration from them for our self-improvement...
Verbal	We must give a genuine appreciation...
	We shall not take their heroism for granted.
Existential	We will not spare ourselves of the moral duty to perpetuate the ideals that they have fought for...
	...we once again earnestly dedicate this special day.
Verbal	We must mention a dear and departed friend...
	...let us always tell the tales of the heroic deeds of our kababayans...
Existential	Heroism is not only to be found in the grand battles and struggles...
	...it also resides in the simplest acts of kindness,...
Existential	Collectively, their heroic acts, small or large, go a long way...

4. Discussion

The thematic and linguistic analyses reveal that while the speech begins by invoking historically significant figures, its rhetorical trajectory increasingly privileges ordinary and contemporary forms of heroism. This shift suggests an intentional ideological move: to reposition heroism away from the exclusive domain of the past and toward the lived realities of present citizens. The initial references to warriors, revolutionaries, and patriots serve as a perfunctory nod to tradition, but they are not sustained

as the dominant frame. Instead, the discourse pivots toward a redefinition of heroism.

At the outset, the speech situates heroism within the nation's historical struggles, referencing warriors, revolutionaries, and patriots. These figures serve as symbolic anchors, legitimizing the continuity of sacrifice across generations. However, this historical framing functions less as the central focus and more as a launching point for a broader redefinition. The speaker quickly transitions from commemorating the past to questioning the adequacy of traditional definitions, urging listeners to "break free" from the notion that only those immortalized in monuments or biographies deserve recognition. This rhetorical shift does not seem accidental. By urging listeners to "break free" from the notion that heroes are only those immortalized in monuments or biographies, the speaker effectively dodges the burden of historical heroism. In doing so, the speech avoids prolonged engagement with the contested terrain of the past, particularly significant given the speaker's own political lineage. As the son of a former president whose legacy remains deeply divisive, and whose burial in the national heroes' cemetery was widely criticized, the speaker's choice to downplay historical heroism can be read as an attempt to neutralize historical scrutiny.

From this point forward, the speech increasingly foregrounds ordinary men and women as the true bearers of heroism in the present. Through relational processes such as "most heroes are ordinary men and women," the discourse collapses the distance between the extraordinary and the everyday. This rhetorical move democratizes heroism, suggesting that it is not confined to certain figures of history but is instead embodied by citizens who rise to challenges in their families, communities, and workplaces. On one hand, this reflects a populist orientation. On the other, it strategically dilutes the authority of historical narratives that might otherwise highlight uncomfortable truths about the speaker's own family history.

Meanwhile, themes of inclusivity and accessibility are reinforced by behavioral processes that emphasize agency: "we unleash the hero in us" and "all of us can be heroes." These linguistic choices highlight that heroism is not a static status but a performative act, realized through genuine service for others. In this way, the speech reframes heroism as praxis rather than legacy, shifting the emphasis from historical commemoration to present-day moral responsibility. This emphasis on present-day heroism such as acts of kindness, empathy, and solidarity only further consolidates the attempt at reframing. By insisting that heroism "resides in the simplest acts," the speech not only elevates the ordinary but also repositions the locus of heroism away from the grand struggles of the past. This rhetorical move allows the speaker to celebrate heroism without dwelling on the historical canon, which remains fraught with ideological contestation.

In this sense, the speech does not merely broaden the definition of heroism; it reorients the national imagination. The speaker's choice of words in the speech strategically redefines heroism by decentering the monumental past and recentering the ordinary present. Although historical figures remain important as symbolic reference points, the ideological thrust however lies in democratizing heroism and embedding it in everyday life. Deeper than this, by foregrounding the ordinary and present, the speaker effectively sidesteps the controversies of the past while simultaneously prescribing a moral framework for the present. In this way, the speech functions as both a commemorative act and a strategic redefinition: It honors history but only briefly, and strategically recasts heroism as a lived, everyday practice; a move that both resonates with citizens and shields the speaker from the weight of historical judgment.

5. Conclusion

This paper employed Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) in conjunction with qualitative content analysis to surface the ideologies of heroism embedded in President Ferdinand

“Bongbong” Marcos Jr.’s Heroes Day speech. Six themes emerged from the analysis: heroes as historically significant figures; heroes of the past as part of Filipino identity; breaking free from traditional definitions of a hero; heroes as today’s ordinary men and women shaped by their circumstances; the notion that anyone can be a hero in their own way; and the recognition of everyday, modern heroism as a source of inspiration. These themes were further substantiated by the transitivity processes identified in the text: Material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential; which collectively reveal how language was strategically mobilized to construct and redefine the concept of heroism.

From these findings, it can be inferred that the speech advances a broadened and reoriented definition of heroism. While it begins with references to historically significant figures, the discourse quickly shifts to emphasize the heroism of ordinary citizens in contemporary contexts. The linguistic evidence demonstrates how the speaker encourages the audience to move away from a purely historical conception of heroism and instead recognize the moral value of everyday acts of service, kindness, and solidarity. In this way, heroism is reframed not as a legacy confined to the past but as a living, performative practice accessible to all.

This rhetorical move carries important implications. By downplaying the centrality of historical heroism and foregrounding the ordinary, the speech strategically avoids prolonged engagement with the contested terrain of the past, particularly significant given the speaker’s own political lineage and the controversies surrounding his father’s burial in the national heroes’ cemetery. The redefinition of heroism thus serves a dual purpose: it democratizes the concept by making it inclusive of ordinary citizens, while simultaneously redirecting attention away from divisive historical debates. Ultimately, the speech not only commemorates but also reconstructs heroism as a civic responsibility for the present, embedding it in the everyday lives of Filipinos and ensuring its continued ideological resonance.

References

- [1] Al-Badri, Z. K. G., & Al-Janabi, S. F. K. (2022). A systemic functional linguistic and critical discourse analysis of a selected speech on COVID-19. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Special Issue on CALL*, 8, 314-329. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/call8.21>
- [2] Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso.
- [3] Arao, D. A. (2022 October 10). Press freedom under Bongbong is fake news. <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/10/10/press-freedom-under-bongbong-is-fake-news/>
- [4] Banks, D. (2002). Systemic functional linguistics as a model for text analysis. *OpenEdition Journals*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/asp.1584>
- [5] Bartley, L. V. (2018). Putting transitivity to test: A review of the Sydney and Cardiff models. *Functional Linguistics*, 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40554-018-0056-x>
- [6] Benedicto, B. (2021). The place of the dead, the time of dictatorship: Nostalgia, sovereignty, and the corpse of Ferdinand Marcos. *Environ Plan D.*, 39(4). 722-739. doi:10.1177/02637758211013038
- [7] Beord, T. (2017). An analysis of the Filipino-English diglossia through social representations of languages. *An International Multi-Disciplinary Graduate Conference of Terengganu (GraCe 2016)*. hal-01432727
- [8] Bengtsson, M. (2016). How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis. *Nursing Plus Open*, 2, 8-16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.npls.2016.01.001>
- [9] Bigazzi, S., Csernus, F., Siegler, A., Bokretas, I., Serdult, S., Ilea, I., Giourga, A., Kahraman, M., & Takacs, B. (2021). Social representations of heroes: Triggers from the past, values in the present, patterns for the future. *Human Arenas*, 6, 830-854. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-021-00248-5>
- [10] David, R. (2022 August 28). Heroism. <https://opinion.inquirer.net/156443/heroism>

- [11] Caballero-Anthony, M. (2022 May 13). A Marcos returns to power in the Philippines [Commentary]. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-marcos-returns-to-power-in-the-philippines/>
- [12] Cabrera, J. E., Omandam, C. J., & Canini, N. D. (2016). Influence of Filipino heroism on the value concepts of Grade 10 high school students in Ozamiz City National High School. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 5(2), 1-18. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7828/jmds.v5i2.1023>
- [13] Darong, H. C. (2022). It is all about clauses: Speech analysis using systemic functional linguistics theory. *Englisia: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities*, 10(1), 54-66. <https://doi.org/10.22373/ej.v10i1.13029>
- [14] Deinla, I. B., Mendoza, G. A. S., Ballar, K. J., & Yap, J. K. (2022). The link between fake news susceptibility and political polarization of the youth in the Philippines. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 30(2), 160-181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2022.2117713>
- [15] DeStephano, M. (2015). Jose Rizal, the quest for Filipino independence, and the search for ultimate reality and meaning. *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 34(1-2), 113-129. DOI: 10.3138/uram.34.1-2.113
- [16] Dulay, D. C., Hicken, A., Menon, A., & Holmes, R. (2023). Continuity, history, and identity: Why Bongbong Marcos won the 2022 Philippine presidential election. *Pacific Affairs*, 96(1), 85-104. DOI: 10.5509/202396185
- [17] Encinas-Franco, J. (2015). Overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) as heroes: Discursive origins of the “Bagong Bayani” in the era of labor export. *Humanities Diliman*, 12(2), 56-78.
- [18] Frisk, K. (2018). What makes a hero? Theorising the social structuring of heroism. *Sociology*, 53(1), 87-103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518764568>
- [19] Galang, D. (2012 September 5). The gates to heroism: Defining a Filipino hero. <https://nhcp.gov.ph/the-gates-to-heroism-defining-a-filipino-hero/>
- [20] Halliday, M. A. K. (1973). *Explorations in the Functions of Language*. Edward Arnold.
- [21] Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, M. I. M. (2014). *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar* (4th Ed.). Routledge.
- [22] Hood, S. (2013). Systemic functional linguistics. <https://genreacrossborders.org/research/systemic-functional-linguistics>
- [23] Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qual. Health Res.* 15(9), 1277-1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- [24] Jeresa, V. L. (2020). Burying “national trauma”: Memory laws and the memory of the Marcos regime. *Philippine Law Journal*, 93(2). College of Law, University of the Philippines.
- [25] Koussouhon, L. A., & Dossoumou, A. M. (2015). Political and ideological commitments: A systemic functional linguistic and critical discourse analysis of President Buhari's inaugural speech. *International Journal of Linguistics and Communication*, 3(2), 24-34. DOI: 10.15640/ijlc.v3n2a3
- [26] Malkawi, R. J., & Fareh, S. (2023). The role of language in advocacy: An SFL analysis of Hanan Ashrawi's speech on Palestinian rights. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2276554>
- [27] Mabbayad, B. S. (2015). Problematizing the Filipino hero in the graphic novels of Arnold Arre. *The Antoninus Journal: A Multidisciplinary Journal of the UST Graduate School*, 2, 53-69. <http://graduateschool.ust.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/The-Antoninus-Vol2-06BMabbayad.pdf>
- [28] Martin, J. R. (1992). *English Text: System and Structure*. John Benjamins.
- [29] Martin, J.R., & Cruz, P. A. T. (2019). Relational process in Tagalog: A systemic functional linguistics perspective. In: Rajandran K., Abdul Manan S. (eds), *Discourses of Southeast Asia*. The M.A.K. Halliday Library Functional Linguistics Series. Springer, Singapore
- [30] Mason, R., & Istvandity, L. (2018). Intramuros: Memory, violence and national becoming of Manila. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 24(10). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2018.1475405>
- [31] Mendoza, S. L. (2011). Ang usaping pang-wika sa bagong yugtong pantayong pananaw: Ang panloob na hamon ng pluralismo. *Social Science Diliman: A Philippine Journal of Society and Change*, 7(1), 37-62.
- [32] Monje, J. (2017). “Hindi bayani/Not a hero”: The linguistic landscape of protest in Manila. *Social Inclusion*, 5(4), 14-28. DOI: 10.17645/si.v5i4.1151
- [33] Mwinlaaru, I. N., & Xuan, W. W. (2016). A survey of studies in systemic functional language description and typology. *Functional Linguistics*, 3(8). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40554-016-0030-4>

- [34] Nagao, A. (2019). The SFL genre-based approach to writing in EFL contexts. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 4(6). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-019-0069-3>
- [35] Novio, E. B. C. (2022). Marcos presidency and the challenges to journalists and educators. *Media Asia*, 50(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2022.2104489>
- [36] Parba, J. (2018). Empowering the Filipino language classroom towards critical pedagogy and curriculum [Dissertation]. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/211329265.pdf>
- [37] Pedregosa, L. S. (2019). A popular-theological anthropology of Bayani: Liminal unity of overseas Filipino workers in their expression of love as sacrifice. *MST Review*, 21(2), 21-55. ISSN 2782-9944
- [38] Peracullo, J. (2017). The sacredness of Libingan ng mga Bayani in the pictorial representations of Filipino “Youth in Revolt”. *Arts and Culture: Heritage, Practices and Futures*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316442165_The_Sacredness_of_Libingan_ng_mga_Bayani_in_the_Pictorial_Representations_of_Filipino_Youth_in_Revolt
- [39] Quinto-Pozos, D. (2021). Respect and honorifics in American sign language. *Sign Language Studies*, 1(1), 49-75. Gallaudet University Press. doi:10.1353/sls.2001.0015
- [40] Roman, J. D. (2020). The convergence of hero and place as depicted in Fernando Poe Jr.’s Tondo films [Master’s Thesis]. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Janice-Roman-Tamesis/publication/369742461_The_Convergence_of_Hero_and_Place_as_Depicted_in_Fernando_Poe_Jr's_Tondo_Films/links/642a6f0792cfd54f844c546a/The-Convergence-of-Hero-and-Place-as-Depicted-in-Fernando-Poe-Jrs-Tondo-Films.pdf
- [41] Ramones, R. J. (2008). Philippine nationalism: An analysis of the development of Philippine national identity [Thesis]. <https://history.rutgers.edu/docman-docs/undergraduate/honors-papers-2008/100-philippine-nationalism-an-analysis-of-the-development-of-philippine-national-identity/file>
- [42] Tehankee, J. (2023). Beyond nostalgia: The Marcos political comeback in the Philippines. *Southeast Asia Working Paper Series*, 7. Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre.
- [43] Triyanto, S. (2018). The manifestation of ideology in language: A systemic functional linguistics approach to Obama’s speech. *English Language & Literature Journal*, 7(1).
- [44] Tuquero, L. (2022 July 25). Ironies abound in Marcos’ debut state of the nation address. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/ironies-abound-president-ferdinand-marcos-jr-state-of-the-nation-address-2022/>
- [45] Ueda, M. (2016). Hero or villain? Burial reveals Philippines’ deep divide on Ferdinand Marcos. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/hero-or-villain-burial-reveals-philippines-deep-divide-on-ferdinand-marcos/>
- [46] Umali, J. (2021 April 7). What makes a ‘true’ Filipino hero? <https://www.esquiremag.ph/long-reads/features/filipino-hero-a2212-20210407-lfrm>
- [47] Wu, J. (2023). The required reading for entering systemic functional linguistics: A review of systemic functional grammar: A first step into the theory. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Studies*, 8(3). <https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.83.9>