

“We Are Doing This For Each Other” Speech Analysis

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Introduction

Leo Varadkar delivered “We Are Doing This for Each Other” on May 1, 2020, while serving as Taoiseach of Ireland. The speech announced that restrictions intended to slow COVID-19 would continue and introduced a phased roadmap for reopening. It addressed a population experiencing death, isolation, unemployment, interrupted education, and uncertainty. Its central rhetorical problem was difficult: the government had to ask people to accept further sacrifice while offering a believable path toward relief. (Varadkar, n.d.)

The original analysis correctly identifies grief, praise, solidarity, and hope as major elements. It treats some time-specific projections as if they were settled facts and repeatedly calls the speech “interactive,” although it was a televised national address rather than a two-way exchange. A stronger analysis should examine the speech’s historical setting, structure, ethos, pathos, logos, pronoun use, letters, temporal framing, and limits. It should also avoid judging 2020 decisions solely through knowledge gained later.

Historical Situation

In spring 2020, governments had limited information about a newly identified virus, no widely available vaccine, and few proven treatments. Hospitals feared being overwhelmed, while restrictions created severe social and economic costs. Ireland had imposed major controls and needed to decide whether to ease them.

Varadkar’s address responded to competing pressures. People wanted safety, income, education, companionship, religious practice, and freedom of movement. The speech had to present reopening not as a victory declaration but as a controlled sequence dependent on public behavior and health conditions.

The Meaning of the Title

“We are doing this for each other” transforms compliance from obedience to mutual care. The phrase does not say that citizens are acting only for the state or for themselves. It presents restrictions as reciprocal protection among strangers.

The inclusive pronouns “we,” “our,” and “each other” create a national moral community. This language can build solidarity, but it can also conceal unequal burdens. Healthcare workers, low-income families, people living alone, and workers unable to stay home did not experience the same sacrifice. The speech’s moral claim is strongest when collective language is connected with practical support.

Opening with Loss

Varadkar begins from grief rather than celebration. He acknowledges deaths linked to COVID-19 and the added pain of mourning without ordinary funerals, embraces, or family presence. This choice establishes seriousness and recognizes that statistics represent individual lives.

The speech avoids beginning with government accomplishment. That restraint supports credibility. A leader who announces progress without first acknowledging loss may appear detached. The emotional opening prepares the audience to hear later praise and hope without feeling that suffering has been ignored.

Ethos

Ethos concerns the speaker’s credibility and character. Varadkar draws on the authority of his office, consultation with public-health experts, and his identity as a physician. He does not rely only on technical expertise; he presents himself as listening to letters and understanding frustration.

Credibility also depends on admitting uncertainty. The roadmap is described as conditional rather than guaranteed. This is ethically important in an evolving emergency. Overconfidence might have produced immediate reassurance but damaged trust if conditions changed.

Pathos

The speech uses pathos through references to bereavement, loneliness, family separation, and frontline service. Letters from members of the public individualize the national experience. Their inclusion allows the audience to hear recognizable fears and acts of kindness.

Pathos is not merely decoration. Emotional identification can motivate behavior that statistics alone cannot. Yet emotion can become manipulation if it substitutes for evidence or pressures people to accept policy without question. In this address, emotional appeal is generally tied to the practical argument that continued care protects others.

Logos

The logical structure is: restrictions have reduced transmission; relaxing too quickly could reverse progress; therefore, reopening must occur in stages and be reviewed. The phased plan gives the audience a sequence and criteria rather than an indefinite command.

The original essay cites a 70 percent recovery rate as though it were a central rhetorical fact. The official speech should be analyzed through the figures and claims it actually contains. Pandemic statistics were changing rapidly and depended on testing and definitions. The stronger logical feature is not one percentage but the link among health capacity, transmission, timing, and staged action.

Organization

The address moves from mourning to assessment, from assessment to decision, from decision to roadmap, and from roadmap to collective encouragement. This progression mirrors the audience's needs. People first need recognition, then explanation, then practical direction, then hope.

Transitions prevent the plan from seeming emotionally cold. The roadmap is embedded in a narrative of shared sacrifice rather than presented as an administrative table.

The Five-Phase Roadmap

The phased approach provides temporal structure. It allows some activities to resume before others based on contact, crowding, and risk. The speech explains that phases could advance or retreat depending on evidence.

A phased plan communicates control, but it can create false precision. Dates may be interpreted as promises even when the speaker describes them as provisional. Effective crisis communication must repeat the conditions for change and explain why categories differ.

Time and Hope

One of the address's most important rhetorical resources is a future horizon. People can endure difficult conditions more readily when they understand what comes next and what behavior contributes to progress. The roadmap turns sacrifice into movement.

Hope is presented as cautious rather than triumphant. The speech does not claim that the virus is defeated. It imagines reopening while warning that setbacks remain possible. This balance between hope and contingency is more credible than either despair or certainty.

Praise and Recognition

Varadkar praises healthcare staff, essential workers, volunteers, families, and people following restrictions. Recognition validates invisible labor and encourages continued cooperation. It also creates social norms: responsible behavior is shown as honorable and shared.

Praise should be connected with material support. Calling workers heroes can become hollow if they lack protection, rest, pay, or care. A rhetorical analysis should therefore distinguish the emotional function of gratitude from the policy obligations it implies.

Letters as Rhetorical Evidence

Letters provide qualitative evidence about public experience. They show loneliness, compassion, and local solidarity. Quoting them creates a sense that the government has heard people rather than speaking only through experts.

The selection process remains invisible. The letters cannot represent every experience, and choosing uplifting examples may understate anger, domestic danger, or financial desperation. They are best understood as illustrative voices, not a scientific sample.

National Identity

The speech constructs Irish identity around care, resilience, and community. National rhetoric can strengthen cooperation by connecting present action with a shared story. The phrase “each other” is less militarized than descriptions of war against a virus, although the wider pandemic discourse often used battle metaphors.

National unity can exclude if it assumes one household, culture, or economic position. Inclusive crisis rhetoric should recognize migrants, people with disabilities, minority faiths, and those unable to comply without assistance. (Aristotle, n.d.)

Public Health and Liberty

The address asks citizens to accept restrictions on movement and association. Ethical public-health measures should be necessary, proportionate, time limited, evidence informed, and subject to review. Communication helps legitimacy by explaining purpose and conditions.

The speech emphasizes duty but does not fully explore the legal and ethical limits of emergency power. A national address cannot cover every safeguard, yet transparency about review and accountability matters when extraordinary controls are used.

Economic Argument

Varadkar acknowledges the damage to employment and business while sequencing reopening. He does not present health and economy as simple opposites. Uncontrolled illness can also damage economic activity, while prolonged restrictions produce their own harms.

The rhetorical challenge is distribution: who receives support while waiting? General promises of recovery are less persuasive to people facing immediate rent, food, or business failure. Crisis speeches are strengthened when policy details follow quickly.

Audience

The primary audience is the Irish public, but the speech addresses several subgroups: bereaved families, isolated older people, workers, employers, children, healthcare staff, and people eager to reopen. It must also communicate to markets, political opponents, and international observers.

Because the address is televised, it is not interactive in the technical sense. Letters create a simulated dialogue, and later media questioning may provide interaction, but the speech itself is one-directional. Calling it responsive or audience-centered is more accurate.

Style and Diction

The language is generally plain and direct. Short sentences and repeated collective pronouns suit broadcast delivery. The title phrase functions as an anaphoric moral refrain even when not repeated constantly.

Medical and administrative terms are limited, reducing cognitive burden. Specific examples make abstract restrictions understandable. The speech's restrained tone supports trust better than dramatic self-congratulation would have.

Risk Communication

Good risk communication states what is known, unknown, changing, and expected from the audience. Varadkar explains progress and warns of resurgence. The phased plan provides actions rather than fear alone. (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005)

The speech could be evaluated on whether it clearly distinguished legal rules from recommendations and whether accessible versions were available. Translation, captioning, sign-language interpretation, and plain-language summaries are part of national communication, even when not visible in the written transcript.

Hindsight and Fair Evaluation

Later evidence changed understanding of transmission, vaccination, treatment, and the social effects of restrictions. A rhetorical analysis should not pretend the speaker possessed that knowledge in May 2020. The appropriate question is whether claims were responsible given the evidence and uncertainty available then.

Historical analysis can still identify omissions and unequal effects. Respecting context does not require accepting every decision.

Strengths

The speech's strengths are emotional recognition, clear organization, inclusive language, conditional hope, and a practical roadmap. It gives citizens a reason for continued restraint and a view of the future. It also avoids presenting reopening as proof that danger has ended.

The repeated moral frame turns individual behavior into public solidarity. This was especially important because infection control depends partly on actions whose benefits are distributed across other people.

Limitations

The speech's collective language can smooth over unequal capacity to comply. It relies heavily on trust in government and experts without discussing disagreement. The roadmap's dates may have created expectations beyond the control of the speaker.

The address also cannot substitute for detailed policy, scientific publication, or democratic scrutiny. Speeches guide meaning; institutions must deliver protection and support.

Conclusion

"We Are Doing This for Each Other" is an effective crisis address because it joins grief, explanation, conditional planning, and hope. Varadkar uses ethos through institutional and medical credibility, pathos through mourning and letters, and logos through a staged reopening argument. Inclusive pronouns frame restrictions as reciprocal care rather than passive submission.

The speech was not truly interactive, and its unity rhetoric should be evaluated against unequal burdens. Nevertheless, it demonstrates a central principle of public communication: people facing prolonged uncertainty need recognition, reasons, actions, and a credible future. Its enduring rhetorical force lies in transforming public-health behavior into an ethical relationship among citizens.

Works Cited

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