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Communicating (about) Covid-19

Lessons from Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction

This special issue of *Iperstoria* includes a selection of the contributions presented at the LinC Conference at the University of Bari Aldo Moro in December 2022, titled *The Language of the Crisis from the Pandemic to Politics: Forms of Discourse and Models of Communication*. The purpose of the conference was to bring together international scholars to discuss the forms of discourse and forms of communication that have emerged during the Covid-19 global pandemic (SARS-CoV-2).

The Covid-19 pandemic unveiled the vulnerability and fragility of our sophisticated and complex society and brought about a reconsideration of geopolitical issues. A trend toward re-nationalization, alongside a tendency to revive the narrow, backward-looking thinking of nations states (Wodak 2020) soon emerged. Suffice it to think that the EU member States closed their borders, and the Schengen Area was suddenly abolished to "keep the virus out" (Wodak 2021).

Despite the vaccination campaign, people continue to deny that the virus exists or that vaccines actually develop immunity to this serious disease, fuelling various claims against the effectiveness of current treatments. This ultimately has spread "alternative truths" and has demeaned the scientific discourse based on *savoir de connaissance* (Charaudeau 2020). The bombardment of misleading, inaccurate or unreliable information has contributed to the spread of disinformation (Sini and Cetro 2020) and counter-information, both of which have significantly influenced public opinion, so much so that the Covid-19 infodemic has now become one of the biggest problems of the pandemic crisis. In addition, the common intentions and political orientation have given way, both in Europe and elsewhere, to uncertainty, to more precarious social balancing, as well as to decisions not always shared by all European partners.

Furthermore, the prospect of serious international instability has recently been made worse by the consequences of the wars in Ukraine and in Israel.

As Charaudeau (2020) argues, while our post-modern age must deal with numerous information channels, making it difficult to ascertain where the truth lies, politics and the media play a crucial role in the dissemination of information (Moirand 2007). In a context undermined by science denial and conspiracy theories, European governments rely on several frames (Wodak 2021). In communication in general, and in communicating Covid-19 in the case in point, metaphors are important rhetorical devices, especially when the purpose is to explain or to persuade. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that a new virus, causing illness and death, requiring urgent and radical responses from governments and citizens, would be talked about through frames: the religious frame, the dialogic frame, the trust frame, and the war frame (Semino et al. 2021; Charteris-Black 2021).

The war frame, in particular, was frequent at the beginning of the pandemic, albeit controversial. Military language to discuss coronavirus has been defined dangerous and irresponsible, but war-rhetoric dies hard, and its entailments are virtually omnipresent. Research shows that, at least at the start, the war narrative was inevitable and inescapable, with the obvious aim to communicate the sense of urgency and emergency. We cannot deny, though, that military rhetoric, playing a significant role in framing, and by now entrenched in discourse, has somehow lost its resonance and it potential impact (Garzone 2021), and that, despite the 'blanket criticism' of being misleading and/or counterproductive (Musolff 2021, 2017), and despite the successful attempts to frame the Covid-19 crisis with alternative metaphors, war-related narrative will always be the unavoidable and inescapable frame of the extraordinary global pandemic that has affected the whole world (Milizia 2023).

The pandemic provided fertile ground for linguistic invention (Salamurovic 2020), and many frameworks were devised around the pandemic that provide an alternative to the above. When the world was turned upside down and a sudden reversal of the normal order occurred (Charteris-Black 2021), making socializing dangerous or even forbidden, the definition of freedom was also thrown out of whack and people began to question what freedom really meant, whether to stay at home and wear a mask or go out and not wear a mask, whether to abide by the lockdown rules or break them (Charteris-Black 2021).

It is against this backdrop—a scenario where the Covid-19 pandemic fuelled "a dystopian imaginary [...] widespread in both mass culture and academic culture" (Ceretta 2021)—that this special issue aims to stimulate collective reflection and promote positive interferences and

contaminations between disciplines that, albeit in different ways, provide essential support for the "language of crisis."

2. The contributions to this issue

The public health crisis occasioned by the appearance of the novel coronavirus in 2019 revealed a great deal about how we interact with one another other in the 21st century. As Chen et al. (2023) observe, the Covid-19 pandemic dramatically changed the nature of social interaction, creating negative impacts and challenges, but also opportunities for progressing how we communicate, as humans. This volume brings together eight articles addressing various aspects of how the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath have been communicated in Italy, the European Union, and the United States. The articles included here investigate topics including linguistic and political aspects of communication about the pandemic, the forums in which such communication took place, as well as specific matters such as vaccinations, facemasks, long Covid, and even climate change. This diversity of subject matter unifies around the authors' applications of corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis. Thus, across articles we find a unified body of cutting-edge research on how we humans came to (mis)understand the Covid crisis—and continue to do so.

Maria Cristina Aiezza asks how advocates and opponents of the Covid vaccine in Italy and the United States made their opinions about the vaccine known to policymakers using the collective action website Change.org[1]. This website allows individuals to sign petitions about an almost infinite range of social and political issues. Aiezza analyzes a corpus of these petitions to understand how people framed their positions on the vaccine. She identifies several cross-national themes that emerge from the petitions: most broadly, communitarianism in pro-vaccine arguments and libertarianism in anti-vaccine arguments.

In her article, Silvia Cacchiani focuses on the Italian case to explore the emergence of Italian terms concerning the virus. She emphasizes instances in which the English terms *covid* and *corona* were brought into contact with the Italian language. Were Italian grammatical rules followed when Anglicisms were imported into discourses about Covid-19 in Italy? Does the left-hand head principle in Italian (e.g., *tassa covid*) dominate, or are there instances in which the English right-hand head principle (e.g., covid tax) replaces it? Cacchiani's detailed semantic analysis reveals how the global nature of the pandemic—and the necessity of international

[1] https://www.change.org/. Last visited 12/04/2023.

communication during that period—transformed our lives in quotidian ways. Perhaps the pandemic did not just infect people; it may also have had a virulent effect on everyday language. Paolo Donadio focuses his article on how the European Union eventually tried to help manage the Covid-19 crisis long after the "political nationalization" of the pandemic (Wodak 2021). Indeed, as the virus affected some countries much earlier than it did others, national governments were forced to take the lead out of necessity. The EU joined the conversation much later, as it were. Donadio has assembled and analyzed corpora of citizens' reactions to the EU's official Tweets and Facebook posts in 2021. What did the EU say, and how did Europeans react? Donadio's answer to those questions suggest that the EU was in damage-control mode once it began communicating about Covid-19, hoping to disguise its political ineffectiveness by emphasizing economic ramifications of the crisis.

Maristella Gatto's article considers the degree to which Wikipedia was able to communicate accurate information during the pandemic. As early as Fall 2020, the World Health Organization teamed up with Wikimedia Commons for help in disseminating facts and data about Covid-19, as Wikipedia articles can be translated into hundreds of languages. However, the fact that anyone can edit Wikipedia articles made the site a prime combat zone in the Covid culture wars. Gatto analyzes how well Wikipedia was able to engage in gatekeeping to maintain what she calls its "generic integrity" concerning Covid-related matters.

Communication about facemasks on social media forms the basis of Elena Intorcia's article. She relies on Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis to collect and analyze reactions on Facebook and Twitter to a May 2022 recommendation that people in New York City return to wearing facemasks indoors as a means of mitigating a surge in cases of Covid-19. The analysis reveals patterns in support for and opposition to the recommendation, as well as the many symbolic meanings attributed to masks and masking. Intorcia uses her analysis as a context for proposing that policymakers use corpora of social media commentary to improve their capacity to communicate effectively about public health concerns.

Elisa Mattiello's work here considers how language has been transformed by the pandemic. Since March 2020, more than a thousand new words—neologisms and nonce words—have arisen in English alone. Mattiello analyzes the emergence of such terminology using a corpus of online newspaper and magazine articles. She finds that new terms emerged in part for the purpose of communicating basic facts about the pandemic, but also in part for more emotional reasons ranging from dark humor to hate speech and endorsement of conspiracy theories.

Francesco Meledandri turns his attention to online discussion of Long Covid, i.e. cases of the virus that result in negative long-term effects on health. Using a corpus of nearly 600,000

Tweets from Fall 2022, he works to understand how ordinary people were communicating about Long Covid. Did they emphasize their personal experiences, scientific evidence, or conspiracy theories and fake news? Meledandri's results reveal the presence of each of these themes in the corpus. The analysis also speaks to how the social media discourse about Long Covid has reflected the broader polarization that defines our present age.

Finally, Katherine Russo and Cinzia Bevitori explore communication about Covid-19 and climate change during the Virocene, "a new planetary epoch" that has arisen from the pandemic, exposing humanity's limited power over nature (Fernando 2020). They focus on the European Union, using a corpus of the EU's communications between 2020 and 2022. Russo and Bevitori explore whether the virus and its management are reflective of a broader politics—and discourse—of crisis, especially in the context of climate change. This article helps us understand that the very term *crisis* can be used for different purposes by political actors; sometimes the term is used to present the need for a response, while in other contexts it is used to frame the opportunity for transformation.

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Her research is focused on the study of the English language in academic and professional contexts, with particular regard to the analysis of tourism and medical discourses.

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