Introduction: From declarations of war to denial to explanations: How global publics have coped with the COVID-19 pandemic

This book aims to shed light on how different national and cultural communities across the world have dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic since its inception at the start of 2020. The public debates about the pandemic have articulated a vast range of critical reflections on communication: agenda-setting, categorization and metaphorization of the illness and the administrative responses to it, perceived ‘performances’ of specific governments and administrations in dealing with it as well as empathy (and lack of it) in the communication of doctors, carers, patients, patients’ relatives, public services and further social institutions involved in dealing with the crisis.¹ Furthermore, reflections on pandemic-related communication have themselves become part of managing the health crisis and have become objects of fierce debate, e.g. about the appropriateness of specific communicative styles, information (mis-)management and political “framing”.² To attempt providing a comprehensive overview of these debates would be premature, as the pandemic is still raging at the time of writing (spring 2021). The present volume pursues a more modest task, i.e. put forward exemplary case-studies of key-aspects in the “discourse history” (Reisigl & Wodak 2009) of the pandemic debates:

- How was the pandemic, its official existence and nature, defined and categorized at national and international level?

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¹ See e.g. Finset 2020, Oswick et al. 2020, Kortmann & Schultze 2020.
• How is the public guided to understand the pandemic and how does this guidance work?
• Why and how has the management of the pandemic been imagined as a war – and what implications does the use of this conceptual metaphor have for the course of the debate?
• How are intra- and inter-national conflicts that arise from the pandemic articulated?
• How do nation-states, health institutions and non-governmental organizations foster solidarity and conflict resolution in the context of the pandemic?

The 28 studies in this volume approach these questions with a mix of methods drawn from Discourse Analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics and Cognitive Metaphor Theory, but also from Political and Media Theories, within an over-arching discourse-historical approach that aims at an integration of linguistic, social and historical insights, so as to arrive at an in-depth “triangulation” of the impact of language use in its socio-historical context (Reisigl & Wodak 2009). This orientation also implies a corpus-based approach to the primary linguistic data, i.e. every study is based on a set of documented texts that are transparently delineated, so as to allow for exemplary qualitative, in some cases also for quantitative, analyses and can be related to social and political science-based hypotheses. As the pandemic is still ongoing, the analyses are of necessity open-ended, i.e. they do not aim at giving definitive assessments of whether or how particular communicative initiatives have succeeded in shaping the public’s experience of the
pandemic but instead to provide insights into main trends and allow the formulation of plausible scenarios of further developments.

In part I we look at definitions and framings of the pandemic in its early stages, i.e. its official announcement as a threat to public health by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and national governments. In the first contribution, Dennis Tay compares the English language press conferences by the WHO and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (CMFA) from January to May 2020. In the first, quantitative part Tay profiles the discursive manifestations of analytical thinking, authenticity, clout, and emotional tone and their shifts across time and concludes that whilst both the WHO and CMFA press conferences construe issues generally positively, the former displays significantly higher clout and authenticity but lower analyticity than the latter. Together with the results of exemplary qualitative analyses of Q&A turns at the press conferences, these findings point to underlying ideological differences in the respective types of public presentation of health-administrative “authority” in the pandemic context. Chapter 2, by Amir Salama, homes in on the WHO’s multimodal discourse on COVID-19 as represented on the WHO’s official website, using the Social Semiotics approach pioneered by Kress and van Leeuwen (Kress 2010, Kress & van Leeuwen 2001, 2006). By analyzing in detail the hyperlink organization of the Web presentation and the interplay of textual and pictorial modes at discourse, genre and layout level the author shows how the WHO construes and fixes both the pandemic and its own public status in terms of agency and authority.

In the third chapter Alexandra-Angeliki Papamanoli and Themis Kaniklidou use a corpus of 54 statements by international political leaders on COVID-19 collected from the New
York Times’ online edition in March 2020 to elucidate methods of framing ownership, causation and responsibility for pandemic management, including the use of metaphors based on the source domains of SPEED, BODY, PLANT and VEHICLE. They conclude that in most countries, COVID-19 was presented either as an enemy of the state or as an urgent, but temporary, medical emergency, which motivated narratives of personal responsibility and the protection of public health set up against democracy and civil liberties. Daniel Weiss, in chapter 4, focuses on the highly specific categorization of COVID-19 and related arguments in the leadership discourses of two post-Soviet nations, i.e. Russia and Belarus, which exhibit partially contrasting crisis managements. Whilst the Russian government came to fully recognize the pandemic danger relatively quickly and then installed rigorous lockdowns, the Belarusian leader A. Lukashenko at first denied and belittled the threat, using folk wisdom and religion as ‘authorities’, and for much longer excluded restrictive measures on economic grounds. A common feature of both government discourses is the lack – and suspected concealment – of reliable statistical information about national infection and fatalities numbers. In the UK, by contrast, governmental discourse on the pandemic relied heavily on quantifying not only the rise in infections and victims but also the state’s response in terms of testing, successful treatments, civic responses and financial commitments, which Lee Jarvis analyzes in chapter 5. He concludes that the pervasive use of “mathematical language” in ministers’ policy announcements speeches and press releases, to demonstrate maximum transparency, serves a number of functions that range from ‘updating’ the public to reassurances about the national health system’s
commitment to ‘beat the virus’, justifying governmental decisions as being ‘objectively’ necessary and thus establishing authority.

**PART 2**

Part II considers the militarization of official political speeches and media reports about the pandemic in Western and non-Western countries, and the pragmatic effects that the war discourse may have on the social community. The third part of this volume opens with Molly Xie Pan and Joanna Zhuoan Chen mixed-methods study of the WAR metaphor in addresses of the Hong Kong Chief Executive in press conferences dated from January to September 2020. The chapter provides a statistical analysis complemented by a fine-grained critical metaphor analysis of the emotional valences conveyed by the five most recurrent source domains identified in the addresses (i.e., OBJECT, WAR, JOURNEY, BODY, and LOCATION) and considers the changes in WAR metaphor usage across the pandemic. The authors take a bottom-up approach for metaphor identification and define the emotional valence according to metaphorical units’ co-text (i.e., positive, negative or neutral). The statistical analysis makes it possible to determine which associations between sources and valences are statistically significant. The five sources examined reveal different behaviours: the BODY metaphor is associated with a positive valence, frequently used in policy-making and governance explanations; the JOURNEY metaphor tends to be associated with a negative valence, employed to report negative developments of the pandemic; the OBJECT metaphor
showed a tendency for the neutral valence, mainly employed in explaining anti-pandemic measures, and governance and support topics; LOCATION metaphors also tended to be used in neutral explanations of measures adopted; and WAR metaphors showed a statistical significant association with positive valence, mostly employed in governance and financial policy explanations. A diachronic study shows that the patterns of use of the WAR metaphor go in parallel with the development of the pandemic: higher numbers of reported cases in the country coincide with an increase of the WAR metaphors employed in the press conferences.

In Chapter 14, Yating Yu examines how one of the most dominant concepts of China’s foreign policy, “A community with a shared future for humankind” (CSFH), has been legitimised in the discourses associated with COVID-19. In particular, the study considers 111 news articles from China Daily, a state-owned newspaper, dated from February to July 2020, and examines the role that metaphors have played in promoting the diplomatic concept and their ideological implications. CSFH appears up to 218 times in the COVID-19 coverage, turning discourses on health communication into an arena for geopolitics to protect China from some Western media and politics’ criticisms while expanding its international influence. The study draws on Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black 2004) and considers how WAR metaphors combine with other linguistic resources (e.g., indexicals, deontic modals and use of numbers and statistics) to evoke the collectivist and humanitarian values of CSFH. The PANDEMIC AS AN ENEMY metaphor is strategically employed to represent COVID-19 as a the common enemy that all countries have to combat, hence portraying the other countries as allies of China in the global ‘war’ against the virus. The metaphor is also exploited to personify the WHO as
the leader of the fight that requires the support of all the allies. In this way, the WAR metaphor would allow for the projection of China’s national image as a cooperative and reliable ally that respects the WHO’s authority.

Mariana Neagu, in Chapter 15, continues examining the public communication on COVID-19. Neagu considers how the pandemic was diachronically portrayed in Romanian and British official press statements during the initial phase of the lockdown measures and the four months that followed the outbreak of the pandemic (i.e., March-June 2020), and how such depictions may have influenced the public opinion. The study illustrates how the two prime ministers tend to portray the pandemic as an external factor that puts the wellbeing of the nation in jeopardy, either portrayed as an enemy that needs military action to be taken, or as a natural disaster such as floods and wildfire. In particular, militaristic metaphors stand as the most salient similarity between the Romanian and British discourses; mainly identified during March 2020, they are used to urge the population to take action and stay together. However, the portrayals of social unity differ dramatically between the two discourses, while the British prime minister makes use of the CONTAINER metaphor to illustrate the lockdown and the ‘support bubbles’, his Romanian counterpart stresses the need of solidarity through references to a EUROPEAN FAMILY. Neagu argues that differences in conceptualization can be explained through the socio-political history of the two countries.

The portrayal of the pandemic in officials’ public discourse is further explored in Chapter 16. Nadežda Silaški and Tatjana Đurović study the portrayal of the pandemic in Serbia in two different data sets: the first one considers the nation addresses delivered by President Aleksandar Vučić during the “first wave of the COVID-19 epidemic”,
covering from the declaration of the state of emergency (mid-March) to its lifting (early May). The second data set considers press conferences reported in electronic news media outlets and covers the pre-election period until the election’s day (from May to June). Prior to the pre-election time frame, the Serbian public discourse presented COVID-19 as a personified ENEMY and exploited the associations of the WAR metaphor to engender a feeling of patriotism, unity, solidarity and urge of action that would justify and legitimise the anti-pandemic measures enforced. However, the examination of the second data set evidences that the military cognitive frame was readjusted during the pre-election period to accommodate to the political agenda of the ruling party and achieve the desired response from the public in the national elections. Thus, during the election campaign the WAR metaphor was twisted to the much less aggressive and confrontational SPORTS metaphor. The SPORTS metaphor, more collaborative, made it possible to perceive the health crisis as a less dangerous and more stable situation, hence preparing the population to take part in the national elections despite the imminent risk of the pandemic. Chapter 16 constitutes a clear example of the ideological function of metaphors in legitimising political agendas and promoting a particular social reality.

In Chapter 17, Fabienne Baider and Maria Constantinou investigate how COVID-19 has been represented in the political discourse of four European countries: France, Greece, Denmark and Germany. The authors study the metaphors employed in speeches and interviews of the political leaders of each country and the effects of metaphor choices on crisis management. In particular, Baider and Constantinou investigate whether metaphor choices can be related to politicians’ leadership style and
gender. The four political leaders, regardless of gender, promoted social unity and solidarity and presented the measures adopted to prevent the spread of the virus as the logical and unavoidable course of action. While the chapter concludes that, from a gender perspective, the discourses studied present more similarities than differences, the war metaphor is not reported for the two women leaders. However, as the authors point out, we have to be cautious in associating the presence of the war metaphor with gender specificities or the leader personality, for a myriad of factors such as the speechwriters or the socio-historical context may have a direct influence on political speeches.

Andreas Musolff closes Part III with a study of the historical development of the war scenario in British governmental statements and their public reception. More than a third of the 178 news articles comprised in the corpus collected from February to October 2020 included the war metaphor. However, the effects of the metaphor in framing the pandemic varied with the development of the war scenario along the first six months of the health crisis. While the initial governmental ‘war declaration’ against COVID-19 aimed at raising people’s awareness of the danger of the new virus, the media exploited the war scenario to make historical comparisons between the pandemic management and the actions of the UK in WW II, evoking strong emotions and nationalistic memories among the public. After the ‘Blitz spirit’ reminiscences, war-related vocabulary impregnated communications about the pandemic to portray the relation between the virus (attacker) and the population (defenders). However, Musolff argues, these lexicalisations are too vague to trigger changes in the attitude or actions of the public. Considering the different rhetorical functions of the PANDEMIC-AS-WAR
metaphor, Musolff concludes stressing the importance of focusing on the pragmatic and intertextual levels of metaphor analysis in order to provide a comprehensive account of their communicative functions.

PART 4

In Part V, the focus turns to a range of discourse on empathy, encouragement and the fostering of solidarity expressed by professionals, including the communications of medical doctors, fitness experts and political leaders. In Chapter 25, Galasiński and Ziółkowska consider representations of decision-making concerning life-saving resuscitation—CPR communication—looking at how decisions and end-of-life care that involve CPR are constructed. The authors analyse texts in documents, including medical pronouncements, from leading medical organisations such as the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) to shed light on the ideological landscape regarding administering or withdrawing life-saving treatment. The results point to the great importance of explicitness in CPR communication and including patients’ wishes in medical decision-making. In Chapter 26, Kondo discusses empathy and compassion during the pandemic (Barello and Graffigna 2020; Holt 2020) and explores doctors’ verbal responses during online health consultations in the Japanese context. The data indicate that doctors’ showing understanding meets the patients’ need to feel ‘listened to’. The important results include that doctors’ empathic responses not only addressed patients’ fears towards identified symptoms or not-yet-presenting symptoms but also expressed, in a variety of expressive forms, assurance that there was ‘no need’ to go to a medical facility. This finding may indicate that when professionals are taking preventive actions, empathic communication is more effective than simply advising patients to ‘stay at home’. In Chapter 27, Schoofs et al. analyse identity construction on Instagram, exploring the professional and personal identity work of the medical doctor and Instagram celebrity Dr Mike and tracing his audience’s responses. Applying multimodal discourse analytics, Schoofs et al. discuss Dr Mike’s
intersectional identity work as a ‘doctor-influencer’ in depth and highlight the important roles that such influencers play in providing and promoting health literacy, including about the highly debated topic of mask wearing. The study also provides insight into the effects on the audience of information shared on social media by doctors, and it discusses the tension between maintaining a professional identity and one as a social media celebrity. In Chapter 28, Vogl et al. investigate health-promotion discourse by fitness professionals— instructors for Les Mills International (LM)—and the linguistic construction of their roles as health promoters during the pandemic. The authors discuss the concepts of glocal and glocommodification and the ‘healthism’ ideology (Crawford 1980). Focus-group discussions with LM instructors from a wide variety of countries were analysed, which reveals how the instructors’ relationships with customers and fellow instructors have been changed by social distancing, and that their sense of belonging to a global community remains strong. The analysis also sheds light on discursive strategies and healthism ideology in professional roles at the global, national and local levels. Part V closes with Chapter 29, in which Degani highlights the range of discursive strategies that New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has employed in public statements while leading her country through these challenging times. Ardern has been praised for her effective communication throughout the pandemic and her capacity to connect to people empathetically (McGuire et al. 2020). Degani investigates how Ardern engages citizens in cooperative efforts against the virus and focuses particularly on her use of rhetorical strategies and empathy. The findings indicate that Ardern’s communication style has positively affected New Zealanders’ compliance with government measures. The range of issues delineated in these chapters is rich and instructive regarding fostering solidarity among health experts, between professionals and patients, and among global citizens. We hope that these chapters also consider varied social perspectives and issues regarding the practice of qualitative discourse studies related to unity and empathy in public health.

References


