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Communicating COVID-19: A Linguistic and Discursive  
Approach across Contexts and Media

Comunicare il COVID-19: un approccio linguistico  
e discorsivo a media e contesti

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## EDITORIAL

Understanding COVID-19 Communication: Linguistic  
and Discursive Perspectives 5

*Maria Cristina Paganoni and Joanna Osiejewicz*

Radio Advertising in Italy at the Time of the Pandemic 19

*Giuseppe Sergio*

Making Sense of the Response to COVID-19 in Higher Education: 41

A Case Study of Crisis Communication in Two Universities

*Giuseppe Palumbo and Ann Hill Duin*

COVID-19-Related FAQs as a Form of Online Institutional 61

Communication: An Exploratory Study

*Katia Peruzzo*

COVID-19 Explained to Children in Italy: A Comparison 81

between Institutional Guidelines and Narratives

*Michela Dota*

COVID-19-Related Cases before the European Court of Human 101

Rights: A Multiperspective Approach

*Jekaterina Nikitina*

Linguistic and Communicative Practices in the US Military's Response to the COVID-19 Emergency <i>Roxanne Barbara Doerr</i>	123
Terminology for Medical Journalism: Terminological Resources, Neology, and the COVID-19 Syndemic <i>Anna Anselmo</i>	145
Occupational Health and Safety during COVID-19: A Cross-National Comparison of Discursive and Communication Practices in Italy and the US <i>Pietro Manzella</i>	169
Comunicare e gestire la crisi da COVID-19 in Italia e Giappone. Prospettive dall'analisi critica del discorso e dalla comunicazione di crisi <i>Gianmarco Fiorentini</i>	183
Authors	201

# COVID-19 Explained to Children in Italy

## A Comparison between Institutional Guidelines and Narratives

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### ABSTRACT

Among the indirect consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of children and adolescents, most studies, both nationally and internationally, have found an increase in anxious-depressive symptoms, sometimes associated with suicide attempts. Institutions and public health professionals therefore developed textual documents and multimedia products to provide guidelines to set up, among other things, a narrative of the event capable of responding to the psycho-physical distress of children and adolescents and ultimately reducing symptoms. At the same time, individual educators, writers, and YouTubers offered alternative products (accessed through the web) to respond to the same needs. This paper intends to analyse and compare the narrative suggested and packaged by both types of producers mentioned to detect the linguistic-textual and pragmatic choices and their effect.

*Keywords:* anthropomorphisation; COVID-19 explained to adolescents; COVID-19 explained to children; discourse analysis; language of fables.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Between 2020 and 2021, several Italian newspapers dedicated significant coverage to reports detailing the consequences of confinement on the mental health of children and adolescents. Several reports by psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychoanalysts reported an increase in anxiety and depressive states within this population segment throughout the

first lockdown and the subsequent period of relaxed sanitary measures (see, among many studies, Vicari e Di Vara 2021; Barbieri *et al.* 2022; Kauhanen *et al.* 2022; Mansfield 2022 *et al.*; Pedrini *et al.* 2022). The typical sensationalism of a certain kind of journalism took the opportunity to dramatically coin the “Covid-19 Generation” label, i.e. a generation irreparably marked by traumas experienced during the lockdown, which would cause long-term repercussions (Agi 2022; Scarano 2022; Wenner Moyer 2022).

The circumstances mentioned above, alongside established (perhaps hyper-) protective attitudes and tendencies towards children and adolescents, supported the idea that an *ad hoc* narrative was required for this population group. This narrative was expected to reduce the psycho-physical discomforts that surfaced due to the traumas and frustrations triggered by the sudden interruption of daily habits (particularly the social relations that populated them).

As happened elsewhere, agencies and public health professionals developed textual documents and multimedia products to provide parents and educators with guidelines on the (increasingly erratic) emotionality of adolescents and to set up, especially for the youngest, a narrative of the events capable of responding to their psycho-physical distress and, ultimately, reducing symptoms. At the same time, individual educators, writers and YouTubers offered alternative products (accessed through the web) to respond to the same needs.

This contribution investigates how texts were produced to respond to the psycho-physical distress found in the young population. By analysing and comparing the texts of the two groups (the first consisting of producers working in public health protection, the second consisting of people working in fields outside of that), I intend to answer the following research questions:

- a. What kind of texts are produced, and what kind of narrative is activated in each group?
- b. What linguistic choices are made?
- c. Are the adopted solutions the same or different between the two groups?
- d. What effects do these expressive choices produce?

Concerning the medium of communication, the texts selected for research are characterised as follows: some of them are proximal to the “scritto-scritto” category (Nencioni 1976), which in substance corresponds to prototypical writing; others are a sample of the “parlato-scritto” category (*ibid.*), i.e. written texts that aim to simulate (and

partly also to model) the characteristics of orality. Still others belong to the “trasmesso scritto” category (Sabatini 1982), that is, writing conveyed by the web, which has both traits of speech and traits of prototypical writing. Sometimes the latter are verbalised, thus manifesting a multimodal nature. Belonging to one category determines the probability that certain linguistic phenomena, and not others, emerge in the text.

As already mentioned, the texts are divided into two groups, reasonably balanced in consistency, as illustrated in paragraph 2. Specifically, the YouTube videos have been selected from those proposed by the platform’s internal search engine as the first response to the search string “covid spiegato ai bambini” (COVID-19 explained to children).

## 2. CORPUS AND METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

Through guidelines drawn up by institutions engaged in public health protection, I analysed:

1. “Il Coronavirus spiegato ai bambini” (henceforth UNICEF 2020);
2. “Nuovo Coronavirus. 11 consigli per raccontarlo ai bambini e agli adolescenti” (henceforth Bambino Gesù 2021);
3. “Il Coronavirus spiegato a bambini e adolescenti” (henceforth Policlinico n.d.).

The first sample is an eight-point guide created by UNICEF for parents and published on the official website of the Italian Ministry of Health. The second and third samples are posted respectively on the official websites of the Bambino Gesù Paediatric Hospital in Rome, and the Polyclinic in Milan and are digital guides.

With regards to the products formulated by individual experts or associations of professionals involved in public health protection, the following are analysed:

- a. “Leo e Giulia. Noi come voi!” (henceforth SIP 2020);
- b. “Coronavirus. Un fumetto e 7 regole per spiegarlo ai bambini” (henceforth FIMP 2020);
- c. *Il mio eroe sei tu! Come i bambini possono combattere il Covid* (henceforth Patuck 2020);
- d. *Ti conosco mascherina* (henceforth Capua 2020);
- e. “Fiaba Virus Corona. Il Covid19 spiegato ai bambini” (henceforth Marangio 2020);

- f. “Il coronavirus spiegato ai bambini” (henceforth Cilenti 2020);
- g. *Storia di un coronavirus* (henceforth Dall’Ara 2020).

In detail, (a) is a video produced by Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele and sponsored by the Italian Society of Paediatrics, who have the video available to watch on their website; (b) is a video produced by the Federazione Italiana Medici Pediatri. All the other *specimens* are short stories: (c) is the Italian version of a short story by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), and available free of charge in PDF format; (d) is in paper format and is written by Ilaria Capua, a well-known virologist and former Italian politician, who had a lot of media exposure during the period of the pandemic; (e) and (f) are short stories in video format produced respectively by the psychologist Paola Marangio (published on the YouTube channel Psicologia Firenze) and the psychologist Arianna Cilenti, posted on her YouTube channel. Finally, (g), by the psychologist Francesca Dall’Ara, is the first of the short stories hosted on the Milan Polyclinic web page (see point 3 above).

The selection of products offered by individuals or organisations beyond the realm of public health protection consists of:

- i. *Guida galattica al Corona Virus* (henceforth Nerini e Longo 2020);
- ii. *Il coronavirus spiegato ai bambini* (henceforth Campioni 2020);
- iii. *Che cos’è che in aria vola?* (henceforth Piumini 2020);
- iv. “Perché ci ammaliamo?” (henceforth Calagna e Scalia 2020);
- v. “Coronavirus spiegato ai bambini con una favola” (henceforth Martinola 2020);
- vi. “Il coronavirus spiegato ai bambini. Coronello il virus birbantello” (henceforth D’Angelo 2020);
- vii. “Il coronavirus spiegato ai bambini dai bambini” (henceforth Esposito e Iavarone 2020).

The first two samples are short stories published in PDF format, available free of charge, as is the third sample, a nursery rhyme created by children’s writer Roberto Piumini at the request of the Humanitas San Pio X health complex in Milan. All the other samples are video products hosted on different YouTube channels: (iv) is produced by two Italian YouTubers, Luigi Calagna and Sofia Scalia, known as “Me contro Te”; (v) is published on a thematic channel for children called “Le favole di Fede”; (vi) appears on the personal channel of the author, a school teacher, while (vii) was created by the magazine *Obga*.

The method of investigation is based on traditional discourse analysis, well-established in Italian linguistics studies, within which this contribution intends to place itself. This analysis involves identifying

the activated linguistic variants in the different linguistic structures (in particular, morphology, lexicon, and syntax) that characterise the text and reveal its nature (for the synchronic and contemporary perspective adopted in this contribution, see for an overview Lubello 2016, in particular, the section entitled “L’italiano contemporaneo. Strutture e varietà”). The analysis of linguistic forms is then supplemented with a pragmatic-textual perspective (for an overview, including the foundational studies of the disciplines, see Andorno 2003 and Bazzanella 2008; see also Barron, Gu, and Steel 2017, particularly the sections entitled “Linguistic Pragmatics” and “Interactional Pragmatics”; for an overview of the state of the art in Italian linguistics, see Palermo 2012; Bazzanella e Palermo in Lubello 2016). Special attention will be paid to the selection of information and the way it is presented.

### 3. THE GUIDELINES OFFERED BY INSTITUTIONS AND THE TEXTS PRODUCED BY PUBLIC HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

#### 3.1. *General aspects*

The main aspects of the institutional guidelines are best summarised by the suggestions of the developmental psychoanalyst Massimo Ammaniti (Salvatori 2020); parents, and educators...

have to look for and find, the right words and explanations that are not scary. For example, they can tell the story of a child who has a cough and passes it on to everyone, making them sick and forcing them to stay home, take medicine, and not go to school for a long time. And they can tell their children that their cooperation instead can be necessary so that this doesn't happen to anyone.<sup>1</sup>

If taken as a whole, all the documents of the corpus converge on this last aspect. First of all, the discourse on COVID-19 is a discourse on the conduct to be followed rather than a discourse on the nature of the phenomenon. It is, therefore, more prescriptive and directive than descriptive-narrative in the proper sense. Moreover, before being treated as a phenomenon in itself, the pandemic is used as an opportunity to raise awareness of other crucial issues in everyday life, such as the obser-

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<sup>1</sup> For this quote, and the following ones, I provide my English translation.

vance of rules of hygiene and prevention and the civic responsibility involved in one's actions.

The former are given ample space in all the sources considered. Since they are actions that can be carried out by everyone in their daily lives, they would make those who carry them out, including children, feel less powerless and ultimately more reassured (Policlinico n.d.). The observance of such rules, together with the experience of the pandemic as a whole, in fact offered "a valuable opportunity to teach our children and youth that the actions of each of us have an impact on society. This will help us foster in them a spirit of community and the emergence of civic responsibility" (Bambino Gesù 2021).

The latter, for children, appears to be focused on two main terms, or rather on a single aspect and its corollary, i.e. the protection of the most vulnerable people, and in particular of the elderly and therefore of their grandparents (Capua 2020; Dall'Ara 2020; Patuck 2020; SIP 2020). In the documents analysed, the tendency to trace the pandemic discourse back to the child's daily and family sphere and his or her individuality is, moreover, very marked and is evident both in the invitation to explain the pandemic from situations familiar to children, such as seasonal flu (Policlinico n.d.; Cilenti 2020; FIMP 2020) and in the suggestions made for containing the fear, i.e. by making explicit that "Coronavirus doesn't like children and teenagers much, even though they have a lot of snot" (Dall'Ara 2020; cf. Capua 2020; Cilenti 2020) and therefore for them "this virus is not dangerous" (Bambino Gesù 2021; cf. FIMP 2020).

On the other hand, the report repeatedly calls for the encouragement of a feeling of trust, both generalised and directed in particular towards the professional categories of doctors and scientists. Excerpts on this issue are reproduced below: "è indispensabile riuscire a trasmettere fiducia"<sup>2</sup> (Policlinico n.d.); "bisogna avere fiducia e gratitudine per tutti coloro che stanno lavorando sodo per risolvere il problema, in particolare per chi è nella zona rossa"<sup>3</sup> (*ibid.*); "Non ti devi preoccupare troppo, però, ci stanno pensando le persone grandi e i dottori a

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<sup>2</sup> It is essential to be able to convey confidence.

<sup>3</sup> One must have trust in and be grateful to those working hard to solve the problem, especially those in the red zone. The term *red zone* refers to the colour system adopted in Italy during the pandemic to classify the risk in each region and consequently define the restrictive measures to be implemented according to the colour assigned to the different areas. As can be imagined, the red zone corresponded to the highest risk of contagion.



conoscere e combattere il mostriciattolo”<sup>4</sup> (Dall’Ara 2020, 6); “posso assicurarti che tutto il mondo si sta dando da fare affinché io possa fare meno pasticci possibili”<sup>5</sup> (Cilenti 2020, 1:08); “è importante sottolineare sempre che la soluzione c’è e che noi abbiamo fiducia nei medici e negli scienziati”<sup>6</sup> (Bambino Gesù 2021); “È importante che i bimbi sappiano che le persone si stanno aiutando reciprocamente con atti di generosità e cortesia. Condividete storie di operatori sanitari, scienziati, medici e giovani che stanno lavorando per mettere fine al contagio e mantenere al sicuro la comunità. Sapere che ci sono persone compassionevoli che agiscono può essere di grande sollievo”<sup>7</sup> (UNICEF 2021); “#andràtuttobene”<sup>8</sup> (SIP 2020).

Concerning the construction of trust, the following passage (Capua 2020, 15-16) is relevant because it offers an example of attempting to dispel the children’s general state of uncertainty through an analogy with an everyday experience. Capua provides an example of an ‘act of faith’ among the many that we automatically make in our daily life when we rely on the work and expertise of others:

“Anch’io non ho capito tutto, e nemmeno la mamma e il papà, credo”, dice Iaia, “vero, mamma?”

“Eh sì, Iaia, è una faccenda molto complicata, ma tu capisci come fa un aereo, così grosso e pesante, a volare senza cadere? Eppure se ti proponessi di volare in vacanza con me e papà ci saliresti?”

“Sì!” esclama Iaia.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> You don’t have to worry too much, though, adults and doctors are taking care of understanding and fighting the little monster. Note the bellicose lexical choice (*combattere / fight*), in harmony with part of the semantics that has characterised the Italian media narrative on COVID-19. See the essay by Giuseppe Sergio on this issue and Arcangeli 2020. On the emotional impact of Italian institutional communication during the pandemic, see Gagliardi, Gregori, e Suozzi 2021.

<sup>5</sup> I can assure you that the whole world is working hard so that I make as little mess as possible.

<sup>6</sup> It is essential always to emphasise that the solution is there and that we trust doctors and scientists.

<sup>7</sup> For children it is essential to know that people are helping each other through acts of generosity and kindness. Share stories of health workers, scientists, doctors, and young people working to end the infection and keep the community safe. Knowing that there are compassionate people taking action can be a great relief.

<sup>8</sup> Everything will be fine. This was the message propagated by the media during the first lockdown, along with “Io resto a casa” (I am staying at home).

<sup>9</sup> “I didn’t understand it all either, and neither did Mom and Dad, I guess”, says Iaia, “right, Mom?” / “Oh yes, Iaia, it is a very complicated matter, but do you understand

### 3.2. *Vocabulary used to define the virus*

The above quotation also concretises the guidelines' general invitation to explain the pandemic and the virus in simple and truthful language (Bambino Gesù 2021) and comprehensible words (UNICEF 2020). This general principle, apparently simple, is not always put into practice; in fact, the guidelines do not provide narrative or expository examples that manifest the desired attributes of simplicity and truthfulness (UNICEF 2020; Bambino Gesù 2021).

In institutional and professional sources, in fact, there is a lack of consistency when it comes to putting theoretical guidance on recommended language into practice; in particular, inconsistencies emerge when defining the nature and origin of the virus. The Bambino Gesù hospital web page calls for “concrete examples (e.g. telling them that the virus is transmitted by sneezing and coughing)” and to avoid using “metaphors that can create fear, for example, describing the coronavirus as ‘a little monster’. Children, especially young children, literally believe what we tell them and can be very frightened by the idea that a little monster is around, ready to attack them”. However, in a narrative product by health professionals the virus is repeatedly referred to as a little monster (“piccolo mostriciattolo” in Dall’Ara 2020, 6, 8) and the words associated with it are characterised by their strong negative and pejorative connotations: the virus lives in spittle and generally in rather disgusting places (*ibid.*, 6). This semantic choice, on the other hand, responds to the need to make play of the object and the event (in accordance with another of the general principles advocated, especially to accompany hygiene practices; cf. UNICEF 2020), with the effect of trivialising it and thus giving it a manageable character. In other words, it is an example of how to exorcise what is frightening with something amusing (Salvatori 2020). Elsewhere, the virus is defined as terrible and evil (Marangio 2020), but there are also texts that resort to more neutral definitions. In SIP (2020) the virus is a small animal (“animaletto”), while in Capua (2020, 1, 11) it “is a thing”, it is not “evil” and it is always designated as a collective, never as an individual (a unique case in the analysed corpus, as we shall see). Moreover, in multimodal products, it is necessary to consider the possible reinforcement, or vice versa the dilution, that the illustrations of the virus produce with respect to the

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how a plane, so big and heavy, can fly without falling? Yet if I suggested that you fly on vacation with Dad and me, would you get on it?” / “Yes!” exclaims Iaia.

semantics evoked by the words: the virus can be represented in a funny way (Cilenti 2020; Marangio 2020), or as mildly unpleasant (Dall'Ara 2020; SIP 2020), thus dampening the negative connotations verbally transmitted. It can even appear friendly and familiar due to the infantilising connotations attributed to it (such as the possession of a small soft toy in Capua 2020), so as to unbalance in a positive sense an otherwise neutral verbal definition.

Even about the origin of the virus, the narrative is not cohesive. Only in Dall'Ara (2020, 6) is it vaguely mentioned that “it was born a few months ago in a village far from our home” and in Cilenti (2020, 0:29) the virus states “previously I was only in China”.

### 3.3. *Vocabulary used to describe the virus*

While there is no agreement on the substance of the entity and its origin, there is on its attributes: the virus is always tiny, minuscule, invisible (Capua 2020; Cilenti 2020; Dall'Ara 2020; Patuck 2020; SIP 2020) and in different narratives it is mischievous, has preferences, passions and fears, loves, travels, has fun, cheers etc., as the following sampling shows: “è un tipo piuttosto dispettoso e come a tutti i virus anche a lui piace stare in questi posti un po' schifosi! [...] e viaggia per tutto il mondo a bordo delle persone!”<sup>10</sup> (Dall'Ara 2020, 6); “Virus Corona aveva paura della solitudine”<sup>11</sup> (Marangio 2020); “la mia mamma direbbe che sono un maleducato!”<sup>12</sup> (Cilenti 2020, 0:35); “sono un pasticcione e ho combinato molti guai”<sup>13</sup> (Cilenti 2020, 0:53); “ci siamo e siamo sempre in giro per il mondo, come voi!”<sup>14</sup>; “amiamo stare insieme a voi”<sup>15</sup>; “viaggiamo con le goccioline”<sup>16</sup>; “a noi virus piacciono tantissimo i giochi e le feste”<sup>17</sup>; “usiamo le goccioline come tavole da surf”<sup>18</sup>; “gli eventi sportivi con tanti tifosi sono la nostra passione; se nel pubblico ci

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<sup>10</sup> It's a pretty naughty guy, and like all viruses, it likes to stay in these kinds of shitty places! [...] and it travels all over the world aboard people.

<sup>11</sup> The virus named “Corona” (Crown) was afraid of being alone.

<sup>12</sup> My mum would say I'm rude!

<sup>13</sup> I'm a bungler, and I've caused a lot of trouble.

<sup>14</sup> We're always running the world, like you!

<sup>15</sup> We love being with you.

<sup>16</sup> We travel with the droplets.

<sup>17</sup> We viruses love games and parties.

<sup>18</sup> We use the droplets as surfboards.

sono nonni che urlano, noi facciamo il tifo con loro”<sup>19</sup>; “ci divertiamo moltissimo anche con i vostri giochi”<sup>20</sup> (Capua 2020, 5-14).

In short, the description of the virus and the way it spreads uses the marked anthropomorphisation that has always characterised non-human protagonists (animals in particular) in fairy tales. The syntony with prototypical children’s fiction, as well as with the motherese or baby talk (Bernini 2010), is confirmed by the use of altered words and elatives, topical linguistic resources in Italian children’s literature (Ricci 2009). For the former, in addition to the already mentioned *animaletto*<sup>21</sup>, *mostriciattolo*<sup>22</sup> and *sputacchio*<sup>23</sup>, there are *urlaccio*<sup>24</sup> (Capua 2020, 8), *goccioline*<sup>25</sup> (*ibid.*, *passim*) and *vecchiette*<sup>26</sup> (Dall’Ara 2020, 8). For the latter, there is the recursive use of *tantissimo*, *moltissimo*, *piccolissimi*/*i*<sup>27</sup> (Capua 2020). Moreover, in a couple of cases, elements of the fantastic emerge. For example, in one case, doctors are flanked by wizards who help them to produce the magic formula to eradicate the virus (Marangio 2020). In another, an amazing creature, illustrated as a dragon, helps the protagonist in her mission (Patuck 2020).

#### 4. TEXTS AND VIDEOS OFFERED BY INDIVIDUALS OR ORGANISATIONS BEYOND THE REALM OF PUBLIC HEALTH PROTECTION

##### 4.1. *Vocabulary used to describe the virus*

The traditional language of fairy tales is the most popular technique, even in products offered by individuals or organisations beyond the realm of public health protection. In an even more obvious way, most of the products considered make use of the movements of fable textuality (see, for instance, the incipit ‘once upon a time’ and the typical

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<sup>19</sup> Sporting events with lots of fans are our passion; if there are grandparents shouting in the audience, we cheer with them.

<sup>20</sup> We also have a lot of fun with your games.

<sup>21</sup> Little animal.

<sup>22</sup> Little monster.

<sup>23</sup> Spit.

<sup>24</sup> Scream.

<sup>25</sup> Droplets.

<sup>26</sup> Old ladies.

<sup>27</sup> Very much, very small.

attack ‘one day’ to introduce a turning point in the story: D’Angelo 2020; Martinola 2020; also present in Dall’Ara 2020; Marangio 2020). Furthermore, traditional linguistic strategies of the Italian language for children are widely used (Ricci 2009). In fact, iterative forms abound (“una terra lontana lontana”<sup>28</sup>, “si avvicinò, si avvicinò”<sup>29</sup> in Martinola 2020; “sono piccolo piccolo”<sup>30</sup> in Calagna e Scalia 2020), as well as altered forms in a diminutive or superlative sense (with regard to diminutive, cf. *manine, ditino, occhietti, visetto*<sup>31</sup> in Martinola 2020; *piccolino, tipetto*<sup>32</sup> in Piumini 2020; *birbantello*<sup>33</sup> in D’Angelo 2020; with regard to superlatives, see *superveloce, supercontagioso, superpotente, potentissimo, bruttissimo*<sup>34</sup> in Martinola 2020; *super veloce, super bravo*<sup>35</sup> in Esposito e Iavarone 2020; *piccolissimissimi*<sup>36</sup> in Calagna e Scalia 2020).

Hyperbole is also conveyed by the consecutive structures describing the pandemic phenomenon (“Ne contagiò tantissime, così tante che in tutto il mondo non si parlava altro che di lui”<sup>37</sup>, “Divenne tanto famoso, ma tanto famoso che tutti i virus lo nominarono il loro re”<sup>38</sup> in Martinola 2020) and in the specular attribution of heroism to the co-protagonists of the narrated stories; the children are heroes (D’Angelo 2020, cf. Patuck 2020) with a special task in the mission (Esposito e Iavarone 2020).

The anthropomorphisation is confirmed in a similar way to that described in section 3. The virus is always an individual, often enunciates its story in the first person, has a humanised corporeity (“se ne stava seduto [...] con le gambe incrociate”<sup>39</sup> in Martinola 2020). It has changing moods (it is moved by envy towards other viruses, it is very sad or very happy in Martinola 2020). It possesses different character qualities (it is evil in Martinola 2020; unpleasant, naughty, intrusive in Piumini 2020; rebellious and disobedient in D’Angelo 2020; mischievous in Piumini 2020 and D’Angelo 2020; it is a sticky, athletic guy! “un

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<sup>28</sup> A land far, far away.

<sup>29</sup> It came closer.

<sup>30</sup> I am tiny.

<sup>31</sup> Little hands, little finger, little eyes, little face.

<sup>32</sup> Small one, little guy.

<sup>33</sup> Little rascal.

<sup>34</sup> Superfast, super contagious, super-powerful, super ugly.

<sup>35</sup> Superfast, super good.

<sup>36</sup> Very small.

<sup>37</sup> He infected so many that the whole world was talking about him.

<sup>38</sup> He became so famous that all the viruses named him their king.

<sup>39</sup> He sat with his legs crossed.

tipo appiccicoso e atletico!” in Nerini e Longo 2020, 11), it has desires, dreams and preferences (“Il sogno più grande era di girare il mondo”<sup>40</sup> in Piumini 2020; “come vorrei avere anch’io una medicina studiata solo per me”<sup>41</sup> in Martinola 2020; “A Coronavirus piace saltare sulle nostre mani”<sup>42</sup> in Esposito e Iavarone 2020), it has fun (“Per evitare che lui si diverta troppo saltando di persona in persona”<sup>43</sup> in Nerini e Longo 2020) and therefore it manifests a will (“A febbraio ho deciso di fare un viaggio nel nord Italia”<sup>44</sup> in Campioni 2020; “sono furbi, riescono a nascondersi o a prendere in giro le nostre difese immunitarie”<sup>45</sup> in Calagna and Scalia 2020).

#### 4.2. *Vocabulary used to define the virus and other aspects*

As in the previous sub-corpus, the definitions of what the Coronavirus is divided between those negatively connoted (*mostriciattolo* in Esposito and Iavarone 2020) and neutral epithets (*microbo*<sup>46</sup> in Nerini e Longo 2020) or only denotative. On this point, see in particular Calagna and Scalia 2020, where only the scientific nomenclature of the virus, bacteria, antibodies, and immune system are used, albeit, to be universally understood. Conversely, in contrast to the sample of official texts, some accounts provide a fanciful justification for the name Coronavirus; it would be so called because it wears a crown (“indossa una corona”, Martinola 2020; Piumini 2020), or because it is the prince of viruses (D’Angelo 2020). The naming and characterisation of the virus are not trivial components as they contribute to the general representation of the pandemic and thus to its perception by the recipients of these stories. Specific individualistic characterisations of the virus may support the perception of the pandemic as caused by an intentionally malevolent will towards humans or contribute to the idea of a phenomenon devoid of intentionality by the virus – or at least devoid of harmful intentionality. In this regard, see the following excerpts: “la semplice curiosità di vedere

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<sup>40</sup> His biggest dream was to travel the world.

<sup>41</sup> How I too would like to have a medicine designed just for me.

<sup>42</sup> Coronavirus likes to jump on our hands.

<sup>43</sup> To prevent it from having too much fun jumping from person to person.

<sup>44</sup> In February, I decided to take a trip to northern Italy.

<sup>45</sup> They are cunning; they manage to hide or tease our immune defences.

<sup>46</sup> Microbe.

il mondo era diventato un flagello per le popolazioni”<sup>47</sup> (D’Angelo 2020), “Il mio arrivo ha portato un po’ di scompiglio”<sup>48</sup> (Campioni 2020).

Also divergent from the narrative tendencies examined above is the more or less precise declaration of the origin of the virus. If some evoke an unknown far away land (Martinola 2020), others mention its Chinese origin, alluding to it (“La grande muraglia la conosco, è nel mio paese”<sup>49</sup> in D’Angelo 2020) or making it explicit (“Sono nato a dicembre in Cina”<sup>50</sup> in Campioni 2020, [5]), with possibly more precise localisations (“Questa storia nasce nella lontana Wuhan, una città della Cina attraversata dal fiume Azzurro”<sup>51</sup> in Nerini e Longo 2020, 3).

Other characterisations are less transversal. For example, the magical element returns with the potion to defeat the virus (Esposito e Iavarone 2020) or with some trick (Campioni 2020) to avoid contamination (the repetition of hygiene and prevention rules remains a constant in these texts as well).

Elsewhere, as in the previous corpus, there is an invitation to trust (“e dobbiamo preoccuparci? No, perché dottori, scienziati e bambini come noi stanno facendo ogni cosa per scacciarlo via e questa è una cosa positiva”<sup>52</sup> in Esposito e Iavarone 2020; “Il mio vaccino invece non è stato ancora creato! Ci sono però tanti scienziati che stanno studiando un modo per crearlo!”<sup>53</sup> in Campioni 2020) and conversely an invitation not to be afraid (“Dicono che non bisogna aver così paura di lui, ma essere cauti”<sup>54</sup> in Nerini e Longo 2020, 17). However, unlike in the first corpus, these injections of confidence are not expressed through imperatives (“Condividete”, “Non ti devi preoccupare”) or impersonal forms manifesting an inescapable necessity (“bisogna”, “è importante”, “è indispensabile”). The invitation to trust, that is, does not sound like an indirect yet explicit injunction, or as a directive speech act sometimes mitigated in the form of advice (Poggi 1990), but follows from the

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<sup>47</sup> The simple curiosity to see the world had become a scourge for people.

<sup>48</sup> My arrival brought some turmoil.

<sup>49</sup> I know the Great Wall; it is in my country.

<sup>50</sup> I was born in December in China.

<sup>51</sup> This story originates in faraway Wuhan, a city in China crossed by the Blue River.

<sup>52</sup> And do we have to worry? No, because doctors, scientists and children like us are doing everything to chase it away, which is a good thing.

<sup>53</sup> My vaccine, on the other hand, has not yet been created! There are, however, many scientists who are working on a way to make it.

<sup>54</sup> They say you should not be so afraid of him, but be cautious.

commitment to the truthfulness of the assertive speech act that medical research on the virus is ongoing.

Lastly, in one case (D'Angelo 2020), the narrative provides an opportunity to convey further educational content, namely the practice of kindness.

## 5. SUMMARY AND DATA DISCUSSION

Given the pronounced discomfort among young people also recorded in Italy during the lockdown period following the COVID-19 pandemic, this essay questioned the communicative modes that were activated in Italy to respond to it. To this end, two small *corpora* of Italian texts were set up, which can be counted in the categories of “scritto-scritto”, “scritto-parlato” and “trasmesso scritto”; these texts were investigated through linguistic and pragmatic-textual analysis, following the conventions of Italian linguistics studies in which this essay intends to situate itself. The research aims to identify the pragmatic-textual typologies activated, the linguistic choices made and the effects of these expressive choices.

About the first research question, the analysis revealed that the institutional recommendations advise using simple and truthful language to explain to children and adolescents the nature of COVID-19 and the cause of the pandemic. These theoretical recommendations are mainly embodied in the textuality and language of the fable tradition. Many linguistic choices proceed from (Italian) fable textuality, which can be counted among the possible realisations of the “scritto parlato” category: formulaic expressions, iterative forms, diminutives and hyperbolic expressions were found in both *corpora*, with only minor differences. The texts of the second corpus play with the scientific name of the virus, giving imaginative explanations.

Also common to both *corpora* is the almost unanimous anthropomorphisation of the virus and its general characterisation as a volitional individuality, sometimes with deliberately malevolent, sometimes neutral intentions. However, the *corpora* diverge when it comes to declaring the virus's origin: only the texts of the second corpus are unanimous in stating the Chinese source, more or less explicitly.

What then are the effects of these linguistic, textual and narrative choices? Traditionally, the attribution of human characteristics to the protagonists of fairy tales (animals, plants or inanimate beings) is



functional to make their symbolisation of typically human vices and virtues more evident. In this context, however, anthropomorphisation seems to perform only the function of making familiar, through the attribution of human characteristics, a new phenomenon that tends to be alien to the everyday life of today's Italian (and generally western) children and adolescents, such as an epidemic and even more so a pandemic. The purpose of this cosmetic operation would be to defuse the understandable disorientation and consequent feeling of fear. Ultimately, the anthropomorphisation of the virus, as well as the sporadic recourse to magical elements, would have helped children to tolerate the brutal otherness that the viral pandemic represented when it broke into the horizons of expectation (if not rosy, at least inertial) regarding the future everyday life of the younger generations. The desired perlocutionary effect of all these narrations is a priority; it consists of reassuring children and adolescents, dampening their anxieties and fostering, on the contrary, a feeling of confidence in the future, sometimes overemphasised in happy endings (“tutto tornò come prima, anche più bello”<sup>55</sup> in Marangio 2020; “E magari, quando avremo superato questa prova, tutti insieme impareremo una vita saggia e nuova”<sup>56</sup> in Piumini 2020). Therefore, one understands the explicit invitations to place trust in doctors and scientists engaged in the search for a vaccine (or a magic potion) and the declarations of the absence of imminent danger to the children's lives. On this aspect, however, the two *corpora* diverge as to how to instil trust: in the first group of texts, a directive speech act is used, sometimes mitigated by the superficial form of advice, while in the second group, an assertive speech act is used that indirectly commits to the efficacy of the medical research in progress.

More consistent with the fable tradition is the presence of rules of hygiene and conduct and other educational themes, equally present in both *corpora*. The former, often placed at the end of the tales, correspond to the traditional teachings of practical wisdom offered at the end of fables. In contrast, the latter (kindness, a sense of civic responsibility towards the elderly) corresponds to the final enunciation of the moral truth, the ethical and social message of the fable, whose importance would be reconfirmed by the pandemic.

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<sup>55</sup> Everything was as before, and even more beautiful.

<sup>56</sup> And maybe, after passing this test, we will all learn to make a wise and new life together.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As the analysis and discussion of the data showed, the documents produced by both organisations and health experts, and those by writers, educators and private individuals, manifest above all a directive rather than an assertive-explanatory character, even though most of the products promise, right from the title, to explain COVID-19. Even the descriptions of the virus and the explanations of the pandemic's dynamics are not very denotative and, on the contrary, strongly connoted in an expressive and emotional sense. While, on the one hand, the strong characterisation of the virus as a humanised individual entity may reassure children and adolescents, bringing otherness within the perimeter of the known, on the other hand, the same emphasis on the humanised will of the virus, sometimes accompanied by distinctly despicable traits, may have fuelled the perception of the pandemic and its consequences as the product of a perverse choice of the virus, ultimately producing the opposite effect to the desired objective, namely a paranoid sense of persecution.

As fairy tales do, acting on an emotional level can produce ambivalent effects. However, it is true that the fable, a textual genre adopted (consciously or unconsciously) as a reference by most of the texts considered, does not have as its primary intent the explanation of a fact or phenomenon but rather the orientation of the conduct of others through *exempla*. The fable is an educational strategy (Colucci 2017) and not an epistemic one. In conclusion, while the fable narrative well interprets the instruction to explain COVID-19 to children and adolescents in simple and understandable language, it seems to have betrayed the commitment to truthfulness precisely because of its nature.

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