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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

Edited by / A cura di
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Editorial
Understanding COVID-19 Communication: Linguistic and Discursive Perspectives

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Abstract

This collaborative essay addresses COVID-19 communication, focussing on the linguistic strategies and discursive constructions that were adopted, first to cope with the unprecedented crisis scenarios of the pandemic and later to hail the post-pandemic times. It recapitulates the unfolding of COVID-19 communication from 2020 to 2022, espousing a linguistic and discursive perspective. To that purpose, it elaborates on a few keywords and key phrases that consistently identify the different pandemic and post-pandemic phases in the public domain. i.e. 'recovery and resilience', 'smart' and 'virtual', and the 'new normal', to finish with a few reflections on the challenges of legal communication faced with mounting social intolerance and the exacerbation of hate speech and xenophobia. The overview privileges the European Union and the UK, the latter launching the first mass vaccination campaign in December 2020, although with the awareness of the global nature of the phenomenon and its present repercussions. The aim of the essay is to frame the nine research articles in this issue as attempts to interpret an exceptionally difficult time span and as a form of intellectual resilience.

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1. Introduction: communication challenges in crisis scenarios

COVID-19 communication is an umbrella term covering a countless number of settings that could hardly be fairly represented in a single journal issue. Thus said, the rationale of this collaborative essay that introduces the main topic of the issue and is followed by nine selected research articles is to show how language-centred approaches to the health emergency may offer specific insights into the understanding of the pandemic and improve communication strategies in future crisis scenarios.

It is now seared into the collective memory that COVID-19 communication started as a response to the trauma generated by the announcement of the pandemic (Wodak 2020). The shocking news and images that began to circulate in the news media and on social networks at the onset of the first wave were overwhelming and shattered any illusion of control. No matter how uncoordinated at first, and understandably so, words conveyed the effort to make sense and cope with the unexpected, and language was perceived as resilient, relational and fundamentally human in the face of a zoonotic disease that made intubated patients unable to speak. A memorable example of affective and resilient communication is when, in March 2020, Italian citizens reacted to the duress of the lockdown by playing music and singing from windows, balconies and rooftops to show support for healthcare workers, overburdened in the hospitals of the second worst-affected country after China. In the months to follow, other forms of phatic communication emerged on the Internet to neutralise social distancing and promote interconnectedness (Chateau 2020).

In retrospect, we can say that the pandemic has ignited linguistic creativity that survives to this day, especially since the virus has not come to a natural end. Among these creative linguistic behaviours we can include the dissemination of scientific terms in popular discourse, the creation of "coroneologisms", from *covidiots* to *coronababies* and *quaranteens* (Roig-Marín 2021), irony and humour to tame fear and uncertainties, especially in virtual interactions and with the dominance

of Internet memes (Olah and Hempelmann 2021), and metaphoric language (Garzone 2021; Semino 2021; Musolff 2022). Exposure to metaphorical framing may modify how people reason about a specific social problem and even interpret the law (Osiejewicz 2021), although framing devices may generate further ambiguities, such as when fighting the disease is compared to a war, or when the concept of 'herd immunity' is unwisely deployed. A surge in studies and critical reflections on the subject of coronavirus was observed at the very beginning of the pandemic, with about 9,500 new publications issued in March 2020 (Torres-Salinas *et al.* 2020).

In fact, the need to adjust messages to contingency has affected all discursive domains and is now embedded as a staple feature within post-pandemic communication ecologies since the health crisis has caused a rethinking of current global challenges – public health, environmental sustainability, tourism and mobility, labour, education, just to name a few. Standing out against this backdrop, political and institutional communication and the media have been playing a key role in (dis)informing citizens of health risks and good practices and promoting social debate to build new perspectives.

In what follows, the unfolding of COVID-19 communication from 2020 to 2022 will be summarised, within a linguistic and discursive perspective, by elaborating on a few keywords and key phrases that can identify the different pandemic and post-pandemic phases across domains – 'recovery and resilience', 'smart' and 'virtual', the 'new normal' – to finish with a few reflections on the challenges of legal communication, faced with mounting social intolerance and the exacerbation of hate speech and xenophobia. The privileged perspective is centred on the European Union and the UK, the latter launching the first mass vaccination campaign in December 2020, although with the awareness of the global nature of the phenomenon. The aim is to frame the nine research articles in this issue as attempts to interpret an incredibly difficult time span and regard them as a form of intellectual resilience.

2. Recovery and resilience

As this journal issue illustrates, a major area of interest for language scholars in the analysis of COVID-19 communication intersects multiple discourses, i.e. political, institutional, public health, media and

legal. On a worldwide level, the pandemic tested policymakers' ability to make decisions in a climate of great uncertainty. After a quick response to the emergency, with the promulgation of safety regulations internally and across borders, sanitary protocols – from lockdown to using hand sanitisers and wearing a face mask on public transport and in stores – were adopted to mitigate the impact on overloaded healthcare systems. Besides the implementation of safety measures to reduce health risks and fines in case of violations, efforts were made by local health authorities to elaborate and share warnings, instructions and advice all-round in an accessible way (Jucks and Hendriks 2021; Smith and Kabele 2021; Kompani *et al.* 2022). However, institutional communication often stumbled against the perceived lack of clarity or unexpected emotional reactions from citizens. One case in point was the UK Government's original recommendation to "stay home, protect the NHS, save lives" that was soon dropped because it apparently deterred people from using dedicated NHS services. It was replaced by "stay alert, control the virus, save lives", in turn criticised for being too vague (Cullen-Shute 2020). An impressive scientific success, the approval of the PfizerBioNTech COVID-19 vaccine started the vaccination rollout, which was inaugurated in the UK on December 8, 2020, and publicised by the "Roll your sleeves up" campaign.

Not unsurprisingly, effective healthcare communication has emerged as a key priority. Not only have several scientific terms entered popular discourse, but the pandemic has thrust epidemiologists, virologists and science explainers into the public eye. Technology and its use have also had an impact on public health since, at one point, epidemiological surveillance found support in digital COVID certificates, their cross-border interoperability and in contact tracing apps (Paganoni 2021), prioritising security (digital or otherwise) and health safety over citizens' right to privacy and raising the issue of informed consent. At the same time, the coronavirus emergency has shown a number of possible obstacles to a more harmonised approach towards fighting the pandemic in EU Member States, such as lack of transnational coordination and fragmentation in healthcare provision.

A bitter context of resilience was people's homes, and not just to the disease. Due to forced confinement, there was a reported increase of news stories about gender-based domestic violence, a phenomenon defined by UN Secretary-General António Guterres as the "shadow pandemic" (*UN News* 2020b). Unfortunately, the ways in which media coverage was framed sometimes added to this plight, magnifying deep-

rooted abuse but looking at cases as sporadic and unrelated rather than attempting an articulated understanding of domestic violence as a form of coercive control that is embedded within a regular pattern of behaviour (Williamson *et al.* 2020). Communication gaps between potential victims and support networks (dedicated professionals, helplines, shelters, etc.) emerged although resilient practices were introduced. In Italy, for example, victims could go to pharmacies and ask for a "1522 face mask", 1522 being the national domestic abuse helpline number; in Spain, the code word was "Mascarilla 19".

In several other communicative contexts, by osmosis, it was important to devise messages stressing resilience from the very start. Breaks in supply chains affected consumer patterns, with instances of hoarding essential items during the first phase (Kirk and Rifkin 2020). With retail stores closed, the sudden surge in e-commerce accelerated digital transformation, although unplanned. On a lighter note, it should be pointed out that several brands invented memorable stay-at-home advertising campaigns. As Sobalde and Klein claim, "perhaps the most impressive and sustained resilience we have witnessed during the pandemic is in the realm of marketing" (2021, 2). Brands orchestrated emotional appeals intertwined with ethical and social concerns (Mangiò *et al.* 2021). Some companies stressed their strategic role in logistics, others emphasised food, sanitary equipment and money donations to needy individuals, institutions and hospitals. In the hard-hit fashion industry, the already ongoing consumer trend from formal to casual apparel was strengthened by a change in dressing habits, due to *staycation* but also to reduced income, especially for women. In retrospect, it can be observed that the value of sustainability has become more widely entrenched in the fashion industry, together with the decluttering and upcycling habits of end users.

Tourism was brought to a standstill, with countries closing borders and issuing travel bans. Destinations, tourism boards and airlines stopped their regular marketing activities, and instead dedicated their channels to inform and appeal to prospective visitors to adhere to local health authorities' guidelines. Tourism marketing teams pivoted, reimagined and relaunched campaigns. Due to travel restrictions, communication strategies reframed negativity into positive practices, drawing from pre-existing discourses of sustainability, shared responsibility and intergenerational cooperation. The "Can't Skip Hope" video released in March 2020 by Turismo de Portugal is worthy of note and was designed as an update of the successful 2017 "Can't Skip Portugal" promotional

campaign on digital media. The video was produced in smart working and the voiceover, recorded with a smartphone, recites the anaphoric refrain "It's time to stop"[1]. An unexpected positive side of the pandemic was that restricted mobility resulted in a temporary truce for the biosphere, with a decline in air pollution and wildlife reclaiming urban spaces. Hopefully, the post-pandemic new normal will offer opportunities for proximity tourism and reinforce more sustainable mobility paradigms, including in air travel, which is increasingly contested by the anti-flying movement (Paganoni 2022).

The public health crisis soon turned into a catastrophic economic crisis with devastating social effects. EU governments took action to cushion the impact, especially in the sectors that were most severely damaged by the pandemic and desperately needed stimulus measures such as subsidies and bonuses. At the supranational level, the 'recovery and resilience' binomial has almost become a mantra of resistance to the devastating effects of the pandemic. Memorably, it describes the strategic tool of the Next Generation EU Recovery Plan (NGEU), a redressive policy approach intended to boost the expected recovery of national economies, together with the 2021-27 long-term budget. It therefore represents "a once in a lifetime chance to emerge stronger from the pandemic, transform our economies, create opportunities and jobs for the Europe where we want to live" ("Recovery Plan for Europe", European Commission).

Restrictions affected the way people worked and studied. While online classes replaced face-to-face lessons, obliging teachers and students to experiment with new forms of interaction in the virtual classroom, social distancing and lockdown protocols forced managers and employees to adopt smart working practices. Confinement and, simultaneously, ubiquity made possible by digital hyperconnectivity redefined the boundaries of work and home as fluid across physical space and virtual reality, showing the dominance of the *onlife* paradigm in everyday experience (Floridi 2015).

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[1] "It's time to stop. It's time to look at each other in the distance. It's time to stare humanity in the eyes. To take a break, for the world. [...] It's time to stop. We are meant to connect and we are stronger together. But separated, we are today more united than ever. [...] It's time to stop. Nature, landscapes, beaches and monuments aren't going anywhere. They will still be there waiting for a better time to be lived. And we must do the same for a while. [...] It's time to stop. Stop and think of ourselves. Think about everyone else too" (Turismo de Portugal 2020).

In light of the above, moving on to legal discourse, the following section will address how rules and restrictions were communicated on institutional and popular media channels and highlight the main social issues concerning law and order that animated the public debate.

3. COVID-19 COMMUNICATION AND LEGAL ISSUES

3.1. *Vulnerability and discrimination*

The pandemic has shown that adequate communication helps to strengthen the functioning of organisations in difficult times. Communicating COVID-related risk aimed to facilitate the understanding of the essence of the threat, its level and what actions should be taken in relation to it. Effective communication should take place in four stages: (1) recognising what people need to know in order to be able to take appropriate action in the face of a threat, (2) recognising what people think about the threat and how they feel it, and how they make decisions, (3) creating an adequate message to be delivered to the recipients, (4) checking whether the message has the intended effect. The message should always be clear, simple and consistent with prior announcements. The message should be formulated considering the specificity of the communities to which it is directed, taking into account their initial knowledge, cognitive abilities, as well as beliefs about COVID-19 and ways of dealing with related fears.

Vulnerability is the degree to which a population, an individual or organisation is unable to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impacts of disasters. The term "vulnerable community" implies the disadvantaged sub-segment of the community requiring utmost care, specific ancillary considerations and augmented protection. Vulnerable individuals' freedom and capability to protect oneself from intended or inherent legal risks refer mostly to decreased freewill and the inability to make informed choices. Vulnerable communities involve – but are not limited to – children, minors, pregnant women, foetuses, prisoners, employees, physically and intellectually challenged individuals, elderly people, the visually or hearing impaired, ethnic minorities, refugees, and the economically and educationally disabled. The way vulnerability is felt and displayed depends on the way institutions create legal frames

for resilience devices. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has relied on a clear-cut framework to determine which individuals or groups should be considered vulnerable and disadvantaged, and what measures are required to protect their human rights. Legal dilemmas are widely prevalent in addressing these communities with regard to communications, employment, data privacy and therapeutic deliberations. However, they barely concern legal communication, the effectiveness of which depends on how the information is organised and consciously dedicated to the community, their communicative needs, language competences and knowledge.

There is no convincing evidence that COVID-19 communication addressed the specific needs of vulnerable groups. The time of a pandemic is a difficult time – it puts human security to the test, but also shows all the faulty points at the interface of social discourses, practices and the law. In sum, while everyone was affected by the pandemic, not everyone was equally affected. Of course, a severe pandemic can disproportionately affect subjects that are already victims of discrimination, but it should be kept in mind that discrimination is a double-edged sword as it can also negatively affect those subjects who discriminate against others. In times of a pandemic, social responses resulting from discrimination may lead to violations of certain sanitary standards, i.e. disregarding social distancing and neglecting preventive measures (such as wearing masks) because of anger, protest or denial. Discrimination can also cause ignorance and disregard for elements that could potentially improve sanitary and epidemiological conditions. In such cases unfortunately, the discriminatory approach causes responses from disadvantaged communities that are *a priori* rejected as unacceptable by the discriminating society. Recent studies have identified alarmist conspiracy theories, xenophobic and racist discourses, as well as attempts to correlate the evolution of the disease with stereotypical social representations of ethnic groups. "The strategy of identifying the 'scapegoat' went hand in hand with the vigilante discourse promoted by the media, opinion leaders and politicians who criticized various social groups for non-compliance with health regulations or other controlling measures" (Pankowski and Dzięgielewski 2020, 1). Members of minority groups who already were the preferred targets of hate speech and derogative cultural stereotypes prior to the pandemic faced stigma associated with COVID-19.

3.2. *Hate speech and xenophobia*

Social cohesion was put to test by the pandemic. In February 2020, Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned the population against misinformation and the proliferation of conspiracy theories and false news. Later into the year, UN Secretary General António Guterres warned against the "virus of hatred" that was spreading rapidly throughout the world and denounced the "tsunamis" of racial hatred, xenophobia and anti-Semitism that was emerging globally (*UN News* 2020a).

Social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and YouTube were the main source of health information around the world (Cinelli *et al.* 2020), with roughly one in three people exposed to and seriously believing in fake or misleading COVID-19 information via social media (OECD 2020). Disinformation about the disease was disseminated far more widely than information from credible sources, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). Some online platforms, such as the Tech Transparency Project, EUvsDisinfo and EU DisinfoLab, took steps to reduce the spread of false and misleading information. Their efforts aimed at automatically directing users to official sources on the coronavirus disease; highlighting, disclosing and prioritising content from credible media outlets; removing offers containing false or misleading opinions about products that prevent or treat the disease; offering government free advertising on COVID-19.

Research at Cardiff University's HateLab has shown a link between online anti-black and anti-Muslim hate occurring on the streets. It also documents how anti-Asian hate on the streets in the first weeks of the pandemic increased significantly, in line with online hate. As well as Asian people, there was a targeting of Jews, Muslims and LGBT+ people during the pandemic, largely fuelled by divisive disinformation and the "science of hate" (Williams 2022). Remarkably, "the frequency of anti-Semitic messages decreased on social media, along with the focus on Middle East conflicts that previously would trigger massive anti-Semitic narratives. Even so, the Jewish community has been associated with the occurrence of the coronavirus in complex conspiracy theories" (Pankowski and Dzięgielewski 2020, 41-42), in particular blaming the Jewish elite and insinuating that they used the disease as a biological weapon.

Drastic increase in online anti-Asian hate crime was triggered by a tweet sent by former President Donald Trump that included the

phrase 'Chinese virus' to describe COVID-19. At the beginning of the pandemic, Trump used the phrase in a tweet which he then went on to defend in a White House press briefing days later. Many of the tweets sent after Donald Trump's comment were deeply hateful and disturbing, with some people expressing frustration over cancelled plans like birthday parties and postponed sporting events, using hashtags containing racial slurs and dehumanising language.

"Various media outlets used ethnic references when covering negative news on communities or individuals that did not comply to confinement rules" (Pankowski and Dzięgielewski 2020, 41), including the Roma people. The pandemic created a new sense of threat that has been misattributed to certain identities by politicians and members of the far-right. In Poland, Corona-related hate also affected refugees and immigrants (or people perceived as part of these groups), even though they had been living in Poland for a consistent period of time. They were usually described as dirty, reckless about hygiene and health, and a threat to the safety of others for spreading the virus. "The dehumanizing discourse against certain categories of people included radical solutions such as expulsion, severe isolation, but also physical violence or the extermination of these categories perceived as not only a threat to public health, but also as a threat to national culture and economy" (Pankowski and Dzięgielewski 2020, 2).

In brief, mishandling communication and the information policy was not without health, social and legal consequences. Many individuals ignored the risks of the pandemic and refrained from vaccinating against the virus, intolerance mounted and was not adequately confronted, thus increasing social instability and unrest, a bitter legacy to the 'new normal'. There was often a lack of transparent and responsible communication, including expert advice, public education and social consultations, a number of challenges to address for the future in a consistent way (Osiejewicz 2020).

4. Outline of contents

This themed issue is the result of a joint endeavour between the University of Milan and Warsaw that began after participating in "Transnational Legal Communication on COVID-19: From Legislative to Popular Discourse" research grant as part of the 4EU+ Alliance collabo-

ration framework. The project then expanded into a conference held online on December 1, 2021, and organised by the then Department of Studies in Language Mediation and Intercultural Communication.

This editorial is followed by nine peer-reviewed research articles. Giuseppe Sergio's contribution illustrates how, during the first wave, radio advertising in Italy shows misalignment with the actual pandemic context and how the linguistic features are therefore not very effective. Giuseppe Palumbo and Ann Hill Duin explore crisis communication in higher education, comparing and contrasting the COVID-related responses of two different universities, an Italian and a US one. With a focus on prevention and control measures through not-so-accessible legislative and regulatory acts, Katia Peruzzo analyses the typical linguistic features of frequently asked questions (FAQs) in a contrastive perspective, concentrating on online institutional discourse in the UK and Italy. Michela Dota explores textual documents and multimedia products in Italian that provide guidelines for narratives capable of responding to the psycho-physical distress of children and adolescents, and ultimately reducing it. Jekaterina Nikitina reviews how the COVID-19 pandemic is framed as a human rights violation in five cases before the European Court of Human Rights, drawing from discourse analysis, genre analysis and linguistic framing. Roxanne Barbara Doerr's article proposes an alternative and hitherto successful model of crisis communication, i.e. that of the US military and Department of Defense, that was implemented during the pandemic to highlight productive linguistic strategies that may be applied during civilian emergencies. Anna Anselmo introduces the notion of syndemic to critically assess the terminological needs of journalists reporting medical news in such a context. Pietro Manzella's paper examines legal communication in Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) discourse and investigates the rhetorical strategies that were implemented at the height of the pandemic in a data set of legal provisions in Italy and the US. Gianmarco Fiorentini presents a comparison between Italian and Japanese texts considered of primary importance for the initial phase of the COVID-19 crisis in the two countries.
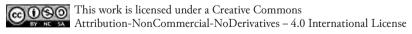
We hope that the insights into the critical times of the COVID-19 pandemic that are provided in this issue will help interpret our recent past and look forward to the future with a more solid understanding of the power of language and communication.

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