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'Viral Discourse'

From Cambridge Elements in Applied Linguistics

Q&A, 11 March 2021

We were delighted that so many of you were able to attend our webinar, and thank you for your questions. Unfortunately, we were unable to answer them all during the session, but the panel have now been able to address them.

What framework or theory did you use in studying the naming of the Covid?

Critical discourse analysis was used for this.

How do researchers collect their data in relation to the language of covid-19 patient?

This is an interesting topic. None of the pieces in this volume deal with patient talk, but this is, of course, a very important area for further research, both in terms of patient narratives, and in terms of doctor-patient communication.

Sylvia, I'm interested to know a bit more about what you found out about discourse used in the US regarding COVID. From a UK perspective, it seemed like life was very different there during the first lockdown. It would be great to hear how a different approach to lockdown used metaphor in discourse.

I would love to read your study, maybe you could send it to me at s.jaworska@reading.ac.uk; I found that the metaphors were quite similar in the UK and US press and quite different in the German data. In the USA and UK, there were lots of war metaphors and these were absent from the German press corpus. In the German data, I found quite a few metaphors from the domain of nature and engineering.

A question for Prof. Jarowska. In addition to war metaphors, did you find other kinds of source domain mapped onto virus target domain?

In the UK and US press, there were mostly metaphors from the domain of war and violence. In the German data, they were absent but instead some metaphors from the domain of nature and engineering have been used.

Did any of you look at translanguaging in your data?

There is a chapter in the book that looks at facemasks and cultural identity on YouTube. In that chapter I made an attempt to use multimodal discourse analysis and a translanguaging approach to unpack how the video-creator aligns with, and at times distances himself from certain behaviour displayed in the video. The way he does this is by orchestrating a range of resources, including his linguistic repertoire and the range of semiotic resources at his disposal.

Do your studies suggest that some of the language changes / viral discourses introduced during the pandemic are here to stay?

Language and discursive practices are always changing based on social and material conditions. Whether these changes are durable also depends on social and material conditions.

I was wondering if it's fair to say there's an autoethnographic element in many of the projects represented here and how that has reshaped/will reshape your approaches to discourse analysis in the future?

I'm not entirely sure that we are doing autoethnography, but in many ways, the research is about me making sense of the crisis and the change. For example, my choice of the methodology and take on the pandemic are certainly influenced by my personal experience and centre around the things we care.

Could you give some tips on how to start doing discourse analysis?

You might read this book and choose an approach that you find interesting, and then try to find out more about that approach and practise applying it to some data

Please wear a facemask. Thank you for wearing a face covering. No mask, no entry. Which one do you prefer?

These phrases create a very different relationship with the reader. The first, for example, is a polite request, and the last one is a directive. The kinds of wordings that are used, however, depend on lots of things, including legal considerations. For example, in the UK, workplaces who use the last version (the directive) would be required to provide facemasks to workers, whereas workplaces who use the first one (request) would not be.

To Prof Zhu Hua, is there humour embedded/used in the public signs from your data?> what could explain this phenomenon?

Not a lot of humour, I'm afraid. I only found one example. Most of the signs in the early days of the crisis were to do with information, directives or affect. They were prepared in the emergency amid anxiety and uncertainty.

Professor Elena semino proposed the firefighter metaphor as a better alternative to replace conventional war metaphor after talks of #reframecovid on Twitter, do you find this new metaphor feasible in US and UK data? Prof Jaworska

I think this is a good alternative to the war and violence metaphors that were so frequent in the US and UK data; yet these metaphors were used because they are quite culturally.

One of the interesting communication issues has been how masks have literally become a text, mixing together issues of offence giving, memes, and political partisanship (I'm thinking particularly of Marjorie Taylor Greene as an example of this!). I'm not sure if this is something any of you have been looking at, but it would appear to combine a number of different focuses?

Have a look at the second section in the book: The veil of civilization and the semiotics of the mask

There is need to discuss how did Critical discourse analysis deal with the trauma in pedagogical practices? What is needed to re-route our future pedagogical practices regarding curriculum development. As students have to double trauma of pandemic and unconventional para-dimes of pedagogy.

This is an important topic. CDA can inform pedagogy in different ways. For example, findings about discursive strategies of verbal aggression online can inform the development of critical/media literacy education

Has anyone looked into discourse structure within Zoom and other online meetings? For most people this was a new form of interaction.

Not in this volume, but this is a really important area to look at. I recommend looking at Maria Grazia Sindoni's recent work.

In terms of media representations of the pandemic, are you looking into expanding the cross-cultural analysis beyond the UK, USA and Germany? And do you have any upcoming projects on the discourses of vaccination?

The suggestion about the vaccines is a really good one and something I have been thinking about, especially to compare the representations in countries where there is a fairly high uptake of the vaccine(s) like the UK with countries where there is a stronger resistance among the public like France or Poland.

Did the spread and acceptance/rejection of (mis)information outside of government or mainstream media come up in any of the speakers' studies?

None of the chapters in this book deals directly with mis-information/conspiracy theories, but the chapter on memes, hate speech, and UK government policy all touch on this. Obviously, this is an important area for future research

If we see mask as symbol or sign .In the plays of Eugene O Neil and Shakespeare plays people have worn masks as well in advance before Covid -19.

Yes, please look at section 2 in the book: The veil of civilization and the semiotics of the mask

Is it possible to use discourse analysis to interpret culture of a particular group of people?

Yes, there is a long tradition of discourse analytical work in intercultural communication. I recommend Intercultural Communication: A discourse approach by Scollon, Scollon and Jones

In the context of the US, how would you address the role of affect with some Americans who insist on not wearing masks because it's against their freedom and liberty - the state motto of New Hampshire for example is "Live Free or Die!" - this may be irrational to many of us, but for those who align with this discourse, they feel oppressed by masks.

Yes, this shows how objects on masks can take on symbolic meanings beyond their medical utility. Please look at section 2 in the book: The veil of civilization and the semiotics of the mask

There has been the racial discourse targeting Asian individuals around the world, which is also addressed in some of our viral discourse articles (e.g., Chun, Jones, Lee, etc). As scholars, educators, and everyday people, what can we do with this kind of racial discourse/ everyday racial encounters? What do they do to us and what actions can/shall we take? For example, here in the States, the sign "China/Chinese Virus" has been displayed (and legitimized) in various public (and private) spaces. These signs came into social circulation with material consequences, people got hurt on the street, got pushed out from their communities, etc.

This is an important question. As Lee's section mentions, hate speech per se cannot be 'stopped' immediately just by doing CDA. Understanding verbal aggression also requires an interdisciplinary effort. Discourse analysts can however work with multiple disciplines (e.g. education, public policy research) to enhance people's awareness of the potential harm caused by such discourse practices.

Covid 19 and communication, what kind of data is valid for discourse analysis?

Any kind of data involving combination with language or any other semiotic mode is amenable to discourse analysis

To the matter of “essential worker”, I think if we take for granted the social discourses as if they are common sense/knowledge, we would be wrong. So (online) discourses will always contribute to the socialites’ in the world, even though we don’t analyse them at the moment they are being constructed.

I agree. The discourse on essential workers came from a particular discursive frame. But at the same time, it did disrupt certain ideas about the value of work when people realized that 'essential workers' such as supermarket clerks and amazon delivery people are actually the people who earn the least.