



## *Communication of crisis or crisis of communication? The conflicting “voices” of the covid 19 pandemic across the world*

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**ABSTRACT:** After the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in China in December 2019, information spread globally as fast as the virus. Different stakeholders confronted daily in the rhetorical arenas of social media within and across countries, thus providing a bewildering view of the impact of COVID-19 on communication. This paper aims at investigating the crisis of communication during the first wave of the pandemic, drawing upon the *rhetorical arena* communication model (Johansen and Frandsen 2017). This model, which entails a macro- and a micro-layer of analysis, allows us to recognize the complexity of the inter-actorial relations taking place between various “voices”, e.g., political and economic actors, international organizations, healthcare professionals, and the media, who compete or collaborate to manage the crisis. In this regard, research is carried out on a set of corpora, including press releases issued by the WHO, political speeches released by Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, as well as reactions to them provided by public opinion via diverse social media outlets, in the period between January and June 2020. Attention is paid to the micro-level of the arena, in particular some specific “text” parameters, namely the verbal and visual semiotic adopted, the crisis communicative strategies of scapegoating and counterattack, metaphors and speech acts.

**KEY WORDS:** Crisis communication; Pandemic; Rhetorical Arena Theory; Pragmatics; Metaphor



## INTRODUCTION

After the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in China in December 2019, amounts of uncertain information started spreading about the origins of the virus, its mode of transmission, its impact on patients, its features, its potentialities in terms of mutation not to speak of the countless and different stories relevant to the candidate vaccines and the potential therapies that could be used to treat the disease. Soon, the pandemic turned into an infodemic.

Fake news and false myths spread like wildfire on social media. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other platforms (Kouzy *et al.*) triggered a form of *mis-/dis*-information “virulence”, which drew the attention of researchers from different domains and fostered the proliferation of a multitude of studies based on either epidemiological models (Shai *et al.*; Cinelli *et al.*) or broadcasting models (Vosughi *et al.*).

Along with conspiracy theories and falsehoods, tweets and texts posted by online users also tended to disseminate sentiments of anxiety and fear (Alam *et al.*) which, in turn, solicited in the population wavering feelings of distrust towards the government, institutions and other authorities and a failure of confidence in mainstream medicine, thus making people extremely vulnerable to lucrative quackery and exploitation by the unscrupulous.

Against this background, this paper focuses on the critical role played by media in the flow of risk information during the first wave of the pandemic. Media represent major authoritative voices in framing the public perception of the disease and en/discouraging people to adopt specific social and health behaviours to prevent the pandemic from spreading (Wallisa and Nerlich; Wicke and Bolognesi). In the framing process, however, an important role is also played by the audience’s ideological orientation which drives people in their choice of information as well as in the perception of the message. People embrace alternative, often non-scientifically evidence-based hypotheses, in which world catastrophe, apocalyptic scenarios and dreadful images, are represented through rhetorical tropes, including metaphors associated with decay, disease and corruption. What is more, distorted information increases racial and social discrimination, skepticism, disorder, social riots and suspicions, rather than promoting solidarity and humane thinking, thus further fuelling conspiracy theories and *mis-/dis*-information (Freckelton).

This scenario testifies to the failure of the communicative strategies enacted by both “public voices”, i.e., governments, local and international health agencies, supranational organizations and news media, on the one hand, and, the multitude of divergent, conflicting, “private voices”, i.e., citizens, on the other. It exacerbates the diffusion of the disease and spread the sentiments of fear, panic, anxiety, anger, and, consequently, provokes unexpected and undesired impacts on the social, cultural, political, scientific and economic fields or, to use a more comprehensive term, “sub-arenas”. The interplay of different sub-arenas results in a fragmentation of voices, as is the case of the WHO medical reports and data, which, wavering between messages of



hope, courage and confidence, and messages of powerlessness and uncertainty, caused, ups and downs in the financial sub-arena of the global stock markets.

Drawing upon the Rhetorical Arena Theory (Frandsen and Johansen *Organization Crisis Communication; Corporate Crisis Communication*; Coombs and Holladay *Publics*) and on Crisis Communication theories (Coombs and Holliday *Handbook*; Hearit *Apologies, Crisis Management*), and on social media studies (Freckelton; Alam *et al.*; Shahi *et al.*), and adopting the methodological tools available from metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson) and Speech Act Theory (Searle), the paper illustrates the findings of a study carried out on a set of corpora consisting of texts dating back to the early period of the pandemics. Specifically, they include both institutional texts, such as WHO's communications, Trump's remarks and Johnson's statements, as well as Tweets and Facebook posts published in the period between January and June 2020, i.e., the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper shows how the "voices" of public opinion reacted to and undermined, through social media platforms, the institutional "voices" of the WHO at the international level, Donald Trump in the USA, and Boris Johnson in England. In the case of the WHO, for example, their decision not to name diseases based on location is frustrated by a global wave of Sinophobia and anti-Asian sentiment, as evidenced by tweet hashtags. The anti-China rhetoric is fueled by Trump in his tweets: his fight against the virus is in fact a fight against his political opponents. Finally, Johnson's crisis rhetoric generates dissenting reactions of consensus and anger in his citizens.

The paper is organized as follows. The following section, "Theoretical Framework", illustrates the theoretical and methodological background underlying the research. The third section, "Methodology and Results", reports the findings of the case studies. The final section, "Conclusion", contains concluding remarks and suggestions for future research.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The communication crisis caused by the pandemic since its outbreak varied not only across countries but also in terms of genres and media, i.e., social media (e.g., Tweets, Facebook posts); news media; political statements (e.g., speeches, interviews, press releases); academic reports and writing (e.g., research articles, case reports, etc.). This media environment was dynamic and complex as it consisted of a variety of rhetorical arenas and sub-arenas that involved the interplay of a multitude of voices.

To delve into this environment this paper draws first of all upon the Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT) designed by Frandsen and Johansen (*Organization Crisis Communication; Corporate Crisis Communication*), and further implemented by Coombs and Holladay (*Publics*), and, with specific reference to public health crisis communication, by Rodin *et al.*

Frandsen and Johansen developed their RAT to deal with crisis communication in the social and cultural field and in the area of corporate communication (*Corporate Crisis Communication*). Their rhetorical arena model is a socio-rhetorical one based on a



multivocal approach, which “combines two submodels: a macromodel dealing with the many actors or “voices” inside the arena, and a micromodel concerning central aspects of each individual communication process inside the arena.” (Frandsen and Johansen *Corporate Crisis Communication*)

The term “arena” refers to a multisemiotic space where communication takes place: it consists not only of written words but also of images, symbols and other non-verbal sign systems. The term “voices” refer to the many actors, i.e., institutions, organizations, professionals from specialized fields, citizens and other stakeholders who are, directly or indirectly, involved before, during and after a crisis. It follows that, considering this dynamic and complex context, we cannot simply speak of one communication arena, but of multiple communicative arenas or sub-arenas, where various voices communicate *to, with, around or against* each other at a micro- and macro-level. (Frandsen and Johansen *Organization Crisis Communication*).

At the micro-level, communication includes four parameters: context, media, genre and text. In the arena and sub-arena, these affect and are affected by the specific choices made by the voices that interplay in the arena. *Context* may be “internal” or psychological, i.e., the set of cognitive schemes influencing people’s interpretation of a crisis, or “external” or sociological, i.e., the set of socio-cultural, organizational and situational contexts impacting on the actors’ interpretation of crisis. The second parameter is *media*; each media type has its own communication characteristics which meet the specific needs of a crisis while influencing “how, where, when, and why a crisis message is produced and/or received by the actors inside the rhetorical arena.” (Frandsen and Johansen *Organizational Crisis Communication* 436). *Genre*, which is used in Swales’ terms, may be verbal or visual, or a mix of both semiotic systems. *Text*, finally, is intended as the “result of the sender’s deliberate or undeliberate selection and application of the verbal and visual semiotic resources and rhetorical strategies available or prescribed to him or her.” (Frandsen and Johansen, *Organizational Crisis Communication* 437) A text may be constructed with various linguistic strategies/devices, such as metaphors (Millar and Beck), and terminology (Hearit *Apologies*), depending on the crisis situation that senders and receivers are found to cope with.

Interestingly, the RAT-based communicative approach marks a shift of focus from sender-centered to receiver-centered communication.

In this respect, Coombs and Holladay, who are concerned with corporate crises, show that “the reactions of crisis publics are critical because they provide assessments of communication effectiveness” (Coombs and Holladay, *Publics* 40). In other words, to mitigate the effects of a crisis on their publics, managers and message senders in general tend to negotiate, if not to manipulate, the features of their message. In the framework of the RAT, however, the complexity and dynamicity of negotiations increase due to the continuous shift of roles of the many voices involved in the communication process, e.g., the sender turns into receiver and receiver may turn into sender, according to the pragmatic rules of *turn-taking*.



It follows that the rhetorical arena actually consists of a number of sub-arenas where distinct, multiple voices interplay and network, discuss and differently interpret crisis. In the age of the Internet this phenomenon has sped up with social media which represent sub-arenas where the main voice discusses with other voices thus creating different outlets for the same story. (*Publics*) In crisis situations, the voices of non-experts, too, participate in the rhetorical arena; indeed, they can be considered as crisis communicators in that they contribute to shaping reactions as well as helping confirm or reject the position and opinion of the legitimate “voices.”

Following Frandsen and Johansen, Raupp (*Crisis Communication*) acknowledges the important role played by new media as public rhetorical arenas or sub-arenas in which distinct voices participate in outlining crisis communication. In particular, he introduces the new concept of “issue arena”, which entails the rejection of a communication model centered exclusively on the sender role and advocates a narrative in the arena of crisis communication that is not only shaped by voices but is also influenced by the specific topic or issue.

Against this theoretical background, this paper adopts a multivocal approach to texts to investigate how, in the age of COVID-19, both the institutional and non-institutional voices interplay in the network of old and new forms of sub-arenas (e.g., press releases, political speeches, tweets, Facebook posts and news media). The paper examines how these voices struggle to attain the symbolic power of language and communication. Particular attention is paid to the communication strategies of *denial*, which is used to avoid responsibility; *counterattack*, which is intended to challenge the ethics of the accusing group; and, *differentiation*, whereby organizations place blame on a scapegoat (Coombs and Holliday, *Handbook* 287)

## METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the research and the methodology adopted to study how the WHO, Trump and Johnson coped with the spread of the virus in their own countries between January and June 2020.

Considering the specificity of each case study, the methodology is an integrated one in that it combines the theoretical insights from RAT and crisis communication theory, as illustrated in the previous section, with the theories on metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson) and speech acts (Austin; Searle; Blum-Kulka; Searle and Vandeviken).

Each case study deals with a particular sub-arena in which the interplay between the institutional “voice”, on the one hand, and the replying “voices” of the public opinion, takes place. The “voices” are studied at textual level, focusing in particular on some specific aspects: a) terminology and metaphors in the WHO; b) metaphors and communication strategies in Trump; c) metaphors, conditionals and speech acts in Johnson.



The study of each case has been carried out on one or more corpora, some already available online, others manually compiled (i.e., DIY corpora).

## CASE STUDY 1 – “WHAT’S IN A NAME?”

Naming is a declarative speech act whereby the speaker changes the state of the world in an immediate way (Searle); it is a socio-semiotic operation that shapes how we see things and how we act towards them and, as such, provokes political, social and economic reactions (Prieto-Ramos). It is a “persuasive act that contains an attitude toward the object” (Hearit, *Crisis Management* 65). Therefore, naming things, including diseases, in professional contexts concurrently involves a *reflection*, a *selection* and a *deflection* of reality (Burke). Terms exceed denotative, neutral meaning since “there are no longer any innocent words. [...] Each word, each expression, threatens to take on two antagonistic senses, reflecting the way in which it is understood by the sender and the receiver.” (Bourdieu 40)

On February 11, 2020, the WHO announced that it had officially assigned the virus the name COVID-19 (Fig. 1), short for “coronavirus disease 2019”, thus provoking a huge number of replies on social media platforms, peaking to 8.8K Retweets, 1.9K Quote Tweets and 8.4K Likes on Twitter and 2k comments and 6.5 shares on Facebook (data refer to October 24, 2020).



(Fig. 1)

The WHO “had chosen a name for the disease that makes no reference to places, animals or people to avoid stigma” (*The New York Times*, Feb. 11, 2020), i.e., a name devoid of any ideological implication, as the WHO strategy was to avoid scapegoating China which was widely considered as responsible for the pandemic spread.

This case study focuses on the main sub-arenas where the “voices”, i.e., citizens, institutions and mass media from around the world welcomed the WHO announcement. The research is carried out on two categories of datasets, each



representing a sub-arena. The first category includes tweets and Facebook posts released by ordinary people in the aftermath of the WHO decision; the second category includes corpora of newspapers' articles published in the same period as the first category of datasets.

The study of the first category shows that messages on Twitter and Facebook can be subdivided in three strands of "voices":

- 1) a "science-related voice": posts belonging to this voice are mainly concerned with 1a) explaining the choice to use the acronym COVID-19 for the disease (e.g., "Every virus needs a name") and 1b) providing scientific information on treatments and drugs which, according to research in various world labs, could be employed to fight the virus (e.g., using blood pressure drugs like losartan and valsartan to counter the virus by acting on the ACE2 receptors);
- 2) a "sarcastic and ironic voice": this "voice" mainly complains about the time wasted in looking for a name to "baptize" the virus rather than working to find a vaccine or a therapy. Sarcasm and irony, however, soon turned into diffused feelings of racism against China: precisely the stigma that the WHO meant to avoid by renaming the disease. For the vast majority, COVID-19 is "China Outbreak Virus Identified in 2019", "China Originated Virus Infection Disease 2019", "China Originated Virus In December 2019", while WHO becomes the short name for "Wuhan Health Organization", "Wu Han Organization", or "Winnie Happy Organization", to denounce its attempt to deflect attention away from China's responsibility in spreading the pandemic worldwide (e.g., Ghebreyesus is referred to as a puppet of China). Tweets were often accompanied by images that ironically comment on the deadly relation between the WHO and China (Figures 2 to 4);

	World Health Organisation	Winnie Happy Organisation
AIM	To protect international public health.	To make Children X! happy
MISSION TARGET	All countries	CCP
EXAMPLES	Preparedness, surveillance and response and emergency services.	Showing zero but China rapidly increase the outbreak Excluding China from monitoring the connection with the world
EXPECTED OUTCOME	Global health is under control reduced infected number	Global outbreak of Wuhan Virus

(Fig. 2)



(Fig. 3)



(Fig. 4)

- 3) a “conspiracy theory voice”: the ironic vein of the comments and posts seen in 2) very often turn into misinformation and fake news. Besides some amusing, non-scientific hypotheses (e.g., “Pomegranates can treat COVID-19), the dominant mis/disinformation originates from the belief that the Chinese government deliberately spread the virus. The “Wuhan lab” is just one of the many conspiracy theories circulating in posts and comments along with the many false myths that the WHO themselves have collected in a long list<sup>1</sup>, but this is the conspiracy theory most prominently retweeted and posted in reaction to the WHO announcement.

The second sub-arena refers to news media and newspaper articles released soon after the WHO naming announcement on February 11, 2020. The voices collected are those of journalists and editorialists who reported the news and commented on the attempt by the WHO to avoid any stigma.

A corpus was compiled using Sketch Engine and typing the words “COVID-19”, “World Health Organization”, “naming”, “stigma”, as seed words. The corpus, named “WHO”, consists of 132,977 tokens, out of which 106,521 are lexical words, and includes articles from various English-speaking newspapers available on the web.

Using the English Web 2020 (enTenTen20)<sup>2</sup> as a reference corpus, the Sketch Engine “Keywords” tool shows that “stigma” is the most frequent word (1,163 occurrences) in the built corpus, followed by “stigmatize” (224) and “stigmatization”. Statistics also shows that “stigma” tends to collocate, first and foremost, with *social*, *reduction* and *discrimination*: “social stigma” (78), “stigma reduction” (41) and “stigma discrimination” (39) are the multi-word terms ranking in the top 5 key multi-words in the corpus. The concordances below are just a sample of the rhetorical context in which “social stigma” tends to occur:

- i) **Hyperboles, i.e., *dis-information stigma is more infectious than disease***  
social stigma amplifies the dangers of infectious disease, feelings of shame, self-blame, embarrassment, and low self-worth accompany stigma. Those feelings are exacerbated in pandemic times when people are isolated and fearful.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>. Accessed 8 May 2022

<sup>2</sup> More details about the enTenTen20 are available at <https://www.sketchengine.eu/ententen-english-corpus>. Accessed 10 May 2022.





- the virus outbreak itself was worse than terrorism  
a virus is more powerful in creating political, economic, and social upheaval than any terrorist attack
- ii) **Metaphors, i.e., DIS-INFORMATION STIGMA IS DISEASE**  
Stigma is a fundamental cause of health inequities," she said. It's bad for physical and mental health and can lead to chronic stress, which has been linked to heart disease. Stigma can even affect people who aren't ill.
- iii) **Metaphors, i.e., DISEASE IS WAR/FIGHT**  
It turns people against each other  
The social stigma of COVID-19 has not even shown mercy to the dead bodies of the patients.  
Social stigma in this context becomes a function of disadvantageous alliances

Metaphors and hyperboles, as well as other lexical items in the collocational span of "social stigma", and "stigma" in general, evoke a rhetoric of fear and hate, including sentiments of racism, intolerance, marginalization, panic, aggression, hate, verbal and physical violence that are tellingly targeted to China. The analysis of the retweets to the WHO's naming policy announcement shows how the indirect language of irony and metaphor gives way to the harsh and violent anti-China reactions. #KungFlu, #ChineseVirus, #CommunistVirus are some of the hashtags that attest the Sinophobia rhetoric as well as the fiasco of the WHO's attempt to avoid social stigmatization.

## CASE STUDY 2 – "THE SITUATION IS UNDER CONTROL" OR TRUMP'S SCAPEGOATING RHETORIC

When on February 26, 2020, Donald Trump appointed his Vice President Mike Pence coordinator of the US government's response to the coronavirus outbreak, for the very first time the (former) American President proved that he was starting to be seriously concerned by the virus spread in America, after about two months during which he had underestimated the virus and repeatedly declared to the nation that the situation was "under control". In this section, the paper focuses on the multiple communications that Trump released via official and unofficial channels between January and June 2020. These distinct voices testify to the ups-and-downs of Trump's mood, his decisions and responses since the first WHO announcement at the end of December 2019, of a new flu strain spreading from China. The section shows that Trump's communication is in fact made up of distinct, often clashing "voices".

A case in point is how Trump's voices change with respect to China as well as to his collaborators. To study the issue three DIY corpora were compiled and other corpora available online were investigated. The three corpora are:

a) a corpus of tweets and retweets compiled using Twitter Advanced Search. The following parameters were employed as compilation criteria: "@realDonaldTrump" as addresser account and "until May 31, 2020, since January 1, 2020" as time span; (164,852 tokens).



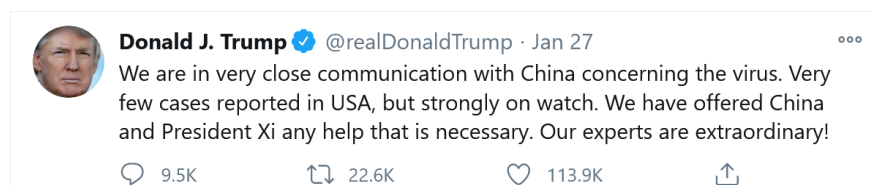
- b) a corpus of posts from Donald J. Trump's Facebook page (205,002 tokens).
- c) a corpus of Remarks by Trump available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks> (11,650 tokens). Accessed 11 May 2022.

Investigation was also carried out on a set of data including Trump's Tweets, YouTube transcripts, press conferences, and Facebook posts available on Factba.se (<https://factba.se/trump>. Accessed 11 May 2022).

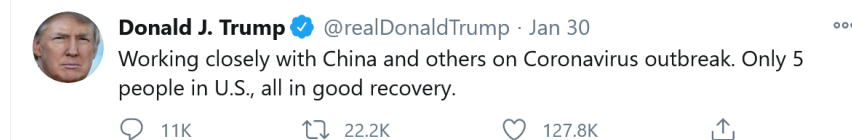
In his first declarations on the virus in January 2020, when the contagion had not yet turned into a pandemic, Trump contended that the situation was "under control" and, what is more, he praised the good relations with China, even though public health emergency and travel restrictions to non-US citizens were declared at the end of January (Figures 5-8).



(Fig. 5)



(Fig. 6)



(Fig. 7)



(Fig. 8)

This communicative strategy, based on a Pollyanna-like positive attitude towards the disease, and framed on the “under control” assertion, was perpetuated in the month of February as Trump confirmed good relations with China while generating hopes in an end to the virus as the warm season was approaching (Fig. 9).



(Fig. 9)

Trump’s “under control” strategy started to falter at the end of February 24 when he appointed his Coronavirus Task Force, even though he publicly went on affirming that coronavirus was an exaggerated threat or even a hoax.

It is possibly this moment when the Trump communication unveils its multivocality as he employs different rhetorical strategies. He seems to use an epideictic rhetoric. On the one hand, he praises his own staff, using hyperbolic language and intensifiers, as some of his favourite words, e.g., “tremendous”, “terrific”, “great” and other expressions demonstrate:

“Very, very tremendously talented in doing this” (referring to Dr. Fauci)  
“Our staff has been doing a great job”



But first and foremost, he praises himself, using hyperboles – “President Trump is a ratings hit” – as well as orientational and structural metaphors “I was busy ... putting us way ahead in the battle with our battle with the Coronavirus”.

On the other hand, he blames the “Do Nothing Democrats” who concretely waste money and metaphorically waste time on Fake News and the Impeachment Hoax, and their partner, i.e., the mainstream media and the WHO.

The multivocal dimension of Trump’s tweets, posts and speeches during the epidemic from the first cases in the USA is consistent with those rhetorical communication strategies that make him a dangerous demagogue. As Mercieca has observed, in a climate of faltering public trust as the one caused by the health crisis, Trump uses words as weapons. The multiple rhetorical voices he adopts in the COVID-19 crisis communication arena overlap with the multivocal communication he adopts in the political arena of the forthcoming election campaign: on the one hand, *ad populum*, *paralipsis* and *American exceptionalism* strategies to ingratiate his supporters and the American people in general, and, on the other hand, *ad hominem*, *ad baculum* and *reification* strategies to alienate his political enemies (Mercieca).

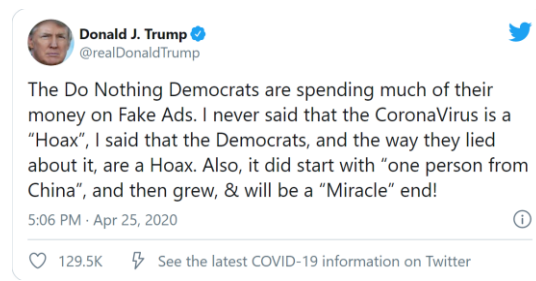
The analysis of the data shows that Trump’s multi-voice communication during the COVID-19 crisis also emerges in his attitude towards China as he shifts from praise between the beginning of January and the end of March (See Figures 1 to 5 above) to blame from the beginning of April 2020 (Figures 10 to 14 below). Interestingly, his attacks are not only against China but also against his political enemies, the WHO and certain media outlets, e.g., *The New York Times*:



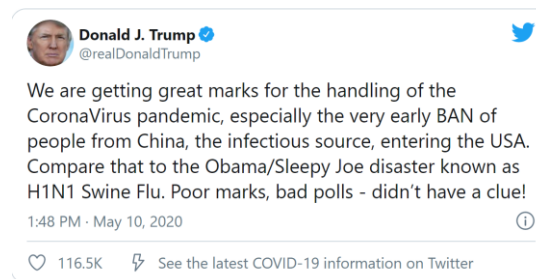
(Fig. 10)



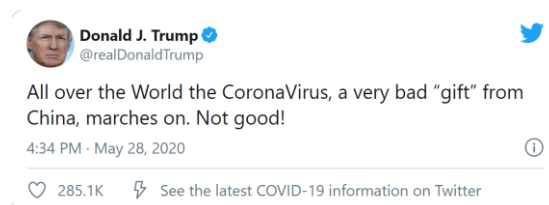
(Fig. 11)



(Fig. 12)



(Fig. 13)



(Fig. 14)

The examples above show that Trump shifted his focus from attacks on the virus to attacks on people, i.e., China, politicians, news media and the WHO. His tone becomes sarcastic (“This is a first”, Fig. 11) and scornful (“They were recently thrown out of China like dogs, and obviously want back in”, Fig. 11), and even unveils discriminatory and racist behaviour towards China (“China the infectious source”, Fig. 13; “the CoronaVirus, a very bad “gift” from China”, Fig. 14).

From the point of view of crisis communication strategies, Trump takes on *counterattack* and *scapegoating* stances, whereby not only is he denying his responsibility in the poor decisions initially made to halt the virus spread in America – his repeated refrain in the months of January and February that the situation is “under control” – but is also “pointing the finger at *his* accusers claiming that *his* accusers are the party really at fault in the drama” (Hearit, *Crisis Management* 16).



### CASE STUDY 3 – “IT ALL DEPENDS ON A SERIES OF BIG IFS”: BORIS JOHNSON’S CRISIS RHETORIC

The first known cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in England on January 31. One month later (February 26), the Health Secretary introduced his four-part plan, i.e., *contain, delay, research, mitigate*, which was followed by new measures on March 1, which, among other things, confirmed that the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, would continue to lead the response.

In the period from January to June, Johnson delivered various statements. These have been collected in a corpus of over 28,000 tokens, which shed light on the main features of Johnson’s “voice” in the rhetorical arena of the pandemic.

As in the case of Trump’s communication, Johnson, too, seems to possess a rhetoric consisting of distinct, often clashing “voices” but, unlike Trump, Johnson does not use scapegoating or counterattack stances to manage the health crisis. He is not attacking the WHO, nor his political rivals: the only enemy he is fighting is the virus.

The analysis of Johnson’s corpus of statements mainly focuses on his use of metaphors and conditional constructions as rhetorical devices in his communication about the virus.

Johnson’s use of structural metaphors is a call to British people to act, to change their attitude towards the pandemic, as some samples from the corpus show:

- i) DISEASE IS AN ENEMY/A WAR: “our fight against the virus”, “we will beat the coronavirus”; “Yet this enemy can be deadly”.
- ii) DISEASE IS A BROKEN-DOWN MACHINE: “it is a global problem but we must *fix* it”, or arrested, as in “put on the *brakes/handbrake/slam on the brakes* across the country”;
- iii) EPIDEMIC IS AN ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER: “we prevented this country from being *engulfed* by what could have been a *catastrophe*”;
- iv) FUTURE IS A JOURNEY: “the first sketch of a road map for reopening society”;
- v) EPIDEMIC IS A (NATURAL) OBSTACLE: “now that we are passing through the peak”; “we’ve been going through some huge alpine tunnel”.

Oriental metaphors unveil other nuances of his “voices”; they are intended to a) cool down the feelings of fear, panic and anxiety caused by the pandemic (e.g., “everyone will have a role to play in *keeping* the R *down*”, “keep *pushing* the number of infections *down*”); b) provide safety and hope (e.g., “the opportunities *lie ahead*”); c) warn people against enthusiasm (e.g., “*the way ahead* is hard”); d) emphasize the resilience of British people (e.g., we will *come through* it stronger than ever”).

His statements on the coronavirus are also instantiated through hyperboles:

this campaign against the virus has come to a colossal cost to our way of life  
And so it is vital that we do not now lose control and run slap into a second and even bigger mountain.



Interestingly, the corpus data shows that Johnson’s fight against the virus is made up of multiple hesitating “voices” as his statement on the virus delivered on May 10<sup>3</sup> demonstrates.

The statement highlights the failure of Johnson’s crisis communication strategies. This is shown by the reiterated use of conditional constructions in Johnson’s rhetoric. Conditional constructions are often used “not in order to register epistemic distance, but rather to enhance the assertability of the apodotic proposition of the construction, and fuse in the *if*-clause a pluralization of voices” (Kitis 30), thus including not only the voices of the writer or the narrator but also the voice of the readers. In short, we expect that Johnson’s statements have a perlocutionary effect.

To this aim, a pragmatic approach was adopted, which focuses on the *function* rather than the *form* of the utterances. Johnson’s use of conditionals are not only linguistic expressions but also speech acts, in which the meaning is the result of the interplay between the action performed by the speaker (illocutionary force) and the reaction of his audience (perlocutionary effect). Analyzing conditionals from a pragmatic perspective involves accounting for the situational context, the order of words, the speaker’s intent and his relation to the speaker. In other words, we have to understand to what extent the propositional content (*p*) matches or mismatches the force of an illocutionary act (*F*).

The illocutionary force of a verb can be identified by means of 12 criteria (Searle), namely by means of the illocutionary point, the direction of fit and the expressed psychological state (Table 1).

Illocutionary Act	Examples of Illocutionary verbs	Point or purpose of the act	Direction of fit	Psychological state
Assertive	assert, deny, claim, affirm, state, certify, attest, etc.	To commit the speaker to something being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition	Words to world ↓	Belief
Directive	request, ask, instruct, demand, order, command,	Attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something	World to words ↑	Want (or wish or desire)
Commissive	commit, pledge, undertake, engage, promise	To commit the speaker to some future course of action	World to words ↑	Intention
Expressive	approve, compliment, praise, congratulate, thank, apologize, greet, and welcome	To express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content	N/A: The truth of the expressed proposition is presupposed $\emptyset$	Several different variables
Declarative	declare, renounce, disclaim, disown, resign, repudiate, disavow	Declarational	Both words to world and world to words ↓↑	N/A

Table 1. Searle’s Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts (Searle) as modified with Searle and Vanderveken.

The illocutionary point of a verbal speech act is its purpose. Its direction of fit “refers to the way in which the utterance relates to factors in the extralinguistic world”

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-address-to-the-nation-on-coronavirus-10-may-2020>. Accessed 16 May 2022.



(Trosborg 72). The psychological state is the speaker's expression of his attitude or state towards the propositional content, i.e., the sincerity condition of the act.

Illocutionary acts can be performed not only through verbal acts but also other Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs), i.e., linguistic devices such as word order, verb mood, tone, or even Speech Act Sets, i.e., utterances in which the *illocutionary acts* can be performed by means of various strategies, not only through IFIDs (Blum-Kulka et Olshtan; Válková). Speech act sets are "chains of smaller units (discrete speech acts), which, if produced together, contribute in a specific way to a global scenario representing a 'sequentially' emergent complete speech act ..." (Válková 44). In uttering a sentence, a speaker can express a propositional content (p), while leaving the illocutionary verb implicit, although (p) can be part of an illocutionary act. In such case, the illocutionary act is expressed through an assumed subordinator (i.e., an assumed illocutionary force followed by *that*, *whether* and *if*) + the propositional content (Schiffrin).

Fundamentally, Johnson's statement of May 10, is a big performative act that, rather than evoking simply a statement, in fact, entails a request, a command, a directive in terms of its illocutionary point, which is conveyed by means of both direct and indirect – either conventional or non-conventional – speech acts.

Following Searle's taxonomy (Table 1), Johnson's speech apparently seems to express a psychological state of belief. In fact, it expresses want or wish; its direction of fit is not to get the words to match the world, as in statements, but to get the world to match the words, as in requests. In other words, the purpose of his speech is not so much to commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition as in statements, as to get the hearer to do something.

This purpose is achieved by means of conventional indirect speech acts, as the reiterated use of "we must ..." as in

We must protect our NHS.

We must see sustained falls in the death rate.

We must see sustained and considerable falls in the rate of infection.

We must sort out our challenges in getting enough PPE to the people who need it, and yes, it is a global problem but we must fix it.

and the continuous interplay between *I know that / You know that*, as in

And so I know - you know - that it would be madness now to throw away that achievement by allowing a second spike.

These IFIDs are strategically used by Johnson to convey orders to his audience while saving their public face.

Directions are also performed by Johnson by means of non-conventional indirect speech acts, such as conditional constructions, including *if*-clauses, comparatives and other devices (Searle and Vanderveken *Foundations*).

Besides conditionals of the type "If p then f(q)", as in





And if we are to control this virus, then we must have a world-beating system for testing potential victims, and for tracing their contacts.

Johnson's speech, and his rhetoric in general, is built on speech acts whose propositional content is a conditional, whereby their syntactic construction is  $f(\text{if } p \text{ then } q)$ . The letter  $f$  indicates the illocutionary force which, in this case, is not the force of the protasis ( $p$ ) only, i.e., the clause expressing the condition in a conditional sentence generally introduced by *if*, but it is in fact the illocutionary force of the whole conditional sentence, i.e. the protasis and the apodosis ( $q$ ), i.e. the main clause in the conditional sentence:

We said that you should work from home if you can, and only go to work if you must.  
So work from home if you can, but you should go to work if you can't work from home.

As *requests* are by definition face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson), whereby the speaker impinges on the hearer's claim to freedom of action and freedom from imposition, (Blum-Kulka *et al.*: 201), the use of conditionals is strategically used by Johnson to minimize or syntactically downgrading his commands to the British people.

Mitigation of requests is also achieved through other syntactical forms embedded in speech act sets, such as "grounders", i.e., Johnson indicates the reasons of his request ("And since our priority is to protect the public and save lives"), or "sweeteners", i.e. he expresses exaggerated appreciation of his hearer's ability to comply with the request ("it is thanks to your effort and sacrifice that ...). Each of these utterances involves an implicit directive speech act rather than a declarative; the underlying verbal act is "I want you to do something *if* you want ..."

As the data gathered from Twitter (952 tweets) and Facebook (8.3K Comments) show, the replies to Johnson's statement of May 10 are not of consensus. Rather, sentiments of anger and sarcasm and overlooking of the command prevail. Johnson's acts have no perlocutionary effect thus testifying to the failure of his communicative strategies. The majority of people find his speech confusing and contradictory, "clear as mud"; even dangerously misleading because of his repeated use of concessive clauses introduced by *even though*, which seems to contradict his following assertion, as in his statement of 12 March 2020:

Because this disease is particularly dangerous for you, for older people, even though the vast majority this will be a mild to moderate illness, I know that many people will be very worried.

## CONCLUSION

Far from being exhaustive, this paper focuses on topics of interest in the area of institutional communication crisis as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are several signs indicating communication crisis, including the failure of the performative force of the messages delivered by official "voices", such as international organizations or political leaders. Notwithstanding the peculiarities of each case study, there is,



however, a *fil rouge* that binds them together: the institutional nature of the voice does not necessarily imply consensus; rather, it unexpectedly generates adverse arenas. As the cases studies show, institutional voices tend to exacerbate, either unintentionally (the WHO and Johnson) or knowingly (Trump's rhetoric), forms of social and cultural stigma, hate and discrimination. The WHO naming policies and their related guidance "urg(ing) people to avoid talking about the virus in non-neutral terms" eventually prove to be a fiasco: their announcement triggers racist and aggressive behaviour against China, seen as the responsible for the pandemic. Scorn, discrimination and aggression are attitudes deliberately adopted by Trump: his rhetoric represents a kind of sub-arena in which the communication of the former President of America builds on the interplay of distinct, clashing voices, as he shifts, for example, in his approach to China, from support to scapegoating. Multivocality also characterizes Johnson's speeches and is the cause of the failure of the perlocutionary effect of his call-to-action rhetoric. His statements are seemingly assertive: in fact, they are directions that provoke reactions of anger, disappointment and frustration in his audience.

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