

Modality and Representation in BBC and CNN News Articles on Social Distancing at the Onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Critical discourse analysis

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الوسيلة والتمثيل في مقالات أخبار بي بي سي وسي إن إن حول التباعد الاجتماعي في بداية جائحة كوفيد-19:

تحليل نقدي للخطاب

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Abstract:

The present paper is a critical discourse analysis of two online articles published in spring 2020, at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, each addressing the issue of social distancing from a different perspective.

The first article, *Social distancing: How to persuade others it works*, written by Martha Henriques on April 6th 2020, focuses on the challenge of convincing the population about the risks of Covid and the importance and effectiveness of following public health measures such as social distancing and self-isolation. While the second article, *Why America's social distancing efforts have had 'painfully slow' results*, published on May 7th on the CNN website and written by Eric Levenson, mainly represents a criticism of the way in which the US government handles the crisis situation compared to other countries.

This paper explores how the authors of the two articles use linguistic tools such as modality (including hedging), representational strategies (e.g., naming), and transitivity to deliver their messages and, more importantly, the effect that the use of these instruments has when it comes to the relation between language and society and the way in which such tools impact the social status quo.

This analysis aims to demonstrate how language is employed to both reveal and conceal meaning, to express personal stance, to mitigate or intensify impact, and to shape perceptions of social actors and agency.

To do so, the paper will first introduce the selected articles, then the theoretical framework (i.e. CDA, modality, hedging, representational strategies, transitivity)



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that will be employed to analyse each article, individually and then comparatively. In the conclusion insights will be drawn to assess how public understanding and perception are impacted, considering the analysed aspects.

مستخلص البحث :

هذه الورقة البحثية عبارة عن تحليل نقدي لخطاب مقالين نُشرا على الإنترنت في ربيع عام 2020، مع بداية جائحة كوفيد-19، يتناول كل منهما قضية التباعد الاجتماعي من منظور مختلف. المقال الأول، "التباعد الاجتماعي: كيف نفنع الآخرين بأنه فعال"، بقلم مارثا هنريكس في 6 أبريل 2020، يركز على تحدي إقناع السكان بمخاطر كوفيد وأهمية وفعالية اتباع تدابير الصحة العامة مثل التباعد الاجتماعي والعزل الذاتي. بينما المقال الثاني، "لماذا كانت نتائج جهود التباعد الاجتماعي في أمريكا بطيئة بشكل مؤلم"، نُشر في 7 مايو على موقع CNN وكتبه إريك ليفنسون، يمثل بشكل رئيسي نقداً لطريقة تعامل الحكومة الأمريكية مع أزمة كورونا مقارنةً بالدول الأخرى. يناقش هذا البحث كيفية استخدام مؤلفي المقالين لأدوات لغوية، مثل الوسيلة (بما في ذلك التحوط)، واستراتيجيات التمثيل (مثل التسمية)، والتعدي، لإيصال رسائلهم، والأهم من ذلك، تأثير استخدام هذه الأدوات على العلاقة بين اللغة والمجتمع، وكيف تؤثر هذه الأدوات على الوضع الاجتماعي الراهن. يهدف هذا التحليل إلى توضيح كيفية توظيف اللغة للكشف عن المعنى وإخفائه، والتعبير عن الموقف الشخصي، وتخفيف أو تكثيف التأثير، وتشكيل تصورات الفاعلين الاجتماعيين وفعاليتهم. وللقيام بذلك، سيقدّم البحث أولاً المقالات المختارة، ثم الإطار النظري (أي تحليل الخطاب النقدي، والوسيلة، والتحوط، واستراتيجيات التمثيل، والتعدي) الذي سيستخدم لتحليل كل مقال على حدة، ثم بشكل مقارن. وفي الختام، سيتم استخلاص رؤى لتقييم مدى تأثير فهم الجمهور وإدراكه، مع مراعاة الجوانب التي تم تحليلها.

Introduction

Covid-19, a disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, is the reason behind a pandemic which challenged societies worldwide and led to over 760 million cases and 6.9 million deaths since 2019, according to the World Health Organization, though when taking into account not only the officially recorded deaths, the number is believed to be much higher. So this topic was of interest at a global level and was present in the media discourses, with numerous media outlets disseminating information about the virus and thus shaping the way the situation was perceived by the audience.

In my opinion, two main types of information have been sent at a global level via different media channels during the pandemic: facts and figures meant to convince people about the real risks of the disease and rules and guidelines

for them to follow in order to reduce the spread of the virus. Both categories are tightly connected with the usage of modality either for expressing different degrees of certainty and one's level of commitment to what they are saying, or for influencing people's behaviours by giving them advice, instructions or even rules to follow. This is why I have chosen two articles focused on the topic of social distancing, where modality is being used with both of the purposes previously mentioned, that is expressing a level of truth and certainty and giving instructions or orders.

However, as we will see, modality is not the sole instrument used, as the authors do not convey messages only by resorting to modality, but also to hedging and lexical strategies of representing agents or actions in different manners with different goals. This is why the analysis will have various theoretical approaches as a background: the perspective of Fairclough (2003) on modality and evaluation, nicely connected to that of Machin and Mayr (2012), all of them mentioning hedging as a marker of modalization and referring to different types of hedging also identified by Dudley-Evans (1994) or Resche (2004). All these represent the toolbox of the analysis and will be presented in more detail in the theoretical framework.

Using all these theoretical concepts and instruments to analyse media discourses helps to unveil how media influences public perceptions and behaviours, both representing and constructing our reality. And this is precisely what critical discourse analysis, i.e. CDA, focuses on – the powerful, two way relationship, between language and society. This is why resorting to the selected theoretical framework to analyse the chosen articles will prove to be an extremely relevant discourse analysis if we consider the purpose of CDA.

CDA – Critical Discourse Analysis

As mentioned above, CDA takes a closer look at discourses or social interactions, analyzing the relationship between language and society. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) describe this relationship as being *dialectic*, i.e. a two way relationship, as discourses and society shape themselves. Moreover, since discursive practices influence society, it is implicit that they have major effects when it comes to power, producing and reproducing unequal power relations “through the way in which they represent things and position people” (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 258). What CDA aims at is to make these aspects of discourse and language more visible.

The two scholars also mention that a technologization of language has taken place, as people have become more and more aware of the importance that language has in social life, realizing that they can shape their discourses depending on their objectives, whether political, economic, or institutional. In

this context, CDA's relevance has significantly increased, with it being not just an instrument of analysis meant to unveil, but also "a form of intervention in social practice and social relationships" (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 258), as it not only sustains and reproduces the status quo, but it is also involved in transforming it.

BBC and CNN

It is also relevant for our analysis to briefly present the two institutions where the selected articles have been published, in order to understand their different approaches when it comes to broadcasting pieces of news. First of all it is important to mention that BBC is a public service broadcaster funded mainly through the UK television licence fee and thus aiming to provide content for the benefit of the public, while CNN is a commercial broadcaster part of Warner Bros. Discovery, Inc., for which advertising is the main source of revenue so their content should attract audience.

Given the contrast public versus commercial, BBC has stricter guidelines to follow and is more impartial compared to CNN. So we expect to see more neutrality and accuracy from the BBC, while CNN tends to focus on offering different perspectives of various commentators and analysts. As we see from their websites, they both have a global reach while also including content focusing on the UK or the US respectively and this will also be visible in the selected pieces of news.

Framework of analysis

As previously mentioned this section will focus on presenting the theoretical framework, that is, all the instruments which will be used in the analysis of the article, starting with modality (Fairclough 2003, Machin and Mayr 2012) and hedging (Dudley-Evans 1994, Resche 2004) and moving on to naming strategies and strategies for representing actions (Machin and Mayr 2012).

Modality and Hedging

In the literature there are different perspective when defining modality, but one idea is common – modality refers to more than just modal verbs and there are several lexical items that can be used to mark it.

Fairclough (2003, p. 165) defines modality as "what people commit themselves to when they make Statements, ask Questions, make Demands or Offers". So it is an instrument used to express attitudes, different degrees of

certainty, possibility, necessity, permission or obligation. Fairclough (2003, p. 166) also mentions that “how one represents the world, to what one commits oneself, e.g. one’s degree of commitment to truth, is a part of how one identifies oneself, necessarily in relation to others with whom one is interacting”, calling this process the *texturing of identities*. Fairclough (2003) distinguishes between two main types of modality – knowledge exchange (epistemic modality: one’s commitment to truth) and activity exchange (deontic modality: one’s commitment to obligation/necessity), and between three levels of commitment as in the table below and in the examples under (1).

	<i>Truth</i>	<i>Obligation</i>
<i>High</i>	certainly	required
<i>Median</i>	probably	supposed
<i>Low</i>	possibly	allowed

- (1) a. He is certainly/probably/possibly home. – epistemic modality
b. He is required/supposed/allowed to call the doctor. – deontic modality

When identifying different markers of modalization, Fairclough (2003, p. 170-171) mentions: modal verbs (e.g. *may, must, should, could*, etc.), modal adverbs (e.g. *certainly*), participial adjectives (e.g. *required*), mental process clauses (e.g. *I think*), modal adjectives (e.g. *possible, probable*) that also appear in modalizing clauses (e.g. *it is possible*), verbs of appearance (e.g. *seem, appear*), other types of adverbs (e.g. *in fact, obviously, evidently, usually, often, always*), hedges (e.g. *sort of, kind of*), reported speech used to lower one’s commitment, or even intonation and other aspects of oral delivery which distinguish between a hesitant, tentative, confident, or assertive tone.

Particularly if we take a closer look at hedging, defined by Dudley-Evans (1994, p. 1) as “the process by which the writer or writers distance themselves from the knowledge claim that they wish to make”, we have a variety of different types of linguistic features to look at. Dudley-Evans (1994, p. 1-2) actually includes modal verbs themselves on the list of linguistic features meant to help us recognize hedging, to which he adds: semi-auxiliary verbs (e.g. *seem to, appear to*), adverbs (e.g. *probably, possibly*), adjectives (e.g. *likely, plausible, possible, feasible*), non-factive verbs used to report claims (e.g. *suggest, speculate, indicate, imply*), giving a statement personal attribution (e.g. *I would like to argue that*), attributing claims to an impersonal agency (e.g. *the results, the observations, the study*, etc.), invoking a general rule or category when criticizing (e.g. *The play was ok, but far from being a Shakespearian one.*), or using approximators (e.g. *approximately, roughly, quite, somewhat, considerably*, etc.). As we can easily see, the two lists, that of Fairclough (2003) and that of Dudley-Evans (1994), overlap to a large extent.

When it comes to the purpose of hedging, Dudley-Evans (1994: 1-2) mentions that some instances are seen as shields used by writers to adopt a defensive position, others (such as the expressions of quantity or frequency) decrease the precision of a statement, making it more cautious, while some scholars believe that hedging is used simply for reasons of politeness.

Resche (2004), who claims that hedging is a strategy leading to an increased complexity, enriches Dudley-Evans's (1994) list of hedging devices, adding connectors (e.g. *however, although, moreover, meanwhile*, etc.) that introduce alternative explanations and also other elements, which, she claims, are added for precision: indications of time, allusions to former remarks, repetitions, referring to expertise, an official body or history, enumerating, quoting, defining concepts, giving additional explanations of terms. Though, at a first glance, these elements are meant to add precision and clarity, thus protecting the writer against criticism and guaranteeing reliability, they paradoxically can also generate unclarity when resulting "in an accumulation of complex structures and an intricate pattern of entangled clauses". Besides this effect of "fuzzy transparency", Resche (2004) mentions that hedging can also be used to soften statements, idea which can easily be linked to that of politeness mentioned by Dudley-Evans (1994).

Going back to Fairclough's (2003) 'texturing of identities', Machin and Mayr (2012) link it to power, mentioning that, by telling us something about a person's identity, modals also tell us how much power that person has over others, being able to conceal power relations or even to mask coercion. All in all, both modality and hedging refer to overlapping types of linguistic devices that can be used to express different degrees of commitment, to give the impression of precision, to increase or decrease distance from what we say, to soften a message or add vagueness, all with the purpose of protecting utterances from criticism through the fog that they bring while simultaneously simulating clarity.

Representing People and Actions – Identity and Transitivity

As previously mentioned, reported speech is also considered a marked of modalization which can be used to lower one's commitment, so modality is connected to the way in which people and actions are represented in sentences. As expected, different linguistic devices and strategies do not function and should not be analysed in isolation and Fairclough (2003, p. 171) also states that an author's commitment, how he or she identifies him/herself, "also depends upon the intersection between modality and other categories in clauses", such as speech functions, grammatical mood, process type or person.

If we take the latter, Fairclough (2003, p. 171) distinguished between modalities which are subjectively marked (e.g. *I think the door is closed.*) and modalities which are not subjectively marked (e.g. *The door is closed.*). This tightly connects to the discussion of Machin and Mayr (2012) on ways of representing people or actions. The two mention that there is “no neutral way to represent a person” (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 77) and a person’s absence from a discourse is just as important as their presence.

A participant can be represented as an individual (personalization, specification, nomination – humanised, generate empathy), as part of a collectivity (collectivization: e.g. *students*) or institution (impersonalization: e.g. *the university*), or as a generic type (genericization: e.g. *an American man*). One can also use honorifics to make a person appear more important and increase authority, or reduce a person to a role (e.g. *the defendant, the judge* – dehumanise / connote legitimacy), or to a feature (e.g. *a beauty*). Other representational strategies mentioned by the two scholars are anonymisation (e.g. *some, anyone, a source*) or aggregation, i.e. quantifying participants and treating them as statistics (e.g. *millions of children, thousands of immigrants, one of a few students*). The choice of pronouns can also be extremely powerful since the first person plural can be used either to create a collective other (*us* versus *them*) or to make vague statements and conceal power relations. (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 79-85).

The ways of representing people are tightly connected to those of representing actions, since transitivity reveals who does what to whom, who is the responsible doer and who is the affected one, the recipient of the consequences. Participants can be activated or passivized, thus manipulating power, and hedging strategies can be used to position the action within a prepositional phrase or subordinate clause, thus de-emphasizing it (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 114-115).

Machin and Mayr (2012, p. 105-111) also briefly present the six process types identified by Halliday, and the effects that they can trigger:

- a. material processes – processes of doing, concrete actions with material results or consequences: either the goal or the actor can be absent, with responsibility being obscured in passives;
- b. mental processes – cognition, affection, perception: humanise and trigger empathy, make the participants appear busy, but can also convey passivity;
- c. behavioural processes (e.g. *watch, stare, dream, taste, cough, smile*)– denote physical or psychological behaviour: do not denote a strong agency, do not give a sense of goal or a beneficiary;

- d. verbal processes – the verb *to say* and its synonyms: reveal who is allowed to have a voice, but also who is the talker versus the doer (material processes) or the thinker (mental processes);
- e. relational processes (e.g. *mean, define, represent, stand for, become, refer to, have*) – used to talk about things which are in relation to other things: allows the writer or speaker to present opinions as facts;
- f. existential processes – the verb *to be* and its synonyms: agency and responsibility are obscured (passives), backgrounding is realized as only one participant is present.

All in all, we see that there is an interplay between modality, the representation of people and the representation of actions, all of the three never being neutral and contributing to shaping messages and manipulating power though what they reveal and obscure, thus influencing perceptions. Having a deeper understanding of how the strategies discussed so far function can help us uncover intentions, biases or power relations. So we will proceed in applying the toolkit that we have in our analysis of the two selected articles.

Analysis and discussion

After having a deeper understanding of modality, hedging and representational strategies, let us see how they are used in the two articles separately, then compare the two and later draw the conclusions with respect to how messages are being conveyed, with what purpose and to what extent the ways of expressing alter perceptions.

BBC - *Social distancing: How to persuade others it works*

As the title suggests, in the BBC article written by Martha Henriques (2020) the focus falls on the social distancing measures. So, when thinking about modality we would expect to identify both epistemic modality in the way the author expresses different degrees of certainty with respect to the efficiency of the measures that she refers to, but also deontic modality when it comes to prescribing certain behaviours to the readers. On the other hand, when it comes to hedging, the expectation would be for them to be used either to soften statements given the sensitive topic and the public's reluctance to follow the guidelines, or to give the impression of precision, clarity, reliability in an attempt to convince the audience about the truth of the message that is being sent and persuade people of its importance.

Moving on to representational strategies, we expect for titles and honorifics to be used in order to increase the authority of the message, but also for nominations or personalisation to trigger empathy and humanize the discourse. There will surely also be situations where the participants will be missing or where they will be referred to as representing an institution (collectivization), as a generic type (genericization), or as quantified in statistics (aggregation). As for the representations of actions, it is expected to find material processes that emphasize the impact of the virus and that would create a contrast with the mental processes (doers versus thinkers).

As expected, from the very beginning we identify what Fairclough (2003) calls high modality in the assertion “Social distancing and self-isolation **are** effective ways to slow the spread of Covid-19”, conveying certainty through epistemic modality. In spite of the fact that the agentivity and responsibility are missing, in this particular example the absence of the participants and the usage of an existential verb (passive), make the statement more impactful as it resembles a general truth that cannot be argued against.

Another examples of high epistemic modality meant to convey certainty is: “Given that public health bodies such as the World Health Organization, the UK’s NHS, the US’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention among others, are making it clear that there are effective ways to slow the spread of Covid-19”. Here the naming of the institutions is not only a representation strategy but also a manifestation of hedging, simultaneously having an instance of enumeration and a reference to an official body, to expertise. The long noun phrase which includes the names of the organisations does indeed increase precision and authority, and suggests wide knowledge, but at the same time its complexity seems to bring the foggiest that Resche (2004) was mentioning, moving away the focus from the assertion conveying certainty that follows (“there are effective ways to slow the spread”). Thus, paradoxically, we are dealing with high modality and with a lowering of modality at the same time.

The author also uses instances of lower epistemic modality to express possibility, so a lower degree of certainty. This is the case in the fragment below where “could” is used, making the efficiency of the measures seem less certain. In the same fragment modality is present through the adverb “fairly”, suggesting a median degree of certainty when it comes to the level of understanding of people in the UK and US with respect to public health measures. When considering hedging we can identify: specific time references (“between the 23 February and 2 March”), references to an official report (“one study”, “an online survey”) and expert (“Pascal Geldsetzer, a researcher at Harvard University’s TH Chan School of Public Health”), and even the quotation from the expert himself, which is not a single occurrence in the article.

*One study during the Covid-19 outbreak found that people in both the US and in the UK understood public health measures to contain the virus fairly well early on, says Pascal Geldsetzer, a researcher at Harvard University's TH Chan School of Public Health. In a study he carried out between 23 February and 2 March, Geldsetzer used an online survey to ask 2,986 people in the US and 2,988 people in the UK about their views on and understanding of the new coronavirus. The majority of participants (93% in the US and 86% in the UK) knew which measures **could** prevent Covid-19 spreading: handwashing, avoiding close contact with people who are ill and avoiding touching your face. (Henriques 2020)*

If we move on to deontic modality we identify two instances of the verb “to need” conveying a sense of urgency and obligation (e.g. high deontic modality – requirements): “We need people to understand”, “we need to stay vigilant”. In both of these examples of high deontic modality the subject is a collective “we” both weak given its vagueness (unclear to whom it refers to) and strong given its power to make every reader feel included by creating a collective other. However, once again, if we look at the entire structure that the second example is part of – “I think it's important to keep reminding people we need to stay vigilant on this.” – we notice that hedging moves the assertion at the end, out of focus, lowering the initially high modality. With respect to the process types, we have a mental process (*to understand*) and an existential process (*to stay*), both conveying passivity and, with only one participant present, thus further contributing to the backgrounding.

Next let us take a look at two more examples of deontic modality with the verb “to have to” as a softer replacement for “must”: “we have to be a bit more creative” and “People have to think about the risks”. Once again, at least apparently, we are dealing with high deontic modality. However, in the second example the mental process “to think” conveys passivity, while in the first hedging is present both in the sentence (“a bit more”) and before it, backgrounding the assertion and lowering modality: “Leslie Martin, a health psychologist at La Sierra University in California and co-author of the Oxford Handbook on Health Communication, Behaviour Change and Treatment Adherence, says that without a precedent to compare the crisis to, we have to be a bit more creative.”. We notice, however, that the hedging is done through a representational strategy – the use of a title (honorifics) to underline the importance, specialization and authority of the participant. In addition to the assertion used at the end, we have once again a static, existential verb denoting passivity.

There is also an instance of a median deontic modality in the text in the example: “I ought to have isolated more.” with isolation being described as

something that one is supposed to do, but not necessarily expressed as a requirement. However, if we consider the chosen representational strategy (first person singular “I”), this makes the statement more impactful and relatable.

As anticipated, there are also many instances of aggregation, with participants being represented as part of statistics to give the impression of objective research and scientific credibility: “2,986 people in the US and 2,988 people in the UK”, “the majority of participants”, “44 people”. Individuals are also represented as part of a group (“groups of young people”, “students on their spring break”), with the younger generation being presumably less likely to comply. In contrast, besides the individualization of scholars and researchers whose names are mentioned, also stands a common person (“Karen Swallow Prior in Maine”), triggering empathy as one of the people who is humanised and much easier to relate to than a scientist or doctor.

Considering the issue of transitivity separately, the numerous mental processes (*to understand, to be concerned with, to know*) contrast, as, expected, with material process verbs expressing the action that has to be taken (“get through to someone who isn’t following the rules”) or the impact of the virus (“the spread of the new coronavirus has left public spaces eerily silent”). So the passive mental processes such as *knowing* and *understanding* contrast to what should be done and what is really happening.

CNN - *Why America’s social distancing efforts have had ‘painfully slow’ results*

If the BBC article was about convincing an indefinite “someone who isn’t following the rules” to stop ignoring social distancing and self-isolation, we now move from a text filled with hedging strategies meant to soften the messages addressed to a reluctant public to a text directly criticising America, in particular the government who should have taken more effective measures to protect the citizens. So if BBC article was written in the benefit of the public, in an attempt to educate and advise, now the responsible party is no longer the wide public, but rather the leaders of each country who should keep them safe.

Here the author clearly expresses certainty when it comes to the effectiveness of social distancing (“social distancing is most effective when applied early, consistently and aggressively”) that has not been applied properly and for this the government is to be blamed (“The federal government belatedly offered its own unenforceable “guidelines” for reopening, Wen said, and has generally left the decision on shutdowns up to individual states.”). This strategy, of shifting the responsibility from each individual to the government and solely blaming the latter for the spread of the virus, on the one hand brings a sense of relief to individuals who are no longer responsible for their own faith, on the

other hand it makes them think and doubt less whether they should obey the rules regarding social distancing. So the discourse is used to completely shift the focus from the cause of the people's dissatisfaction, i.e. the need to comply with the rules.

As mentioned, the degree of certainty in this article is much higher, with clear examples of high modality (e.g. "staying away from infected people is the only way to stop the virus"). As the level of certainty is higher, we rather find instances of deontic modality which prescribe behaviours ("how people should behave", "We'd like to see a steeper, faster decline") than of epistemic modality. However, we do have an instance of epistemic modality, suggesting possibility and introducing uncertainty: "If there's a sudden rise in domestic travel or a steady rise, that may counteract some of the benefits of increased testing per capita". Probability is also expressed through a modal adverb ("probably") when discussing the effectiveness of the current measures that are being taken in the US: "The leakiness of our social distancing is probably leading to this slow decline or in some cases flattening or plateau or no decline,". In this example we also notice the absence of the agent.

Quotations are also present throughout the CNN article, confirming our initial expectations that CNN mainly presents the perspectives of different commentators, analysts and experts: Gov. Andrew Cuomo, Dr. Leana Wan ("an emergency physician and former Baltimore health commissioner"), Dr. James Phillips ("a physician and assistant professor at George Washington University Hospital"), Nadia N. Abuelezam ("an epidemiologist and assistant professor at Boston College"), IHME director Dr. Christopher Murray, Dr. Kent Sepkowitz ("an infectious disease specialist"), CNN Chief Medical Correspondent Dr. Sanjay Gupta.

Moving our focus to representational strategies, we mainly see impersonalisation (New York, America, China, New Zealand, Spain) rather than individualization, since we are dealing with a critique of the system, not of individual actions. There is, however, a similarity with the BBC article, as here we also have the reference to experts for whom we have both the names and the titles/functions, that is nomination and functionalisation. So their importance, authority and credibility are increased. However, as noticed in the discussion of quotations above, in the CNN article only experts are personalised or individualised and the empathy and humanisation found in the BBC article where a common person was individualised is missing.

The passive is also used to hide agency and highlight once more the passivity of the US government ("the weaknesses of American-style social distancing, which has been hampered by a haphazard federal response"). We also have instances of aggregation ("about 2,000 people", "another 232 people")

and numerous instances of suppression, with the agent missing from the text (“Signals are going out to the public.”).

With respect to the representation of actions we notice some material processes in the CNN article (“closed schools and businesses”, “New Zealand banned all foreigners”, “Spain lowered its death toll”) when referring to the measures that have been taken, while mental and behavioural processes are used to reflect the state of confusion and ineffectiveness that is being criticised (“individuals are trying and struggling to decide what to do”, “We know social distancing is most effective when applied early”).

Conclusions

All in all, we conclude that both articles provide a rich ground for CDA and we can use instruments such as modality, hedging, and representational strategies of agents and of actions to discover how language is being used to shape the perception of the message’s recipients. If in the BBC article hedges are used to lower modality and soften the message that people should start following the guidelines and are responsible for their health during the pandemic, the author of the CNN article does not attempt at all to soften the criticism of the American government, describing it as being inferior to those in other countries when it comes to handling this crisis. The only uncertainty expressed in this second article is that with respect to the efficiency of the measures that have been taken and have not led to the desired results.

If BBC remains impartial while keeping the wellbeing of the people in mind, CNN removes any guilt and responsibility of individuals for their actions, completely shifting the blame on institutions. Though unrealistic and with undesirable consequences, this approach might prove to be popular to an audience who is reluctant to respect the guidelines and afraid of the uncertain future, since it is easier for the responsibility to lie with someone else. And the various linguistic instruments in our toolkit reveal the ways in which the two authors impact the public understanding through their discourses, one balancing certainty with caution in an attempt to persuade people to adhere to guidelines, and the other strongly criticizing the flaws of a government fully responsible for the fate of its citizens.

What surely influences both articles is the fact that they have been written in the early days of the pandemic so, in spite of the different approaches, neither of the two puts pressure on the people, with BBC using numerous strategies to soften the message and with CNN completely shifting responsibility from individuals to the government. So, all in all, both articles hesitate on enforcing strict guidelines and on blaming the people, making each of them them responsible for the spread of the virus.

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