

AN ECOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE DISCOURSE OF THE CORONA VIRUS

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Abstract: Taking an ecolinguistic approach the paper analyzes how the corona virus pandemic has changed our lives and how people are talking and discoursing around the globe. The pronouncements of politicians and governments changed very quickly to accommodate to the new state of affairs. Employing strong language governments made their populations stay at home, to keep ‘social distance’, to prevent the spread of the disease. Very rapidly ‘medical’ talk of illness and death entered the public domain and was used by politicians. Medical experts like virologists and epidemiologists accompanied politicians on the media showing graphs and curves to explain what was happening.

Speakers used dramatic metaphors. There were war metaphors, and also disaster metaphors, like floods and tides, a house on fire to characterize how observers viewed what was happening. People constantly mentioned numbers and figures. Everyday discourse patterns were packed with medical and epidemiological terms and phrases. The pandemic discourse resembles Gramsci’s idea of ‘hegemony’. The dominating power of the pandemic has made us all party to this new hegemony. Daily news conferences about the pandemic filled the media and TV. Such a crisis is a favourable time for ‘good’ journalism, especially investigative work. Governments justify their actions by claiming to follow the advice of scientific experts. The tendency for academics to put themselves at the service of government is a well-known phenomenon, a form of linguistic co-opting.

Governments everywhere pitched economic orthodoxy to the winds. With talk about easing the lockdown the discourse began to change. German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that Germany risked damaging its recent achievements in subduing the spread of Covid-19. The pandemic is an idea that exists in our social discourse and we talk about a phenomenon that actually exists as an external physical reality. The texture of everyday life and society feels unstable. So does the human position in the world. With the advance of globalization the risk of infectious diseases spreads. Some people see pandemics as blips rather than an integral part of history. They like to believe that humans are no longer part of the natural world and can create an autonomous ecosystem, separate from the rest of the biosphere. Engels’ comment on humanity’s hubris and expecting humans can conquer nature can serve as a cautionary tale. In ecological terms we need a non-

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hierarchical acceptance of all species, including humans as co-inhabitants of the natural world. This will not be easy.

Keywords: Discours; pandemic; government; lockdown; people; metaphors.

Resumo: Partindo de uma abordagem ecolinguística o artigo analisa as mudanças em nossas vidas causadas pela pandemia do coronavírus e como as pessoas estão falando do assunto pelo mundo afora. As falas dos políticos e do governo mudaram muito rapidamente para se acomodarem à nova situação. Usando uma linguagem forte, os governos mandaram seus governados ficarem em casa e manter ‘distância social’, para prevenir a disseminação da doença. Com muita rapidez, falas ‘médicas’ sobre o mal e a doença passaram a fazer parte do domínio público e foram usadas por políticos. Especialistas médicos como virologistas e epidemiologistas acompanharam políticos nos meios de comunicação mostrando gráficos e curvas para explicar o que estava se passando.

As falas incluíam metáforas dramáticas, como metáforas de guerra e de desastres, tais como inundações, vagalhões e casas em chamas para caracterizar o modo como observadores viam o que estava acontecendo. Frequentemente mencionavam-se números e imagens. A todo dia os discursos eram recheados de frases e termos médicos e epidemiológicos. O discurso da pandemia parece com a ‘hegemonia’ de Gramsci. A força dominadora da pandemia fez de todos nós parte dessa nova hegemonia. Encontros diários sobre a pandemia enchem a mídia e a TV. Uma crise como esta representa um tempo favorável para o ‘bom’ jornalismo, especialmente de natureza investigativa. Os governos justificam suas ações alegando que estavam seguindo os conselhos de especialistas científicos. A tendência dos acadêmicos de se colocarem à disposição do governo é um fenômeno bem conhecido, uma forma de cooptação linguística.

Governos de todos os matizes deixaram a ortodoxia de lado. Falando de modo a favorecer o *lockdown* começaram a mudar de discurso. A chanceler alemã Angela Merkel advertiu que a Alemanha corria o risco prejudicar os ganhos obtidos para domar a proliferação da covid-19. A pandemia é uma ideia que existe em nosso discurso social e no que dizemos sobre um fenômeno realmente existente como realidade física externa. A tessitura da vida quotidiana e da sociedade parece instável, como acontece com a posição dos humanos no mundo. Com os avanços da globalização o risco de doenças infecciosas se espalha. Algumas pessoas veem a pandemia como um pontinho na tela, não como uma parte integrante da história. Elas gostam de acreditar que os humanos não são mais parte do mundo natural e podem criar um ecossistema autônomo, separado do resto da biosfera. O comentário de Engels sobre a arrogância humana de achar que pode conquistar a natureza pode servir como uma exemplo de advertência. Em termos ecológicos precisamos aceitar de modo não hierárquico todas as espécies, inclusive os humanos como co-habitantes do mundo natural. Isso não será fácil.

Palavras-chave: Discours; pandemia; governo; *lockdown*; povo; metáforas.

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic is an unprecedented event in modern history. I shall be looking at the discourse it is generating from the point of view of an ecolinguist. Alexander and Stibbe (2014) defined ecolinguistics “as the study of the impact of language on the life-sustaining relationships among humans, other organisms and the physical environment”.*

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So we can consider the talk about the corona virus and the viral disease it causes, covid-19, as part of the interface between humans, other living beings and the natural world in general. It is a specific virus that has become the focus of the interface. Viruses are living organisms like polar bears, manatees, butterflies or frogs. They are part of the natural order just trying to survive and replicate, according to Darwinian principles as all other living beings do. Ebola, SARS, and HIV/AIDS, and now the covid-19 virus, are the results of microbes jumping from animals to humans, zoonotic spillovers. Viruses are embedded in the same systems of ecology and evolutionary biology that humans are. Some commentators claim that it is through disruption in diverse ecosystems by humans that the corona virus pandemic (see Quammen 2013) has been initiated. Our relationship with the natural world needs to be seen more holistically.

It has not taken long for what the historian William H. McNeill wrote in his (1976) book *Plagues and Peoples* to happen: “It is always possible that some hitherto obscure parasitic organism may escape its accustomed ecological niche and expose the dense human populations that have become so conspicuous a feature of the Earth to some fresh and perchance devastating mortality.” McNeill here adopts an anthropocentric point of view; for to the rest of the world this isn’t devastating.

As the British journalist George Monbiot has written: “This coronavirus reminds us that we belong to the material world.” Some observers have referred to how birdsong has become so noticeable in cities that have been shut down while people stay at home. Others see it as a chance to embrace a new intimacy with the natural world we are after all a part of, with the fox and woodpeckers and oak trees. Wild boars were roaming in the towns of northern Italy, while wild goats were out on the empty and quiet streets of Llandudno in Wales. We humans have no autonomy, no integrity as a species separate from the other species of this world, no collective existence as a creature apart from the animate Earth.

So for a scholar interested in ecology and the ways language is involved in constituting the discourse around ecological issues it is evident that there is a pivotal role for critical language analysis in the current pandemic discourse flooding the globe in many countries and languages.

There are many angles to view this discourse from. We can note how quickly scientific and medical discourse has become hegemonic and is perhaps in part taking over other orders of discourse, including political and government discourse. Then there is political discourse itself. The pandemic decrees in most states foresee the implementation of force and policing to impose the required behavioural change now being demanded of citizens. In democracies the creeping police state appears to be slowly but surely establishing itself. Orwellian language patterns are being employed and spreading as fast as the coronavirus itself. For example on 16th March Boris Johnson claimed in double speak terms that “risks of transmission of the disease at mass gatherings such as sporting events are relatively low”.

Data from multimodal sources such as TV, radio, news, talks shows, interviews, news conferences and websites in several countries and languages was extracted and made into a corpus that formed the basis of the analysis to follow.

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The World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11 declared COVID-19 a pandemic, pointing to the over 118,000 cases of the coronavirus illness in over 110 countries and territories around the world and the sustained risk of further global spread. “This is not just a public health crisis, it is a crisis that will touch every sector,” said Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO director-general, at a media briefing. “So every sector and every individual must be involved in the fights.”

What the pandemic has succeeded in achieving is to put the spotlight on ‘medical’ talk of illness and death in the public domain. This medical discourse can also manifest additionally through the use of metaphors and analogies from the military domain.

Government and political discourse

For some commentators we are living in a corona war. And President Macron of France actually declared war on the virus. There is a state of emergency and above all catchphrases rule. The media are full of appeals to holding out, half-truths and speculations and conjectures. Words and phrases about behaviour like ‘social distance’ are stated publicly, as if such a paradox does not shatter the very essence of things social, namely togetherness. (It was the WHO that first employed this term, making one wonder why their advisors didn’t come up with ‘physical distance’, which has since more aptly entered the discourse.) Death, man’s best friend after his dog, kept embarrassingly secret in day-to-day life has become the killer application in statistics and the declarations of politicians. PR general staffs and task forces are being used to formulate propaganda slogans. Politicians emit military directives. In the early stages of such events contradiction appears pointless.

So against this background, once the World Health Organization (WHO) declared there to be a pandemic everyone suddenly seemed to be participating in a conversation about public health. Governments declared an emergency and parliaments passed laws that changed people’s lives practically overnight.

For several weeks in March and April 2020 on the TV news in several European countries everyone appeared to be talking about the corona virus. It was the same in many European countries to which the author had access by satellite television. Governments were advising their citizens to change their behaviour on the electronic media, radio and TV, in the newspapers and on the Internet.

General phrases or catchwords were constantly repeated in many countries. In Austria ‘Schau auf dich, Schau auf mich’ (look out for yourself, look out for me) was an early slogan accompanying Government pronouncements. In Cuba I saw on the Cubavision Internacional TV station that “Mi casa es mi plaza” is the key slogan being employed. Italians received and largely obeyed an order to stay at home. “I’m staying home” became a hashtag, then the name of a national ordinance and then a motto hung from balconies and windows.

Politicians were forced to take decisions on the basis of inadequate information, in an emotional context. They were individuals working 20 hours a day who were fully aware they were dealing with matters of life and death. Politics is a brutal game. It’s not for the faint-hearted and in a democracy at some point every politician and official knows that they will have to provide an account of each and every decision they made.

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On 12th March 2020 at a press conference the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was asked if he was concerned about getting the virus. He answered: “I am washing my hands”. Johnson’s advice was: “We should all basically just go about our normal daily lives.” These glib and superficial statements ring hollow, knowing as we do that weeks later Johnson himself was infected with covid-19 and had to be treated in an intensive care unit in a National Health Service (NHS) hospital.

But we knew very little about this virus at the outset. The scientific uncertainty is a feature that has fed into the discourse of politicians. There remains considerable doubt and disagreement regarding how best to respond to curbing the spread of the infection and to how best to prepare society to continue. Then came the lockdown even in the UK, though much later than in other countries.

In democratic societies there are clearly ‘backroom boys and girls’ whose job it is to propose both what critical linguists call ‘relexicalizations’ or word choices, discursive semantic patterns and rhetorical ploys in order to structure arguments and thus persuade listeners to engage in certain actions short of giving orders. The British government published guidance on the Coronavirus outbreak in the format of frequently asked questions (FAQ): what you can and can’t do. This advice had the force of law: “[The Health Protection \(Coronavirus\) Regulations 2020](#) have been put in place to reduce the risk of further human-to-human transmission in this country by keeping individuals in isolation where public health professionals believe there is a reasonable risk an individual may have the virus.”

The appeals are now backed up with the threat of legal punishment if not adhered to. These can take the form of arrest and fines.

So the government utterances are not just on the level of appealing to citizens’ common sense, although this is how the ministers initially tried to act before the legislation was passed in parliament. An element of manipulating the public is to be found by calling the statements ‘guidance’. This is a form of what Wilhelm Trampe (2018: 327) calls ‘euphemization’.

What underlying ideological structures can be found in such announcements? How do speakers and writers position either their listeners or readers or viewers, thus getting (bringing) them to understand or see the ‘facts’ or the events they relate in a particular fashion. In answer to the question: “What will happen to me if I break the rules?” The text prevaricates stating: “We appreciate all the effort people are putting into containing the spread of coronavirus which will help protect our NHS and save lives”. That ‘appreciate’ sounds reasonable and grown up, only to be followed by six potentially punitive outcomes that underline what ‘the police may’ do. Again the text mollifies the punishment with the modal ‘may’ instead of a clear ‘will’. We here see discourse engineering at work on the part of the government. It took several weeks for the persuasive tone to then shift to calling the guidance ‘an order’ and making room for more clear announcements that people openly infringing social distancing would be punished.

In the face of such ubiquitous pandemic discourse it is not surprising that many people express feelings of helplessness and being inextricably caught up in structures too big for them.

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What do we know? Is the government telling us what it knows or only what it wants us to know? Before we can discuss such issues we have to clarify a number of concepts and issues.

All discussions of the virus have as the starting point reports of ‘information’. This general notion covers a variety of phenomena that feed into how people talk about the situation. What scientists and we as members of the public require above all are the ‘facts’ about the virus. It is on the basis of the ascertainable ‘facts’ about this novel virus that scientists learn how it functions and thus they can then build up the scientific and medical ‘knowledge’ which is gradually leading to ‘understanding’ how it is caused and how it is transmitted and so on.

So a very simplified ‘information’ pathway can start with ‘facts’ which lead to ‘knowledge’ which hopefully, we might argue, result in ‘understanding’ of what is going on.

We can of course employ this configuration to view how governments or organizations like the WHO can be seen to be operating. There is then a further dimension which comes into play; for it is on the basis of the ‘understanding’ gathered from multiple sources that governments then proceed to ‘actions’ based on the complex ‘information’ pathway we have laid out.

In most government cases the ‘actions’ engaged in involved efforts to contain the spread of coronavirus. These so-called ‘measures’ were very similar in most European countries; they were however differently articulated or mediated. Over the period of study for this research the variations noted resulted from different degrees of preparedness for such a pandemic and also varying political traditions and philosophies.

How the measures were decided on and then presented to the citizens of different countries is of interest. In the section on experts below we will look at how the measures were justified in the United Kingdom.

Here we will bring in evidence about the Austrian Corona-taskforce. Minutes of a meeting held on 12th March have been put in the public domain. The North of Italy had been in quarantine for 3 days, people were dying on the corridors of Lombardian hospitals and Scandinavian governments were ringing up the government to say that Austria had a corona hotspot in the Tyrol. Kurz, the Austrian Chancellor, is quoted as saying he saw no sign of the population waking up. Now as the Austrian lockdown is being lifted, Kurz is presented as the conqueror of corona, a leader of the smart countries who ‘have the virus under control’.

For the six weeks of the corona emergency transparency, evidence, checking, public debates and doubts about the measures the government introduced were not desired and they still are not. Uninterrupted marketing and communication was the key to the government’s success or even ‘awareness’, as Kurz put it using the English word. The question the taskforce addressed was how could the population be made to take the corona danger seriously. The doctor for tropical medicine, Herwig Kollaritsch, referred to what happened in Great Britain during an epidemic of measles in the 1990s. The government had successfully played with the ‘fear of the population’ and corona also ought to be presented as a fatal disease. This was taken up by the Chancellor who is quoted in the minutes as saying “people should fear an infection, they should be fearful that their parents and grandparents would die”. Kurz intensified this theme of fear and anxiety in a famous quote two weeks later: “Soon each of us will know someone who has died of corona”. Kurz’s crisis management did not reckon with grown-up citizens, preferring compliant subjects or ‘obedience through fear’ (according to the magazine “Trend”) rather than with voluntary personal

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responsibility, as we now know from the minutes. All the press conferences in which there was talk of ‘life endangerers’ and ‘life savers’ and ‘100,000’ deaths stoked fear and anxiety in people.

We will note below how quickly scientific and medical discourse has become hegemonic and is perhaps in part taking over other orders of discourse, including political and government discourse. In particular we will give some examples of experts’ discourse.

Much discourse has become medicalized

The pandemic almost by definition succeeded in bringing ‘medical’ talk of illness and death into the public domain. Everyone was soon talking about infectious diseases and how to avoid spreading them. On an almost daily basis the news in many countries opened with reports on the number of people infected with covid-19, the numbers of patients hospitalized and the number of deaths. Suddenly the existential issue or the human dimension of people’s lives was prominent. The epidemiologists are the experts who provided advice on what to do. But even the politicians employed medicalized or scientifically coloured discourse patterns, emphasizing how ‘we all’ can help to ‘save lives’ by staying at home and engaging in ‘social distancing’.

Political scientists Matthew Flinders and Gergana Dimova (2020) wrote about the UK government: “[O]ne of the defining performative elements of the coronavirus crisis is the daily reports of the Prime Minister or senior ministers at which they are flanked both figuratively and literally by ‘the experts’. No message, statement or utterance can be made by a representative of the government without being foreshadowed and subsequently enmeshed within the golden phrase that is *‘following the expert advice we are receiving’*.”

There was talk of needing to protect the frail and vulnerable. The UK medical officer said: ‘the progress of the illness may be moderate.’ Bringing in the experts and hugging them close is a politicized form of self-preservation strategy that *might* (and it is a rather dubious ‘might’) afford politicians some distance from direct culpability when things go wrong.

In Germany too for several weeks in March and April 2020 on the German TV news everyone appeared to be talking about the corona virus. Certain individuals have become scientific celebrities. A virologist, Christian Drosten, appeared and explained in simple terms the nature of the pandemic to the government and citizens. People in the Federal Government say they’re “glad we have someone like him around”. His words have credibility, he weighs up his judgments carefully. Drosten makes disturbing predictions, but there is never anything alarmist about his statements.

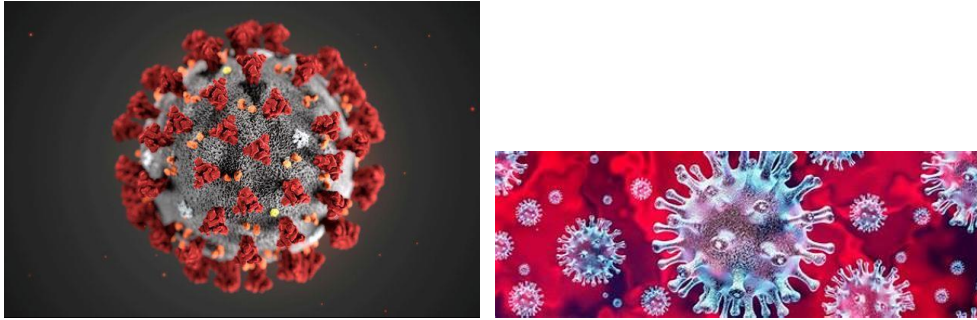
In some ways, declaring a pandemic is more art than science. “Pandemics mean different things to different people,” said in February Dr. Anthony Fauci, the Director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. And he added “It really is borderline semantics, to be honest with you.”

We find discourse engineering at work here.

The medicalization of discourse was supported visually in online articles and newspapers by means of images and visualizations. So the image or the photograph of the corona virus often in colour

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as seen through an electron microscope was being used in the media as an accompaniment to TV and newspaper coverage. These crown-like pictures which gave the medical name to the corona virus are now practically media fixtures if not icons.



Dorling noted (2020) that: “Almost as soon as the COVID-19 pandemic began, graphs and many other visualisations charting the rise of the virus started to multiply. Many show the cumulative number of deaths attributed to the virus.” Hence notion of a curve has become a similar fixture in both the verbal and visual sense. Experts show and discuss charts on which they mark mathematically quantitative data in relation to time. The number of infections, of deaths and other items are plotted in this way. This is used to underline the dynamic nature of the spread of the pandemic since its outbreak. Terms like ‘exponential growth’, ‘peak’ and ‘flattening the curve’, from epidemic modelling have become part of the discourse of politicians.

Bringing order to a chaotic world has always been the driving force of human progress and it can be argued that this is simply its latest manifestation: The ‘Numerati’ with modelling and data science skills making sense of the world around them. One is reminded of the joke: Question: Do you know what the 10 scariest words in the social sciences are? Answer: “I’m from the physics department and I’m here to help.”

Not all experts are as open or frank as the German virologist Christian Drosten who said: “I just sort of slipped into it. It’s also becoming a bit overwhelming, all the media inquiries, advising politicians. I’m not a politician, I’m a scientist. I’m happy to explain what I know. Scientific findings must be communicated to everyone transparently, so that we all can get an idea of the situation. But I’m also honest about what I don’t know. I always have been.”

In the UK government daily news conferences or briefings on TV the experts show graphs representing various reified items. The openly and systematically propagandistic and manipulative use of language is seldom encountered without a subtle mix of specific grammatical and lexical features such as ‘nominalization’ or grammatical metaphor implicating highly abstract nouns (Halliday, 1990) and permitting processes to be represented as ‘things’.

The briefings were carefully managed and set up almost theatrically with the politicians and the experts standing before the wooden panels of a Downing Street hall in front of podiums adorned with the slogans ‘Stay at home’, ‘Protect the NHS’, ‘Save Lives’. These three phrases have been repeated relentlessly. The British newspaper, The Telegraph, claims that a PR communications group working for Boris Johnson thought up this perfect slogan and it has worked so well.

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Alongside the explicit announcements news and films on TV programmes were showing horrific pictures and scenes from Northern Italian hospitals. At least one film showed a reporter dressed in protective clothing accompanying and talking to medical doctors and nurses as they attend to patients in intensive care units; one saw the intensive care equipment, with pipes and wires surrounding beds on which very sick patients are being shown. This makes the filming of the catastrophe into a visualization of the law of entropy in operation in Lombardy. (See Appendix A for a transcript of the voice over.)

Metaphors correspond verbally to the visual elements like images we have found in pandemic discourse. Ecolinguists often focus on metaphors in their analysis of different discourses. Take phrases like ‘on the front line’. The newspapers and politicians keep repeating it. It clearly alludes to war. We are living in a corona war. Indeed President Macron of France declared war on the virus.

For Brigitte Nerlich (2020) metaphors in the time of coronavirus are worth looking at because they create meaning. Thinking and talking about health, illness and medicine and how people act are shaped by metaphors. In a quick overview of metaphors we find war metaphors, and also a lot of disaster metaphors, like floods and tides, tsunami (of cases), storm or a house on fire. There are also some explanatory metaphors, likening the corona virus to an evil trickster or using the domino effect to clarify what is happening. An asymptomatic spread is viewed as a firecracker with an invisible fuse.

There are many metaphors to explain what to do about the virus. The ‘flattening the curve’ metaphor has become big and has many variations, offshoots and cousins, such as: ‘take the heat out transmission’, ‘breaking chains of infection’, ‘starving the virus of fuel’; while Boris Johnson said on 19th March: ‘send the coronavirus packing’. More creative versions of the flattening the curve metaphor include ‘squash the sombrero’, ‘skate not to where the puck is but to where the puck is going to be’ and ‘the hammer and the dance’. Many languages in Europe have used metaphors of imprisonment, such as lockdown, confinement, barriers and so on.

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Kenan Malik (2020) used the virus itself as a metaphor and said: “The coronavirus is both a physical threat and a metaphor for everything from the failures of globalisation to the menace of foreigners.”

Epidemiology – the new hegemony

Politicians in many countries are constantly mentioning numbers and figures.

The effective reproduction number, the reproduction curve was said to be an important epidemiological marker. But the method of calculation is unclear, say journalists. Things are not very transparent for the public. And yet, it is these numbers that justify the measures the politicians are proposing and why they are ‘ramping up’ something, whether it is personal protective equipment (PPE) or testing.

We see that what is happening currently with the pandemic discourse is reminiscent of Raymond Williams’s discussion of Antonio Gramsci’s idea (1971: 12-13) of ‘hegemony’ (WILLIAMS, 1980).

The evidence for this is found in the ways in which even everyday discourse patterns informed and peppered by medical and epidemiological terms and phrases, are heard on radio phone-in programmes in the UK. Hegemony refers to something which is truly total and which is experienced at such intensity, saturating the whole of society to such an extent that, as Gramsci put it, it even constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people during the lockdown. The UK daily press conferences in March and April 2020 are full of this struggle to maintain hegemony.

Identifying the processes of wording the world, ‘lexicalization’, can give insight into how speakers operate. For alternative wordings can carry political and ideological significance in their application. Particular structurings of the meanings of a word are forms of hegemony.

Speakers and organizations are echoing slogan-like phrases from scientific and medical usage. Many have found their way into wider media and political settings. The input from epidemiology can be seen. Metaphors and analogies and vocabularies associated with public health advance into parallel domains. One journalist on a German talk show joked: “We have all become virologists, all 82 million of us”. (The population of Germany is 82 million.)

In the UK we heard ‘we have to flatten the curve’ ... ‘Yes, the coronavirus curves are plateauing’. The Health Secretary on 21st April talked of ‘having squashed down the sombrero’. This is a take-up Boris Johnson’s use of the metaphor in early March 2020 at the second press conference about the virus which actually used a representation of the flatten the curve graph in the background in order to make it more understandable.

The WHO said early on in the pandemic that ‘Testing, testing, testing’ should be the order of the day. New York State Governor Cuomo made some clear statements about the problems of organizing testing in his state.

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Governor Cuomo uses the lexis of the field in his briefings – ‘test-kit’, ‘reagents’, ‘swabs’, ‘phials’, etc. He describes how there are a number of manufacturers in New York State of the testing machines; these are in certain hospitals; the testers report that they cannot get hold of the only reagents, which work with these machines.

Recently ‘Test, trace and track’ has become a repetitive alliterative phrase to emphasize what governments are proposing in order to keep control and suppress the spread of the infection. This is an area of applied epidemiology that has achieved prominence in many countries as they look to ease the shutdowns. Employing these epidemiologic and surveillance activities efficiently helps governments and public health authorities to choose the most efficient ways of controlling the epidemic.

The pandemic has progressed and doctors and researchers have been confronted with the workings of a hitherto entirely unknown virus. Some fascinating and troubling observations are slowly filling out the epidemiological picture of the covid-19 disease. Consider, for example, the incidence of patients who have symptoms for months. Following a series of such cases is a legitimate aspect of epidemiological research. A doctor, who himself contracted covid-19, describes his situation: “The symptoms were weird as hell,” he says. They included loss of smell, heaviness, malaise, tight chest and racing heart (HARDING, 2020).

A scientist in a research group at King’s College London estimated that a small but significant number of people are suffering from what he calls the “long tail” form of the virus. The same research group has developed a Covid-19 tracker app as a technological provision to supplement testing and tracing for the UK. By means of case studies and by obtaining more information the researchers are discovering that the symptoms associated with the covid model seem more and more complex. In other words the epidemiology picture is constantly changing. One researcher notes that he has studied 100 diseases. And he claims covid is the strangest one he has encountered in his medical career. He added: “We are the country that invented epidemiology. We haven’t produced any epidemiological studies other than the app. It’s kind of embarrassing” (HARDING, 2020). This extremely sobering insight demonstrates just how much the world and all of us along with it need to learn before the pandemic has been possibly mastered. And it seems we will all be forced to live with it. The hegemonic power of the pandemic has made us all party to this new hegemony.

The news – journalistic discourse

Orthodox politicians need the journalists at such a time to put their message across. The newspapers and electronic media simply reported what they were told at the start. So factually sounding messages were to be found at the outset like this one: “The Department of Health and Social Care announced the death toll in the UK had increased by 18 to 71 people on Tuesday. The latest to die were aged between 45 and 93 years and all had underlying health conditions, the government added.”

Almost daily briefings or news conferences were being carried on some TV stations. The Sky News station with its breaking news TV coverage has been very comprehensive.

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The Sky News website dated 24th Apr 2020 carries dispassionate reporting by Beth Rigby. Here is a brief excerpt:

“The transmission rate (the R number) is now below one, which means a person with the disease is causing less than one new infection.

That means the epidemic is currently in decline – for now.

The epidemic is moving to a new phase and decisions will soon have to be made about how we come out of the lockdown and when.”

Stephen Bush (2020) maintains “journalists are fighting a war on two fronts. On the one hand, they are trying to cover the government’s day-to-day handling of the battle against Covid-19. On the other, they are trying to conduct an inquiry into the initial response to the pandemic.”

In a time of fear and anxiety, truth telling is even more important, as George Orwell understood. The focus should be on ‘good’ journalism. Indeed one can say that such a crisis is a propitious time for ‘good’ journalism, especially investigative work.

Scientists in the service of government

Researchers were working on characterizing this novel virus and comparing it with viruses from recent outbreaks. As the virus began to proliferate in the UK, what approach to tackling its spread should be adopted was a matter for the government to decide. In discussing these events, it will help to summarize the time line of when some European countries imposed the lockdowns that happened in 2020. As mentioned above it was on 11th March, the WHO formally declared Covid-19 a pandemic. Italy imposed a lockdown (they called it a national quarantine) on 9th March; Spain on Saturday 14th March followed Italy and imposed a near total nationwide lockdown; France imposed a lockdown on the evening of Monday, 16th March, to last for 15 days initially. Austria closed schools and restaurants and other institutions on 16th March; on 20th March a number of states in Germany imposed quarantine measures that called on people to stay home with Bavaria, Saarland, Rhineland-Palatinate, Hamburg, Lower Saxony and Hesse going into partial lockdown. It was not until 23rd March that a lockdown was imposed in Britain.

So it was the moment for the ‘experts’. Their advice is presented as ‘scientific’ and neutral. Their early advice was clear. We are not powerless if we act now, collectively and decisively. We can significantly reduce the threat of the virus by enhancing ‘social distancing’ and so on. Here we can see events being linguistically constructed by the speakers.

Incorporating experts into government discourse resembles what I refer to as linguistic co-opting or discourse engineering (ALEXANDER, 2009, p. 21-2 and *passim*).

There is nothing new about the role that academia and scientists have been playing in controlling and limiting democracy. Their tendency to put themselves at the service of government is a well-known phenomenon. Arguably this Faustian pact has been around for a long time, as Chomsky (1991) has analyzed in detail.

Countries had plans for how to deal with pandemics. But many governments appear to have ignored their existence or what they implied by way of making preparations. According to the UK 2011 plan, 50 per cent of deaths were expected over a three-week period. When Professor Chris

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Whitty, the chief medical officer for England, appeared before the Commons health committee on 5th March, he repeated this probability. The comments of the experts show that they were not attempting to suppress the outbreak, to reduce the rate of transmission, R , below 1.

On 25th April it was announced that more than 20,000 people had died in UK hospitals after testing positive for coronavirus, making the country the fifth in the world to pass that grim milestone. This came almost six weeks after the chief scientific adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, said on 17th March that keeping the toll under 20,000 would be “a good outcome in terms of where we would hope to get”.

The government lockdown, which then came, was not a continuation of its strategy, as Vallance implied, but a reversal of it. The UK economy, the government finances and freedom of movement were all sacrificed in order to avoid the potential mortality rate that the initial approach accepted. Yet in the government plans a lockdown was not contemplated. And the inevitable shortage of ventilators in any pandemic is unmentioned. The 2011 documents did not anticipate what then happened: an attempt to save as many lives as possible.

The government downplayed the sudden and axiomatic change in its approach, with Vallance telling MPs on 16th March that there was only a “semantic difference” between mitigation and suppression. This was a direct contradiction of modelling released by Imperial College the day before. In the years before coronavirus, Britain’s health infrastructure and the wider public realm were degraded by austerity and preparations for a no-deal Brexit. The NHS, which Mr Johnson now describes as “our greatest national asset”, endured the tightest spending settlement in its history. Stockpiles of personal protective equipment were allowed to dwindle. (New Statesman leader 24-30 April 2020.)

At the beginning there was no space and time for these actions to be subject to thorough and open public debate. It is only after a few weeks of lockdown in Germany and Austria that the opposition and critical commentators began to air their views on government policy. The call for more transparency in how government’s policies and measures were being developed became louder.

How have governments operated? As they always tend to, we could say. They work to win approval without providing evidence by means of what Agre (2000) termed ‘simulated rationality’. Agre states: “This procedure – decision first, then arguments – is utterly routinized throughout the public and private bureaucracies of the world, and a whole industry of public relations.” The lack of knowledge about what the virus does, how it spreads and is transmitted and the accompanying medicalized discourse patterns that have colonized the media has allowed governments to engage in this ‘simulated rationality’.

Arguments need only be plausibly rational to an uninformed listener. ‘Perception’ is primary; only a tiny percentage of people will notice that they are being misled. In a time of uncertainty and fear which may well have been enhanced by certain governmental utterances even what Agre has analyzed can operate with a vengeance and governments can “adopt the surface forms of rational argument – arranging words in logical-seeming ways, using scientific vocabulary, adducing (carefully selected) facts, providing impressive-sounding statistics, citing the opinions of authorities (that is, people who will be perceived as authorities), and so forth” (AGRE, 2000). That is sufficient to manage public opinion alongside a few other control tactics.

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Summarizing what we saw happening as governments spoke to citizens about the virus it is helpful to recall certain insights that George Orwell expounded in his writings on language and fiction (see ALEXANDER, 2009, p. 163-188). We have been discussing asymmetrical announcements and declarations. For society is organized upon a principle of unequal power even in a so-called democratic system. For many a division between ‘them’, the government and ‘us’, the citizens have appeared, despite the appeal to the inclusive ‘we’ and ‘us’ to be found in politicians’ speech. Given this inequality in the distribution of power between two groups it is in the material interests of the group in power to maintain their authority over the other group (and to persuade them that it really is in their best interests not to challenge this authority). Governments cannot risk telling the truth because doing so might give others access to their power base (HODGE; FOWLER, 1979, p. 24).

In the case of governments speaking to citizens or subjects this asymmetry is found in daily pronouncements that could be perceived as ‘talking down’, ‘us’ and ‘them’. The UK government tried early on to hide this in its daily briefings, appealing to the notion of consent. For excellent concrete examples of Orwellian ‘doublespeak’ see Catherine Bennett’s May 2 Observer commentary ‘No 10’s coronavirus briefings: stick to the script and hope no one sees your nose growing’.

Changes in political discourse as the pandemic continued

Acting with emergency powers authorized by parliament, governments tossed economic orthodoxy to the winds. Governments everywhere were soon struggling through the narrow passage between suppressing the virus and crashing the economy. As talk about easing the lockdown started the discourse began to change.

Some smaller, non-essential stores reopened their doors in Germany at the end of April 2020 as state authorities started to ease physical distancing measures introduced a month earlier. Commentators see Germany’s devolved state governments as helping it win the coronavirus race. Interestingly the German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that Germany risked damaging its recent achievements in subduing the spread of Covid-19. “The implementation [of the exit strategy] gives me cause for concern,” Merkel said while addressing parliamentarians in the Bundestag.

Merkel described the pandemic as “an imposition on our democracy, because it restricts precisely the things that make up our existential rights and needs”. Nonetheless, she said, the continued distancing measures were necessary.

Does it help having a scientist running the country in a pandemic like this? And having a woman running the country may well be advantageous too says a Guardian article. With a doctorate in quantum chemistry, Merkel’s clear, calm expositions – a clip of her explaining the scientific basis behind the government’s lockdown exit strategy was shared thousands of times online – have also helped propel public approval of the fourth-term chancellor’s handling of the crisis above 70%. See Appendix B for the translation published by The Guardian on 23rd April 2020.

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In sounding a warning about speeding up the exit strategy, however, Merkel has the support of a number of leading scientists in Germany. Christian Drosten, the director of the Institute for Virology at the Charité hospital in Berlin and a leading expert on coronaviruses, said in his daily podcast that reopening shopping centres and larger stores could trigger a second wave of the pandemic in May and June. Unlike the initial outbreak, such a second wave could have several starting points and would be more difficult to trace and contain.

“With great regret I am noticing that we are in the process of completely gambling away the head start that we had,” Drosten said.

Melanie Brinkmann, a virologist, from the Helmholtz Centre for Infection Research, also criticized the German government’s communication of its exit strategy. “A large part of the population has not realized the extent of the situation,” Brinkmann told Der Spiegel. “At the moment people see that some measures are being relaxed, conveying the impression that the entire lockdown will be lifted step by step and we can soon return to living as normal.” “We are still at the beginning of the pandemic.”

The corona virus has provided a point to stop and consider where we are going

As economic activity all around the world has ground to a halt some commentators are calling for the need to reconsider whether this is not a turning point to stop and consider where we are going, whereas other business oriented groups (led by President Trump) are calling for work, industry and business to be opened up as soon as possible.

Is fighting covid-19 an idea that we invent and talk about or is it a physical and social phenomenon that we observe and quantify? It is of course both: an idea that exists in our social discourse and a phenomenon that exists in an external physical reality. It is this hybrid character of waging war on covid-19 that constitutes its fascination and also its intractability for us. The shutdowns and social distancing activities have changed the way people have lived so far.

Puncturing an imaginary equilibrium, the virus has hastened a process of disintegration that has been under way for many years. Saving lives has become paramount; making profits through economic activity has become secondary. The texture of everyday life is already altered. A sense of fragility is everywhere. It is not only society that feels shaky. So does the human position in the world.

Reflecting on what this means for human societal actions will now perhaps force us to explore our values, our relationships and our view of ourselves. Is our purpose on Earth to secure greater affluence, to seek justice, or is it merely to survive? This is a question that needs posing. With Gramsci we can see that “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (GRAMSCI, 1971, p. 276). Some writers are optimistically formulating what this might entail.

As globalization has advanced, so has the risk of infectious diseases spreading. Yet the notion persists that pandemics are blips rather than an integral part of history. Lying behind this is the belief that humans are no longer part of the natural world and can create an autonomous ecosystem, separate from the rest of the biosphere. Covid-19 is telling them they cannot. It is only by using science that we can defend ourselves against this pestilence.

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In many ways this is an appealing vision, but it is also unreal. There is no world authority to enforce an end to growth, just as there is none to fight the virus.

Is nature striking back?

Now it would be a mistake to call Covid-19 nature's revenge, except as a metaphor. As Susan Sontag argued, illness has no 'meaning', and interpreting it runs the risk of stigmatizing its carriers – particularly if they can be depicted as in some way 'other': foreign, sexually 'deviant', non-white.

Adam Schatz (2020) argues that “there is [a]... dimension of Marx's thought that helps illuminate the Covid-19 crisis: his awareness of capitalism's environmental hazards. ‘Man lives from nature,’ he wrote, ‘and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man's physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.’”

In addition, writes Schatz, Friedrich Engels uttered a dire warning in *Dialectics of Nature*: ‘Let us not flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human conquest of nature.’ ‘For each such conquest takes its revenge on us.’

In the context of the current global pandemic and the increased likelihood of microorganisms such as viruses jumping from species to species this comment of Engels on humanity's hubris can serve as a cautionary tale. In ecological terms we need a non-hierarchical acceptance of all species, including humans as co-inhabitants of the natural world (STIBBE, 2012, p. 65). This will not be easy. Many things militate against it happening. The metaphorical reification of animals like cows, pigs or chickens as money-making machines in industrialized agriculture or factory farming is part of what makes it difficult to overcome the anthropocentric viewpoint that colours much discourse about animals. News stories about illnesses and epidemics involving new virus infections among such animal populations have littered the media for decades.

The work of the British wild animal epidemiologist, Andrew Cunningham demonstrates that it is not simply factory farms that generate new viruses, but also the broader disruption of ecosystems and the expansion of commodity production (CUNNINGHAM, 2020). This has the consequence of pushing different animal species together as well as bringing humans and other animals into contact – drawing new pathogens into circulation. He argued that wildlife markets are hotspots for animal diseases to find new hosts. “Mixing large numbers of species under poor hygienic and welfare conditions, and species that wouldn't normally come close together gives opportunities for pathogens to jump species to species”. Covid-19 may well have emerged as a serious public health threat from wildlife.

If many animals are kept under stress with other animals, this affects their immune system; this is the case of wet markets, where wild animals are sold. It is where viruses can cross from one species to another. The only solution is not to hunt, sell or eat such animals. The natural sciences, like zoology, will require significant investment in preventative wildlife health research, Cunningham argues. This is necessary to come to understand more of the risk factors for zoonotic virus spillover.

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It will doubtless be hard for people to treat microorganisms as part of nature in the same way as cute and furry animals like koala bears.

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Appendix A

The voice over of the reporter underlined verbally what the camera was showing:

Staff frantically wave us out of the way, pushing gurneys carrying men and women on mobile respirators – it's not chaos, but it is hectic.

They rush past wards already rammed with beds all filled with people in terrible distress - gasping for air, clutching at their chests and at tubes pumping oxygen into their oxygen-starved lungs.

I'm in the main hospital in Bergamo, the hardest-hit hospital in Italy in the hardest-hit town in the hardest-hit province, Lombardy - and it's just plain scary.

Masked, gloved and in a hazmat suit, my team and I are led through corridors full of gasping people who look terribly ill.

I ask what ward I am in.

"This isn't really a ward, it's a waiting room, we just have to use every bit of space," my guide, Vanna Toninelli, head of the hospital press office tells me.

The medical teams are fighting a war here and they are losing.

The sheer numbers of people succumbing to the coronavirus is overwhelming every hospital in northern Italy - and it could easily overwhelm the rest of the country as well.

The staff are working flat out trying to keep their patients from deteriorating further. They are trying to stop them from dying.

In groups they crowd around the latest patients. Attaching monitors, drips and most importantly respirators. Without them the patients will simply go downhill fast.

Really fast. Deadly fast.

Appendix B

‘Angela Merkel uses science background in coronavirus backgrounder.’

The curve has become flatter. It needs to be like this (moves her hand flatly), so it doesn't overtax our health system. We have made model observations. We're now at about reproduction factor 1; so one person is infecting another one. I can only say that for one chain of infection, if one person will infect another person. That is an average of one person infecting another one. If we get to the point where everybody infects 1.1 people, then by October we will reach the capacity level of our health system with the assumed number of intensive care beds. If we get to 1.2 people, so everyone is infecting 20% more. Out of five people, one infests two and the rest one, and then we will reach the limit of our health care system on July. And if it's up to 1.3 people then in June we will reach the limits of our health system. So that's where we can see how little the margin is. And the whole evolution is based on the fact that we assume that we have an infection figure that we can monitor, that we can track. And that we have more protection concepts and that thanks to them we can loosen restrictions. But it is thin ice, as Mr. Tschentscher (Hamburg's mayor) said, or a fragile situation or really a situation where caution is the order of the day and not overconfidence.

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