

ARTIGO

DOSSIÊ ESTUDOS EM SEMIÓTICA SOCIAL NA AMÉRICA LATINA

**COVID-19 IN THE BRITISH MEDIA: A MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF
PUBLIC HEALTH ADVERTISEMENTS FROM THE PANDEMIC
OUTBREAK**

(COVID-19 na mídia britânica: uma análise multimodal de anúncios de saúde pública sobre o surto da pandemia)

(COVID-19 en los medios británicos: un análisis multimodal de los anuncios de salud pública del brote de pandemia)

Izabela de Oliveira Mendes Pereira¹

Mariana Lima Terres²
(Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina)

Viviane M. Heberle³
(Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina)

Recebido em: fevereiro de 2021

Aceito em: abril de 2021

DOI: 10.26512/les.v22i1.37286

¹Graduada em Relações Internacionais pela Universidade do Sul de Santa Catarina, Mestra em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários pela Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. E-mail: izabela.ompereira@gmail.com.

²Graduada em Letras – Português/Inglês pela Universidade Federal de Pelotas, Mestra em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários e Doutoranda e Bolsista CAPES em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos pela Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. E-mail: mariana.terres@gmail.com.

³Professora titular aposentada do Departamento de Língua e Literatura Estrangeiras da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina e Bolsista de Produtividade em Pesquisa do CNPq. Atuou no Curso de Graduação em Letras/Inglês e ainda atua no Programa de Pós-graduação em Inglês da UFSC. E-mail: viviane.m.heberle@gmail.com.

ABSTRACT

Based on Systemic Functional Linguistics and the Grammar of Visual Design, this article analyzes public health advertisements in the UK, from different moments during the COVID-19 outbreak (February to April 2020). Considering the verbal and visual meanings, results show a similar major use of verbs that instruct and recommend people's actions: While Poster 1 portrays broader information regarding sanitizing, Posters 2 and 3 instruct people to be vigilant. Visually, Posters 1 and 2 use green, indicating health and safety, and illustrate the presence of the virus, while Poster 3 foregrounds the colors red, orange and yellow, signaling caution regarding the Coronavirus-19.

Keywords: *Systemic functional Linguistics. Grammar of visual design. COVID-19. Public health posters. UK.*

RESUMO

Baseado na Linguística Sistêmica Funcional e na Gramática Visual, este artigo analisa pôsteres de saúde pública no Reino Unido durante o surto da COVID-19 (fevereiro a abril de 2020). Resultados da análise verbal indicam o uso preponderante de verbos para instruir e recomendar ações preventivas: o Pôster 1 informa sobre higienização, enquanto os Pôsteres 2 e 3 instruem o público a adotar ações rigorosas. Visualmente, os Pôsteres 1 e 2 utilizam a cor verde, indicando saúde e segurança e ilustram a presença do vírus. Já no Pôster 3 predominam as cores vermelho, laranja e amarelo, sinalizando cautela quanto à propagação do Coronavírus.

Palavras-chave: *Linguística sistêmico-funcional. Gramática visual. COVID-19. Pôsteres de saúde pública. Reino Unido.*

RESUMEN

Basado en la Lingüística Sistémica Funcional y la Gramática Visual, este artículo analiza anuncios del área de la salud pública en el Reino Unido, durante el brote de COVID-19 (de febrero a abril de 2020). Resultados del análisis verbal señalan el uso predominante de verbos para instruir y recomendar acciones preventivas: el cartel 1 informa sobre la higienización, y los carteles 2 y 3 instruyen al público a tomar medidas rigurosas. Visualmente, los carteles 1 y 2 utilizan el color verde, indicando salud y seguridad e ilustran la presencia del virus. En el Póster 3 predominan los colores rojo, naranja y amarillo, lo que indica precaución con la propagación del Coronavirus.

Palabras clave: *Lingüística Sistémico-funcional. Gramática visual. COVID-19. Carteles de salud pública. Reino Unido.*

INTRODUCTION

This article is intended to be aligned with this special issue of *Cadernos de Linguagem e Sociedade* devoted to projects in multimodality and multiliteracies in South America, as a tribute to the distinguished educator and researcher Gunther Kress. The change from a strict linguistic focus to a broader view of social semiotics can be illustrated by Kress himself when revisiting his work with van Leeuwen: “[i]mplied in our work both in Reading Images and in Multimodal Discourse was a decisive shift of academic paradigm: largely from a linguistic to a semiotic paradigm” (KRESS, 2018, p. 26). Following Kress (2010), we see multimodality “as a social semiotic approach to contemporary communication”. Thus, by discussing visual and verbal synergy in different multimodal texts,

aligned with insights from critical discourse analysis, we attempt to provide critical reflections on those texts and their relevance for different sociocultural concerns.

In line with Kress' and Fairclough's concern with contemporary social practices, this study seems appropriate in the uneasy period we are presently living. Since late 2019 and early 2020 the world was introduced to an emerging public health crisis with a severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) causing an illness now known as Coronavirus disease 2019 (abbreviated COVID-19). According to LePan (2020, p.1), "even in this modern era, outbreaks are nearly constant, though not every outbreak reaches pandemic level as the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) has".

The British government along with the NHS published a number of public health information materials in order to promote awareness and provide the public with important advice on how to avoid the spread of COVID-19. According to Encyclopedia.com⁴, public health campaigns have become a common practice in order to reach a large number of citizens "to raise public consciousness about important health issues by educating specific groups about imminent health threats and risky behaviors that might harm them" (p.1). In order to persuade people of these important health issues, different types of media are used, such as posters, website banners, social media animations, radio advertisement, pull up banners, digital out-of home advertisements (DOOH), to name a few.

The present research focuses on the public health advertisements concerning the COVID-19 outbreak in the UK, which assumed a more 'hands-off' approach at the same time that other countries were engaging in total lockdown and quarantine measures. The objective of the study is to investigate what measures of prevention and health advice concerning the COVID-19 outbreak were being published by the British government in the NHS public information posters. In order to carry out our multimodal analysis of these public health advertisements, we rely on the analytic potential of the interrelation between Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and the Grammar of Visual Design (GVD). This article poses the following research question: *what do the verbal and visual meanings reveal in terms of measures of prevention and health advice regarding the COVID-19 in the NHS and HM Government health public posters?*

In order to accomplish this objective, we now provide an overview of COVID-19 in Britain, the theoretical framework used to conduct this study, the method and discussion related to the findings of the visual and verbal analysis, as well as the final remarks.

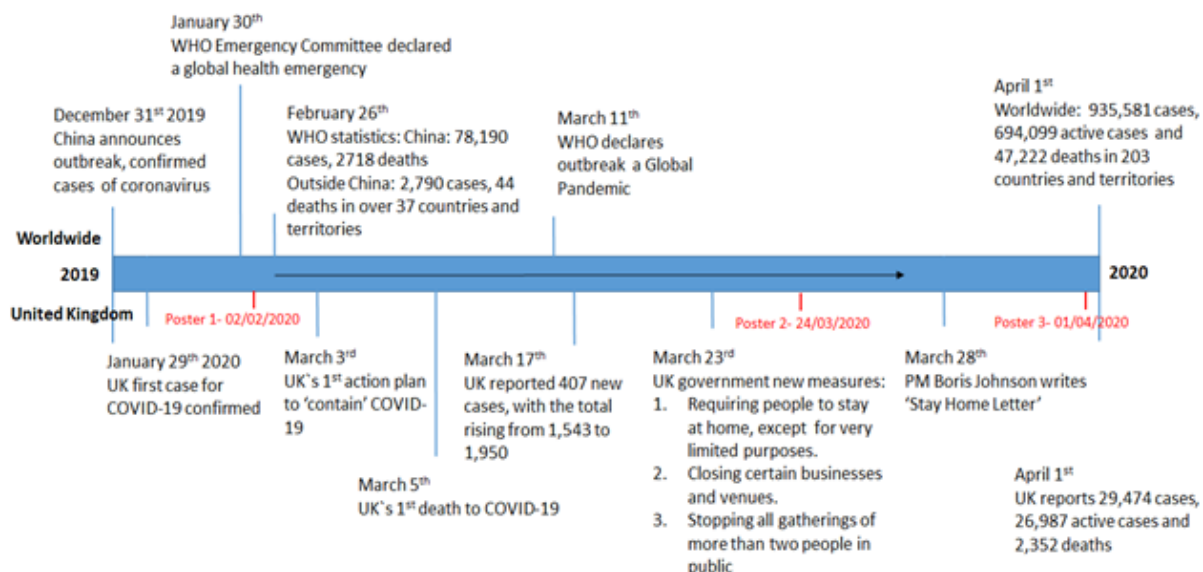
⁴ ENCYCLOPEDIA. Public health campaigns. 2020. Available at: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/media/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/public-health-campaigns>. Accessed on: April 2nd 2020.

1. OVERVIEW OF COVID-19 AND THE CASE OF THE UK

Coronavirus disease 2019 (abbreviated COVID-19) is an infectious respiratory disease which was identified first in Wuhan, located in the People’s Republic of China, on December 2019. By January 30th 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) Emergency Committee declared a global health emergency of international concern. Countries were urged to stop the containment of COVID-19 by applying early aggressive measures to stop transmission and save lives (GHEBREYESUS, 2020).

Considering the COVID-19 outbreak in the UK, until April 1st 2020, there were 29,474 confirmed cases for COVID-19, 26,987 active cases and 2,352 deaths as reported by England’s Public Health website⁵ and BBC News-Department of Health statistics⁶. Figure 1 presents an overview of the events and dates relevant to the present study in a timeline of the COVID-19 outbreak in the UK and worldwide.

Figure 1 – Timeline of the COVID-19 outbreak in the UK relevant to the study



Source: elaborated by the authors, based on: World Health Organization, BBC News and Worldometer.

When the first reported case was advertised in Britain the general instructions then given by the British government and the National Health Service (NHS) to the population was to ‘catch it’,

⁵ PUBLIC HEALTH ENGLAND. Dashboard for Wednesday April 1st. 2020. Available at: <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/f94c3c90da5b4e9f9a0b19484dd4bb14>. Accessed on: April 1st 2020.

⁶ BBC NEWS. Coronavirus UK map: How many confirmed cases are there in your area?. 2020. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-51768274>. Accessed on April 1st 2020.

‘bin it’ and ‘kill it’, a campaign slogan previously used for flu symptoms but re-used in early 2020 to prevent Coronavirus-19 propagation.

On March 3rd 2020, the British government published the ‘Coronavirus-19 action plan’ with the British government’s plans concerning actions to stop the dissemination of the virus and to protect people and their families. The document also contained the strategy adopted by the British government in four stages: contain, delay, research and mitigate. At the time of the action plan’s release, according to the British government officials, the UK was at the first stage of the plan, containing the spread of the virus.

On March 23rd the British government decided to implement more rigid measures regarding prevention: social distancing and staying at home, requiring people to: stay home, except for very limited purposes; close certain businesses and venues, and stop gatherings of more than two people in public (GOV.UK, 2020). On March 28th Prime Minister Boris Johnson addressed a letter to the British people to beat the virus pandemic and to follow “one simple instruction- you must stay at home”. These facts are important to understand the COVID-19 outbreak and the pandemic regarding politics and publicity in the UK.

We now present the main theoretical background for the present study: SFL, for the analysis of verbal meanings and GVD for the analysis of visual meanings.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) aims to reveal the ‘meaning-making’ potential of different strata of language and to explore language as a social system of meanings that construe human experience (MOTTA-ROTH; HEBERLE, 1994; MOTTA-ROTH; HEBERLE, 2015). In this paper we consider the context of situation and the Transitivity system to better understand the contextual meanings related to the text as well as the actions and actors verbalized in the text.

The context of situation in SFL constitutes “the environment of meanings in which language, other semiotic systems and social systems operate”, (HALLIDAY; MATTHIESSEN, 2014, p. 34). It is characterized by three variables: Field, Tenor and Mode, and “the combinations of field, tenor and mode values determine different uses of language – the different meanings that are at risk in a given type of situation” (HALLIDAY and MATTHIESSEN, 2014, p. 34).

Linked to the variables of the context of situation, especially field, Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) present a “contextual taxonomy of text”, that is, 8 broad socio-semiotic activities, concerning

activities of doing and of meaning (p. 35-40). Whereas an activity of doing refers to the use of verbal language and other semiotic systems to perform an action (such as directing or collaborating), an activity of meaning concerns expounding (such as explaining, categorizing); reporting (surveying, inventorying); recreating (narrating, dramatizing); sharing (values and/or experiences); enabling (instructing or regulating); recommending (promoting or advising) or still exploring (arguing or reviewing). In our study we analyze the posters in terms of these socio-semiotic activities.

Field, Tenor and Mode from the context of situation stratum correspond to the three ‘metafunctions’ of language: ideational, interpersonal and textual, from the semantic stratum. By combining metafunctions and register variables from the context of situation, it is possible to define a multi-dimensional semiotic space by outlining diversified ways to use and make meaning of language (HALLIDAY; MATTHIESSEN, 2014).

Thus, the ideational metafunction, which considers social and semiotic activities, concerned with how we represent reality through language, is linked to the contextual variable Field, related to what is going on in the situation. The Interpersonal metafunction reflects both interactive and personal functions linked to the variable Tenor, which considers ‘language as action’ by looking at the relation between the participants (those taking part) in the social semiotic activity and/or situation. Finally, the Textual metafunction focuses on the way information is organized and displayed by means of both the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions linked to the contextual variable Mode, concerned with the role played by language and other semiotic systems in the situation.

As we wish to investigate measures of prevention and health advice regarding the COVID-19 in public health posters, we analyze the contextual variable Field, from the context of situation, since it refers to what is ‘happening’ and the nature of social actions that take place in different situations (MARTIN, 2000). Directly related to the contextual variable of Field and the ideational metafunction, we focus on the lexicogrammatical stratum of the transitivity system, as it allows us to investigate the construal of experience in the text, the flow of events, the “goings-on”, clause by clause.

The transitivity system refers to the lexicogrammatical resources needed to identify experiential meanings. At the lexicogrammatical level, the clause is understood as a verbal representation or enactment of those experiences, relationships and interactions. We describe who is doing what to whom under what circumstances. There are six process types in SFL: material (processes of doing and happening); mental (processes of sensing); relational (processes of being and having); behavioral (processes of physiological and psychological behavior), verbal (processes of saying) and existential (processes representing that something exists or happens).

SFL allows us to understand the meaning-making resources of verbal language. However, visual meanings also play a significant role in communication. Thus, for the visual analysis of this specific study, we now refer to GVD.

1.2 The Grammar of Visual Design

The Grammar of Visual Design (GVD) is both a method of semiotic analysis and a theoretical account to describe the meaning-making resources of images, based on Halliday's SFL, specifically the notions of metafunctions, which we explore next. The Representational structure in GVD corresponds to the Ideational metafunction in SFL, to describe visual meanings related to world representations and experiences concerning events, participants involved, objects, relationships, and circumstances. The two broad visual patterns that represent the nature of events are called Narrative and Conceptual processes. Narrative processes may be Actional, Reactional or Verbal. While Actional processes are indicated by 'action lines' or vectors, representing actions performed by the participants, in Reactional processes there are no 'actions', and vectors are formed by the participants' gaze. Both processes can have one participant (non-transactional) or many participants (transactional). Finally, Verbal processes are presented by dialogues and speech balloons revealing the participants' thoughts. When there are no vectors, Classificational, Analytical, and Symbolic processes within the conceptual representation may be used, to classify/categorize people, things and places.

The Interactive structure, related to SFL's Interpersonal metafunction, describes the meanings related to the nature of relationships between the producer, viewer and the represented participants in the image. Two kinds of participants are identified: Represented participants (people, places and things depicted in images) and Interactive participants (those who communicate with each other through images). Different ways to describe the interactional relations between participants are: Contact, Offer and Demand (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006). Other important elements in the interactional analysis include size of the frame, social distance, attitudes, perspectives, color, and mood and modality.

The last GVD metafunction is the Compositional, related to SFL's Textual metafunction, to describe the compositional and organizational elements in images. Three interrelated systems can be considered: Information value (the position of elements); Salience (elements to attract attention); and Visual Framing (elements to create dividing lines, or visible frame lines).

The following section presents our analysis.

2. ANALYSIS

As previously mentioned, we aim to investigate measures of prevention and health advice regarding the COVID-19 outbreak portrayed by the British government in the NHS public information posters, in terms of their visual and verbal meanings. To carry out the investigation, the criteria for the data selection were: (1) the posters had to be from the same source, the official website referring to public health in England (Public Health England)⁷; (2) the date of release had to be shown on the website's page; (3) they had to have the HM Government⁸ and NHS logos as indicators of authenticity; (4) they had to be selected from different moments during the COVID-19 outbreak in the UK.

In total, three posters were selected to be analyzed considering that they had to meet the criteria set out and follow the time frame proposed by the study from December 2019 to April 1st 2020 (Figure 1). The website (Public Health England) is constantly updated and some campaigns and materials may be recycled or even removed to give way to new information, campaigns and current affairs.

The first poster was released on Sunday the 2nd of February 2020, shortly after the first case had been identified in the UK (January 29th 2020). The second poster was published on March 24th 2020, after crucial events in the UK: the government's first 'action plan' (released on March 3rd 2020), the first death in the UK by COVID-19 (on March 5th 2020), after WHO reported 'global pandemic' (March 11th 2020) and 407 new cases reported in the UK (March 17th 2020). The third selected poster was released one week after Prime Minister Boris Johnson's⁹ letter to the nation (March 28th 2020), urging the population to stay home.

Next, we present our analysis of the verbal and visual meanings in the posters. For clarity, the posters are analyzed in two stages: the context of situation and the verbal meanings and then the visual meanings, following the chronological sequence of the release of each advertisement, starting with the analysis of Poster 1.

⁷ PUBLIC HEALTH ENGLAND. Coronavirus (COVID-19) Resource Center. 2020. Available at: <https://campaignresources.phe.gov.uk/resources/campaigns/101-coronavirus-/resources>. Accessed on: April 2020.

⁸ HM Government refers to: Her Majesty's Government, the central Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, commonly referred to as the British Government.

⁹ BORIS JOHNSON. PM Letter to Nation on Coronavirus. 2020. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pm-letter-to-nation-on-coronavirus>. Accessed on March 30 2020.

Figure 2 – NHS poster first published on 02.02.2020



Source: extracted from <https://campaignresources.phe.gov.uk/resources/campaigns/101-coronavirus-/resources>, accessed on 02 April 2020.

Considering the context of situation and the variable Field, the socio-semiotic activity constituting the situation is ‘recommending’, as this poster advises people to wash their hands. The verbal text is placed mostly on the top left, but with the two pieces of advice on a box on the same level of the doorknob on the right. The background of the image is black and blue. In this dark background, we see an illuminating greenish-purple doorknob and a hand reaching it, suggestively indicating the appearance of the virus. Both the verbal and visual features reflect the nature of the situation, the awareness of hand hygiene. Regarding Tenor, there is an unequal relation between the producer and the viewer of this shot, since images with objective statistics or reports indicate viewers’ submission to the information provided (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006). The last contextual variable Mode points to the semiotic systems present in the shot. The verbal and visual elements play an essential role in the interaction, conveying the information and recommendations in a clear concise way by emphasizing ‘hand hygiene’ with an example of a hand touching an unhygienic surface (doorknob).

Concerning the transitivity system of the verbal analysis, the most frequent process is Material (7), followed by Behavioral (3) processes. Here Material processes are used to advise the public regarding hand sanitizing (*wash, use, get, eat and handle*), to indicate further information about the Government Action plan (*go*), and to recommend people’s actions (*protect*). All verbs are in the imperative mood, aligned with the campaign’s aim to alert the public and recommend actions to be

taken, and the public is presented as the Actor and Beneficiary of these actions. Behavioral processes are used to describe actions related to hand sanitization (*blow, sneeze, cough*). The circumstances of frequency, duration, time and location following the Material processes add relevant information to the message conveyed in the poster.

Regarding representational meanings, the poster presents a very common daily action but also a complex process, where embedding allows for both a narrative and conceptual representation to occur. The major process in this image is narrative, with an actional transactional image of a human hand (Actor) reaching out to the doorknob (Goal) to open it. The second, minor, process represents a conceptual image, constituting a symbolic attributive image of a human hand touching a doorknob.

Considering interactive meanings, the image represents an offer, since there is no eye contact between the represented participant and the viewer. In terms of social distance, the human hand is portrayed at a close shot, indicating proximity to the viewer. Besides, the high angle of the shot suggests that the hand may belong to the viewer, as if to call the viewer's attention to the danger of the virus. The frontal point of view of the shot might also suggest involvement. The background of the poster is dark, while the human hand and the doorknob are portrayed in a fluorescent greenish-purple color, which is used to define sickness (PSYCHOLOGENIE, 2020). The poster also uses green to draw attention to the spots covering the doorknob, which may symbolize the surface contamination with the Coronavirus-19. The word 'Coronavirus', which is repeated twice in the poster, is also portrayed in green, a color widely used to advertise drugs and medical services (PAN, 2016). The verbal text is presented in white, which contrasts with the black and blue background, making it more visible and therefore emphasized. The negative or not realistic colors (low modality) suggest a manipulated shot.

Regarding compositional meanings, the HM Government and NHS logos are placed at the top left and right sides, respectively. Under the logos and placed at the top of the shot, on the left is the verbal text, which suggests an emotive appeal and desirable actions that people should follow to avoid contamination. The left indicates known familiar information to the viewer as if the verbal text were simply serving to re-emphasize the known 'hand sanitizing' procedures. Located under the verbal text is the image of the hand and the doorknob on the center bottom of the image, indicating that the image is important and provides real, concrete information. According to Kampf, Todt, Pfaender and Steinmann (2020), the virus (COVID-19) may persist in inanimate surfaces (like metal, glass or plastic) for some time, endangering people who touch these surfaces and may be infected. Finally, situated at the very bottom of the poster, on the right, is the campaign slogan '*Coronavirus – Protect yourself and others*'. The verbal text at the bottom of the image, on the left, indicates where the public may find further instructions and information about the virus. The disposition of elements

indicates a top/bottom relation: the top refers to the ideal and generalized advisable actions people should take according to the government health authorities, whereas the bottom brings a real portrayal and concrete information about the virus.

Figure 3 – NHS poster first published on 24.03.2020



Source: extracted from <https://campaignresources.phe.gov.uk/resources/campaigns/101-coronavirus-/resources>, accessed on 02 April 2020.

In Poster 2, the register variable Field presents the socio-semiotic activity as ‘enabling’, as this entails instructing or regulating some course of action. Instructions on what people should or should not do include ‘stay home’, ‘save lives’, ‘pick up medicine’, ‘exercise’ and ‘not meet others’. This advert is mostly composed of verbal text with green and red bullet point symbols indicating the recommended (green) actions and the contra recommended (red) action. The background is black giving the white verbal text contrasting values, and the two virus drawings contribute to emphasizing the nature of the situation. Considering Tenor, the role relationships in this shot include the producer of the image and the audience receiving it. There is an unequal status of power of the producer over the viewer because the audience receiving the message needs to accept the information and/or instructions provided by the producer. Within Mode, the verbal text plays an instructive role in the interaction, and it occupies most of the space in the image. However, the two virus drawings also

situate the viewer on the topic. Thus, the organization of the shot ensures that the instructions provided in the verbal text and the visual elements combined are effective in setting the desired mood.

Regarding the verbal analysis, the most recurrent process in Poster 2 is the Material one, with 12 occurrences, followed by one Relational process. Material processes mostly appear in imperative sentences (positive and negative) (*stay, save, meet*) and when eliciting the reasons for leaving home (*shop, pick up, travel, work, exercise*). According to Hart (2014), sentences with negative imperatives may be used to alert people of something, in this case, to avoid contact with others. Most of the Material processes do not present an explicit Actor, with the exception of the public, the Actor (Anyone) of only one Material process (spread Coronavirus), suggesting agency and power. However, here agency and power may be questioned as this specific process is introduced by a finite modal (*can*), which represents a degree of probability and possibility. People are also presented as the Beneficiary in the slogan *Protect yourself and the others*. Furthermore, there is a repetition of the Material verb *stay* in the sentences *Stay at home* and *Stay home*. According to Johnstone (1987) and Dias and Gusso (2016), repetition is a powerful persuasion strategy, which creates argumentative effects that exceed style and, therefore, may persuade the reader. The circumstances accompanying the material processes and participants provide further details and contribute to portray the meaning in Poster 2.

Considering representational meanings, Poster 2 contains a conceptual image, a symbolic attributive image of two animated microscopic organisms amplified, one presented in its totality and the other partially portrayed, which symbolizes the COVID-19 organism. Symbolic attributes, which is the case in Poster 2,

are objects [...] [that] are made salient in the representation in one way or another; for instance, by being placed in the foreground, through exaggerated size, through being especially well lit, through being represented in especially fine detail or sharp focus, or through their conspicuous color or tone. (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 105).

Regarding interactive meanings, the image represents an offer, since there is no eye contact between the viewer and the participants. The microscopic organism portrayed in completion is at a medium shot, while the other, partially presented, is portrayed at a close shot, suggesting proximity to the viewer, implying that the virus is closer to the public and may be a serious threat. The poster, which is presented at eye level, suggesting equality of power, serves to exhibit the information provided by the health services. In terms of color, similar to the previous poster, a fluorescent greenish-purple color is used to indicate the virus and the word *Coronavirus* is also portrayed in green, the color that associates strong emotional correspondence with safety and health when advertising

drugs and medical products and/or services (COLOR WHEEL PRO, 2011). Additionally, the verbal text is preceded by green or red markers to emphasize the permitted/recommended and forbidden/contra recommended actions. The background is black, similar to Poster 1, while the verbal text is in white, creating a visible contrast, which emphasizes the intended message.

Considering compositional meanings, the verbal text is located at the center of the poster, indicating its importance in relation to the other elements in the image. The organism presented in full is centrally positioned on the right side of the poster, suggesting that the virus is not familiar to the public, while the organism partially portrayed is positioned at the bottom of the image, on the left, suggesting a real, concrete organism. The logos of the HM Government and NHS are situated at the top of the poster (left and right side, respectively), similar to Poster 1. However, the slogan differs from the previous poster: ‘Coronavirus – Stay home protect the NHS save lives’ although it occupies the same position as Poster 1, at the bottom of the image, on the right side.

Figure 4 – NHS poster published on 01.04.2020



Source: extracted from <https://campaignresources.phe.gov.uk/resources/campaigns/101-coronavirus-/resources>, accessed on 02 April 2020.

Regarding Field, this image places healthcare workers in a reddish-yellow light wearing WHO Basic (L2) medical protective clothing on the background at the top of the poster¹⁰. The image

¹⁰ WHO Basic (L2) medical protective clothing consists of medical scrubs with cotton socks and boxer briefs, knee high black rubber boots, isolation gown, a cotton surgeon's cap, surgical mask, nitrile examination gloves, and plastic face shield.

represents the socio-semiotic activity of ‘recreating’ a prototypical activity, in this case workers at a healthcare center in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, another socio-semiotic activity presented in this poster is ‘expounding’, as there is a general class of phenomena being explained: people need to ‘stay home to help ‘us’, the NHS healthcare workers (participants represented in the image) save lives’ and “if you go out, you can spread it. People will die”. In terms of the verbal text, the word CORONAVIRUS is in yellow, below the image of the workers. Below it, in white capital letters, we find the imperative STAY HOME TO HELP US SAVE LIVES, which occupies a substantial part of the ad, and, below, in proportionally smaller letters we see the warning in two sentences also in white: “If you go out, you can spread it. People will die”. At the bottom of the poster, there is a yellow and red dotted text box with black font also in capital letters, referring to 3 actions to be taken: STAY HOME>PROTECT THE NHS>SAVE LIVES.

Considering Tenor, there are three participants in the shot: the producers; participants represented in the image and viewers. The contact roles established in this shot promote equality (promoting a shared feeling and responsibility of being in ‘it’ together). Besides, the proximity of the shot frame and the participants’ direct gaze suggest familiarity and intimacy between participants. Regarding Mode, this shot indicates a strong sense of danger, which is reinforced by the verbal and visual elements.

Concerning the verbal analysis, there are only nine Material process, with four imperative sentences. The main participants are “you”, “people”, “us” and “it” (coronavirus). “You” functions as the Actor in three sentences (*stay home, go out, spread*), while the NHS and “us” – meaning doctors, nurses and other professionals involved – appear as Goal and Beneficiary in one sentence each (*protect and help*). In ‘You can spread it’, the public is the Actor, preceded by a finite modal (*can*), which indicates, similar to Poster 2, a degree of probability and uncertainty. The verbs *stay* and *save* are repeated, which, as in Poster 2, constitutes a strategy to persuade the reader and reinforce the message intended by the government. The circumstances of location accompanying the Material process stay reinforces the information in the poster: people are advised to remain at home.

Considering representational meanings, the last poster also contains a complex process, with conceptual and narrative representations. The major process is conceptual, showing a symbolic attributive image represented by three human participants, two in the background and one in the foreground, representing the healthcare professionals involved in the treatment of patients with COVID-19. The represented participants are wearing masks and plastic face shields, the equipment used by doctors, nurses and health technicians dealing with virus infections. Moreover, embedded in the image is a transactional reaction, created by the direction of the gaze vector of the person standing in the foreground (Reactor) looking at the viewer (Phenomenon).

Regarding interactive meanings, the image presents a demand, since the three participants are looking at the viewer, demanding a sense of connection between the participants and the reader (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006). The foregrounded represented participant is at a close personal distance to the viewer, as the head and shoulders are exposed, while the other two participants are portrayed at a medium shot. This distance suggests the participants' intention to establish a close relationship with the viewer. Furthermore, the participants are at eye level, indicating a sense of equality between the participants and the viewers. Regarding colors, the background of the poster remains black, with the emphasis on the verbal text in white, as in Posters 1 and 2. However, different from the previous posters, this image contains the colors yellow, orange and red. The participants are portrayed in a reddish-orange glow, contrasting with the dark background of the poster. Since red-orange is defined as a color which corresponds to warmth, aggression and thirst for action (COLOR WHEEL PRO, 2011), in this poster this color serves as a semiotic resource to show the healthcare workers in action in a dangerous situation. Different from the other posters, the word *Coronavirus* is presented in yellow, which suggests illness and danger (PAN, 2016). Likewise, yellow is said to represent caution, decay, and sickness (COLOR WHEEL PRO, 2011). Finally, at the bottom of the poster the slogan of the campaign is shown in a rectangular frame and a yellow background, which again may indicate caution and danger. The combination of yellow and black establishes a contrast which suggests possible danger to the viewer (COLOR WHEEL PRO, 2011). The rectangular frame is made up of diagonal yellow and red lines which, according to Liungman (1995), may denote 'forbidden' and 'attention', a widely recognized pattern that emphasizes the urgency to attention. Black contrasts with bright colors, combined with red or orange – other very powerful colors –, constitutes an aggressive color scheme (COLOR WHEEL PRO, 2011).

Concerning the compositional elements, the verbal text at the center of the poster suggests it is the most important element of the image. The logos of the HM Government and NHS are positioned at the top of the poster (left and right side, respectively), similar to the previous posters. The campaign slogan is slightly different from Poster 2: 'Stay home protect the NHS save lives' and it is placed at the bottom (center) of the image, strongly framed, which may indicate a separate greater attention in this case. The represented participants are positioned at the top of the poster, suggesting a sense of contrast between the top and the bottom of the image. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 186) "the upper section tends to make some kind of emotive appeal and to show 'what might be'; the lower section tends to be more informative and practical, showing us 'what is'". In this particular case, the informative 'what is' provides more practical consequences or directions for actions to be taken regarding the Coronavirus-19.

FINAL REMARKS

In this paper we investigated measures of prevention and health advice concerning the COVID-19 outbreak by the British government in three NHS public health posters during different phases of the COVID-19 outbreak in the UK. The research addressed the following research question: *what do the verbal and visual meanings reveal in terms of measures of prevention and health advice regarding the COVID-19 in the NHS and HM Government health public posters?*. Our analysis focused on the context of situation and transitivity system based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics as well as on Kress and van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design for the analysis of the visual elements of the posters.

Regarding the verbal meanings of the posters and considering the context of situation, each poster presented a different element within the register variable Field: Poster 1 recommending, Poster 2 enabling and Poster 3 recreating and expounding. Yet, these elements suggest a dominant presence of instructing a course of action. Furthermore, all three posters are organized in a way that the verbal text instructs viewers and the visual elements indicate attention and danger, however semiotically represented in different levels considering their time of release. Concerning the transitivity system, the posters use mainly Material processes, aiming at indicating, instructing and recommending people's actions. The public in most cases is implicitly presented as the Actor and Beneficiary of actions, so the posters may address anyone and/or everyone. Nevertheless, Posters 2 and 3 share the use of the finite modal (can) indicating probability and possibility, indicating uncertainty. Besides, these two posters use repetition as a verbal strategy to persuade the reader and reinforce the message intended by the government. When considering the time frame in which the posters were published, in Poster 1 the HM Government and NHS are recommending and instructing people in a generalized manner regarding hand hygiene. However, by the time Posters 2 and 3 came out the COVID-19 pandemic had reached the UK and the posters seem to instruct and persuade people to act more rigorously.

Concerning the visual elements in the posters, the Representational elements in Posters 1 and 3 are both complex processes where more than one process is used (narrative and conceptual). In Poster 1, released after the government's 'action plan', the narrative representation shows a hand reaching out to a doorknob, a regularly practiced action. But this is also a conceptual representation of people's hands touching surfaces with infectious agents, hence, visually helping to alert people about the risks of contamination. Moreover, by the time Poster 3 had been published, there were already 29,474 cases and 2,352 deaths to COVID-19 in the UK. The symbolic attribute shows health care workers with protective gear, a conceptual representation of health care workers' reality.

Besides, the participants are looking directly at the viewer, indicating a reactional process within the narrative representation—suggesting the viewers’ involvement in this situation. Poster 2, however, shows only a conceptual representation. When this poster was published the government was setting new measures and PM Boris Johnson wrote the ‘stay home’ letter; thus, the visual elements presented help illustrate the real threat.

The posters also differ considering the Interactive elements: dark background and white text, close and medium shots suggesting proximity or ‘togetherness’ in a sense. Posters 1 and 2 present an offer, as there is no eye contact and the color scheme remains very similar. However, Poster 3 presents a demand, as the participants are looking at the viewers and a new color scheme (red, orange and yellow), color saturation and contrasts portray the need for caution concerning the increase of danger. Moreover, the compositional elements indicate similarities regarding the positioning of the HM government and NHS logos at the top of the posters and campaign slogans framed at the bottom right (Posters 1 and 2) and framed and centralized in Poster 3. The disposition of the images and verbal text is also different from Poster 1 (more to the left) compared to Posters 2 and 3 (with the verbal text centralized). This may indicate that the information previously portrayed in Poster 1 is well known and familiar to the public, whereas in Posters 2 and 3 the information is fundamental to the public and requires closer attention.

To conclude, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected many lives and it is necessary to investigate the role of multisemiotic discourses in our society, such as the analysis undertaken in this study. It seems imperative to understand how public health campaigns convey specific meanings through multimodal texts in order to raise public awareness regarding health issues.

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