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LANGUAGE ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE ON THE EXAMPLE OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE CORONAVIRUS

Abstract

Digital media and means of mass communication play an essential role in disseminating information. Studies (Vozab and Peruško, 2021) have shown that the pandemic merely accelerated the apparent shift towards digital news sources. In the 21st century, the internet has become the primary source of information, used by persons of various age groups (Benzinović, Dabo and Šimić, 2021). Authors also point out that the media influence the formation of the public opinion (Jurčić, 2017), especially on topics that their audience knows little or nothing about (Klapper, 1974, as cited in Kovačević, 2020, 5). Chomsky (2002) goes as far as to claim that the media participate in the control and surveillance of the masses. Other authors have argued that the media wield tremendous power in crisis situations, given their ability to filter information and shape opinions on certain problems and their solutions, which can reinforce existing prejudice (Nelkin, 1987, as cited in Kovačević, 2020, 5-6). The coronavirus pandemic provided a perfect breeding ground for fearmongering and dissemination of false and sensationalist news and spins, which are given unmerited space in the media landscape even in normal circumstances. Since the ability to recognise fake news and think critically is one of the prerequisites for responsible internet use, the question is if a person can tell the difference between truth and lie when faced with a deluge of conflicting information about COVID-19 – how infection occurs, how the disease spreads, how we protect ourselves from it, and how it is treated – that are disseminated by a variety of authoritative voices, even if this person has good critical thinking skills.

This paper seeks to analyse the language contained in web portal articles about the epidemic that championed opposing views, and examine how this content influenced

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the formation of the public opinion. For this purpose, the authors analysed articles published on the highest-readership Croatian web portals and on official coronavirus information websites that contained the following keywords: coronavirus, vaccine, COVID certificate, recovery, pregnancy, symptoms, cases, children. Analysis results have shown that the articles overflow with unclear, illogical, incomplete or contradictory information, and use linguistic devices that exhibit the characteristics of political discourse.

Keywords: epidemic, language analysis, coronavirus, media, political discourse

Introduction

The media's primary objective is to communicate information to the general public (Jurčić, 2017). They have multiple roles: the media present worldviews, raise general awareness among the citizens, and frame problems in realistic and visible contexts (Rus-Mol and Zagorac-Keršer, 2005), but also often become communicators of culture, or serve educational or entertainment purposes. They serve the functions of selection and interpretation, which help build cohesion in the community, and the function of explanation, which serves to build and maintain the collective awareness (Martinić, 1994). As means of mass communication, digital media have an essential role in disseminating information in the contemporary world. In the 21st century, the internet has become the primary source of information, used by persons of various age groups (Benzinović, Dabo and Šimić, 2021). From this perspective, given their potential considerable impact on the formation of the public opinion on a large scale, web portals have a great responsibility (Jurčić, 2017). Assuming that the information disseminated online is timely and accurate, the speed of their dissemination to the farthest corners of the globe can help spread knowledge, and directly or indirectly improve living conditions in virtually all aspects. However, in addition to being a very useful source of information, web portals have also become an inexhaustible source of unchecked, half-true or outright false information, as well as sensationalist news and spins. This is largely due to their democratic nature, which allows almost anyone to post any information without checking it first. Fake news and spins are sometimes used harmlessly to increase readership, but they also often play an unethical part in the control and surveillance of the masses (Chomsky, 2002). For this reason, it is extremely important to raise awareness

of media literacy, not only among young people, but in all age groups, especially as regards the analysis and critical evaluation of the media content. Authors also maintain that the media have particularly profound influence on the formation of the public opinion (Jurčić, 2017) about topics that their audience knows little or nothing about (Klapper, 1974, as cited in Kovačević, 2020, 5). What is more, the media have a tremendous power in such circumstances, given their ability to filter information and shape opinions on certain problems and their solutions, which can reinforce existing prejudice (Nelkin, 1987, as cited in Kovačević, 2020, 5-6). In this context, the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV2 virus provided an excellent breeding ground for fearmongering and the dissemination of fake and sensational news, which are given unmerited space in the media landscape even in normal circumstances. At the height of the pandemic, the media overflowed with information on how the infection occurs, how the disease spreads, what can we do to protect ourselves from it, and how it is treated. In circumstances of social distancing, the media played a key role in raising awareness among the citizens, and shaping their opinions about the matter. By definition, crises evoke the feelings of fear, stress and panic (Bulajić, 2010). In crisis circumstances, competent communication dialogue should be the principle underpinning effective crisis management (Barović, 2011) in order to soothe the feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. In hindsight, it is questionable to what extent the dialogue present in articles published at the height of the pandemic crisis in Croatia really aimed to soothe the panic, and to what extent they fuelled fear and doubt. The sense of insecurity, and then doubt, largely resulted from the fact that the members of the Croatian Government's Science Council and National Civil Protection Headquarters, along with epidemiologists, scientists and doctors, presented contradictory information about the virus, and ways to prevent its spreading, on a daily basis, losing the citizens' trust over time. This was partly due to some of the decisions that had been made (for instance, violation of the mandates during the elections and the summer season), and partly to the methods of communication that were used, and the dialogues conducted in the media and through the media. The appearance of the vaccine in the market seems to have marked a turning point. Incomplete and unclear information about the vaccine communicated to the citizens by healthcare professionals aggravated their mistrust in the vaccine, the Headquarters, and the Minister of Health. Following the

same pattern of behaviour, the web portals posted news supporting their own positions, depending on the personal opinions of their journalists, or the positions of the media outlet. The media (and the population in general) seem to have split into two groups: a) the first group emphasised the dangers of the disease and the severe consequences suffered by those who became infected (often including death), and unconditionally promoted the vaccination of all citizens; and b) the second group trivialised the disease and its consequences, and unconditionally opposed vaccination. In such an atmosphere, it was particularly difficult to tell the difference between truthful information and disinformation, even for people who have good critical thinking skills, and who are in the habit of checking the credibility of news. This was probably why the citizens lost some more of their already shaken trust in the media, as evidenced by Reuters' survey on the use of news in the digital media environment. In this survey, 55% out of the total of 2000 Croatian participants said that they found it difficult to tell the difference between true and false information on the internet in 2020. In 2021, the percentage rose to as high as 61.1% (Vozab and Peruško, 2021, 28). Politicians were ranked as the leading source of disinformation by the survey participants (55%), and journalists and their organisations were named as sources of disinformation by as many as 19.9% Croatian participants (Vozab and Peruško, 2021, 29). Since this survey took place during the coronavirus pandemic, we may assume that this result was greatly impacted by the reporting style and treatment of the topic (the first case of the novel coronavirus in Croatia was officially diagnosed and confirmed on 25 February 2020).

The media, communication and manipulation

It is very difficult to give a precise definition of communication, especially because there are so many possible perspectives: communicology, language, philosophy, sociology, psychology etc. In the broadest sense, communication is an exchange of experiences, and the process of creating a meaning between two or more people (Tubbs, Moss and Papastefanou, 2011, 7-8), or the transmission of information from the sender to the recipient (enciklopedija.hr: Komunikacija). Communication comes in different forms: interpersonal, intercultural, public, mass communication, and others (Tubbs, Moss and Papastefanou, 2011, 16). This paper will focus on

media communication, with particular emphasis on web portals. In order for communication to be successful, the meaning conceived by the sender when transmitting the information must not change at the moment when it reaches the recipient. Communication on web portals is specific because it flows in one direction: there is one sender, and many recipients. The reporter (journalist) presents the information, and the recipients receive it, but they do not have the opportunity to ask additional questions if they have not fully understood the text, or if they find anything unclear. They do have the option of commenting on the articles, but comments are for the most part reduced to a discussion between the recipients, without an opportunity to receive a reply from the message sender. The lack of non-verbal communication, which has a key role in exchanging information, in the interaction between the sender and the recipient is another problem in media coverage on web portals. Communication with the readers largely relies on language, photos and layouts, and such unidirectional transmission of information can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations in some circumstances. As a system of signs, language is indeed the most important means of human communication and, in the context of successful exchange of information and receipt of messages, the most important way to materialize meaning. However, according to the basic postulates of cognitive linguistics, "language structures reflect the external world and a person's experience thereof" (Tuđman Vuković, 2009). Meaning is primarily materialized in a context, and is derived from the process of conceptualization of an individual's bodily experience, and from the perspective that the situation is observed from. By extension, the meaning of language structures is not universal and the same for everyone: it largely depends on the individual's conceptual system, and the cognitive processes occurring in the individual's mind (Tuđman Vuković, 2009). For this reason, different readers often interpret the same text differently. If a text is written clearly and unambiguously, and no unclear, incomplete or ambiguous syntagms are used, the differences in interpretation will be minimal. However, if the information contained in the news is in itself incomplete, and the news abounds in ambiguous statements and metaphoric phrases, it is likely that different readers will interpret it very differently. On the other hand, the use of certain linguistic elements and constructs in a certain context and in a certain way can provoke unambiguous reactions and sentiments in message recipients. Such linguistic patterns are, for instance,

largely used when designing advertisements whose purpose is to induce the consumer to buy the advertised product. These are just some of the examples confirming the effect of the senders' linguistic prowess on the success of the communication and the receipt of the message. Of course, linguists have for long been aware of the multiple functions[17] of language in human life, extending far beyond the pure need for communication in the sense of conveying a textual message. Fairclough (1989, 1) even emphasises that the modern society lacks awareness of how much language can contribute to the domination of one person over another, and believes that the impact of language on creating, maintaining and changing social relations of power is underestimated. Authors who engage in critical analysis of discourse also underline that language is a means of expression, but can also be a means of creating social inequalities" (Vuković, 2014, 97). A critical analysis of discourse, among other things, identifies the mechanisms by which language is used as a means of discrimination and abuse of power in certain situations (van Dijk, 2006, 375). Such language mechanisms that serve deceptive and manipulative purposes can be used so subtly that the persuasion may even seem "perfectly acceptable and natural to both sides", the manipulator as well as the manipulated (Vuković, 2014, 101). A score of papers discuss language manipulation in media communication, which often flies below the recipients' radar, and draw attention to the power of persuasion based on cognitive control (van Dijk, 2001, 355; 1985, 254). Such manipulative linguistic techniques are particularly abundant in politics – in the so-called political discourse. Studies of the political discourse have pointed to ample use of various linguistic manipulation and persuasion mechanisms (van Dijk, 2005, 2006, 2012; Sivrić and Mihaljević, 2010; Podboj, 2011; Vuković, 2014a, 2014b). Seeking to influence the opinions of others, and persuade them to accept their own views (Halmi, Belušić and Ogresta, 2004), politicians often use "sub-

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17   In the mid-20th century, Jakobson formulated his well-known theory of the six functions of language: 1) *emotive* or *expressive* function (directed at the sender, directly expressing the speaker's opinion about the topic; exclamations represent the purely emotional layer); 2) *conative* function (imperative function, directed at the recipient, most obvious in the use of the vocative case and the imperative mode); 3) *referential* or *denotative* or *cognitive* function (directed at the context; forms the basis for any communication by defining the relationship between the message and the subject; third person speech); 4) *phatic* function, directed at contact (messages that are used to establish, prolong or stop contact); 5) *metalingual* function (refers to the language code; language that is used to describe language); and 6) *poetic* function, directed at the message as such (Jakobson, 1966, 293-294).

tle forms of abuse of social power, where language is the main means of establishing domination over others" (Vuković, 2014a, 97). In the process, they often emphasise their own power and superiority by finding ways to discredit anyone who does not share their views, describing in detail the "facts" that support their argument (van Dijk, 2006, 379).

Language manipulation in the political discourse and coronavirus discourse

The political discourse is primarily ideological (van Dijk, 2003, 208), and its main function is to persuade. Language, and how it is used, is the crucial element in the process of persuasion and of shaping ideology into opinions. Persuasion does not necessarily have negative connotations (van Dijk, 2005). In principle, persuasion is neutral by nature, its primary task being to influence the audience's judgment and actions without coercion. The primary objective of manipulation, on the other hand, is to gain control over the recipient of the message (Ejupi, Arburim and Siljanovska, 2014). However, persuasion and manipulation are intermixed and interwoven in politics, making it difficult to draw a clear line between the two actions at times, and leading to frequent abuse of the substantial manipulative power of language. Polarisation is one of the most important manipulation strategies in the political discourse, its primary purpose being to portray oneself and other like-minded individuals in a positive light, and to portray others (who do not subscribe to the same views) in a negative light. This is achieved by accentuating the positive and downplaying the negative facts about oneself, and, vice versa, accentuating negative facts about others (van Dijk, 2006, 373). Politicians often also resort to overemphasising the topic they wish to discuss, while ignoring or downplaying the topic they wish to avoid discussing. In their discourse, it is important to underline and punctuate the importance of their own merits, but also to deny responsibility when necessary (Vuković, 2014b, 237; van Dijk, 2012, 34-64). Van Dijk (2012, 34) argues that language manipulation strategies in general are used at almost all discourse levels: lexical, grammatical, and pragmatical, and the political discourse is no exception. The means of manipulation at the lexical level include imprecise words, words with a marked meaning that inspire strong emotional tones (extremely positive or negative), empty words that are used so often in the language

of politics that they have lost all meaning, and professional jargon (e.g. medical). Other characteristic devices include excessive lexicalisation, the use of neologisms, special phraseology (unclear and empty phrases) and the elimination of words and phrases (Gastil, 1992, 474, as cited in Vuković, 2014b, 217). On the grammatical level, manipulative mechanisms are reflected in the use of simple sentences for clear and simple presentation of one's own positive traits, and complex sentence structures to cover up one's negative traits; the use of passive sentences, future tense and conditional verbs; the use of nominalisations instead of verbs to disclaim responsibility; and frequent use of imperatives, modalities and pronouns (*I/we* used in a positive context, and *you/they* used in a negative context). To present themselves in a positive light, speakers usually use emphasis, claims, hyperboles, topicalizations, explicitness, directness, narrative illustration, argumentative support, detailed description, and summarization (Vuković, 2014b, 237; van Dijk, 2012, 34-64). In contrast, when talking about others, they use linguistic devices such as denial, belittling, detopicalization, marginalization, unclear and general description, etc (Vuković, 2014b, 237; van Dijk, 2012, 34-64). From the point of view of rhetoric, persuasion is materialized in the political discourse through a range of rhetorical figures: metaphors (the most common one is *discussion as war*, *discussion as sports*), metonymy, repetition (lexical, semantical, syntactical and phonological repetition), euphemism, hyperbole, irony, personification, contrastive pairs etc (Vuković, 2014b, 231). The above are just some examples of manipulative linguistic patterns that may be used in the political discourse. Each analysis of a political text reveals new expressions and structures that may serve as the means of displaying political power and of manipulation in a given context.

The comparison of the properties of thus described political discourse and the media discourse related to the pandemic points to a high level of consistency and similarity in the use of language structures between the two discourses. Like in the political discourse, linguistic persuasion and manipulation mechanisms are present at almost all levels of the pandemic discourse, whether the articles in question quote statements given by medical professionals, or present news and opinions drawn up by journalists themselves.

Research objectives and methodology

This paper seeks to analyse the content of articles about the epidemic, published by Croatian web portals, which represented opposing views; and investigate which linguistic devices the medical professionals and journalists used in their efforts to shape the public opinion, and persuade the audience to believe the views they advocate. The authors divided the articles they analysed into two groups. The first group comprises statements given by experts, and comments written by journalists, which are aligned with the positions of the Headquarters and the Government (as the authorities that make the mandates aimed at preventing the spread of the diseases), and advocate unconditional vaccination, or hold a neutral view about the matter. The second group comprises articles supporting the positions opposed to the introduction of mandates and vaccination. The linguistic features of the selected articles were analysed and compared with the features of political discourse detailed above, characterised by the use of different linguistic manipulation mechanisms. According to the study by Vozab and Peruško (2021, 25), the leading online news sources in Croatia in 2021 were "index.hr (64%), 24sata.hr (57%), jutarnji.hr (48%), net.hr (39%), dnevnik.hr (39%), tportal.hr (36%), vecernji.hr (35%), telegram.hr (22%), rtl.hr (20%), dnevno.hr (20%), direktno.hr (14%), slobodnadalmacija.hr (14%), and novilist.hr (11%)". For the purposes of their analysis, the authors of the paper analysed articles published by these and other portals (dw.com, koronavirus.hr, poslovni.hr, glasistre.hr, hzjz.hr, vlada.gov.hr, vijesti.hrt.hr, priznajem.hr, plivazdravlje.hr, narod.hr) whose topics were related to the coronavirus, and which contained the following keywords: *coronavirus*, *vaccine*, *COVID certificate*, *recovery*, *pregnancy*, *symptoms*, *cases*, *children*. The analysis was based on the fundamental principles of critical discourse analysis, prioritising the analysis of language in use, and its relationship with the society in its approach. The authors analysed a total of 79 randomly chosen articles, published by web portals between February 2020 and August 2022. 60 of these articles were classified into the first group, and 16 into the second. Three of the articles contained statements from both groups.

Linguistic analysis of the media coverage of the coronavirus

As one of the most important manipulation strategies (van Dijk, 2006, 373), polarization is associated with a strategy of positive presentation of oneself, and negative presentation of others (Vuković, 2014b, 237; van Dijk, 1995, 144), and has a significant role in the political discourse. Polarization is achieved using a variety of techniques and linguistic mechanisms, which very often include the use of personal pronouns. First person singular or plural (*I/we*) is used to present oneself, and third person plural (*they*) is used to refer to anyone who does not share the message sender's views. Personal pronouns in second person plural (*you*) are mostly avoided in the political discourse to avoid the impression of distance between the politics and the people (Vuković, 2014, 228). Linguistic structures of this form are used in the Croatian media's coverage of the coronavirus, and are present in both groups of analysed articles: statements advocating the positions of the Government and the Headquarters about the mandates and the introduction of COVID certificates, and statements opposing this position. Both groups blame the other (*they*) for the high number of cases. Example:

> **They** bear a political, moral and ethical **responsibility** and **will have to face the citizens** whom they have been telling these things, which are not true, Beroš said. (The statement concerns a member of the scientific community who was opposed to the introduction of COVID certificates.)

In addition to having a *political, moral and ethical responsibility*, the opponent will face the consequences of his unreasonable behaviour: he will answer to the citizens. In addition to the polarization *I* = good / *they* = bad, another form of polarization is hidden in this sentence: we = majority / they = minority, with the message sender including the citizens on his side, so that they form this majority together. By letting his opponent know that he belongs to a minority, the message sender minorizes the person who does not share his views, because the assumption is that the majority that shares the same thinking is also right. Such statements are evident in the following examples:

Most citizens have recognised this, and I would like to thank them for it. A remedy will surely be found for the **individuals who have not recognised it**.

It is **our job** to warn **these others** to do it, Beroš said.

This is a denial of everything science has created in the 21st century. I ask **these people** if they will throw away their mobile phones, cars, and TVs, and go back to horse-drawn carriages? I really cannot understand this.

Identification with the audience (*It is **our job** to warn...*) is also a very frequent form of manipulation. On the one hand, this approach is used to create a sense of familiarity with like-minded people, but on the other, plural over singular (*we* over *I*) is also used when the speaker seeks to deny responsibility (Podboj, 2011), or share it with others. For example, the message sender's negative image is softened when the statement reads: *It is our job to warn these others to do it*, as opposed to: *It is my job to warn these others to do it*.

For polarization purposes, message senders often use demonstrative pronouns to refer to people who do not share their views, in addition to personal pronouns, making the subtle distancing even more pronounced (for instance, the sentence *It is our job to warn these others...* could have been phrased as *It is our job to warn them...*, and *I ask these people...* could have been phrased as: *I ask them...*).

These three statements have multiple background meanings. On the one hand, they are an obvious example of polarization, dividing the population into two categories. The first (which includes the message sender) is modern and praiseworthy, accepts scientific achievements without question, and makes wise decisions. This first group also has legitimacy, because the *majority* of the citizens falls into this category. Conversely, the second group is small (*individuals who have not recognised this*), the message sender *cannot understand* its representatives (*these people*) because they are responsible of *denial of the science of the 21st century* (do not accept his solutions), and his opinion is that they should go back *to horse-drawn carriages* (in other words, they are primitive). On the other hand, the statement is a sort of a threat directed at those who do not share the message sender's views, even though the type of sanctions that will apply to them

is not precisely defined (*A **remedy will surely be found** for the individuals who have not recognised it*).

Denying responsibility and evading direct accusations against one's opponent is another feature of political discourse. This is accomplished by leaving out verb phrases (nominalization) and using subjectless and passive sentences. We find such examples in the first group of analysed articles:

> This is a **denial** of everything science has created in the 21ˢᵗ century. (The sentence does not specify who is denying it, even though the reader can clearly infer from the context who the message sender is referring to.)

> **The recommendation is** to wait for at least a month to achieve a better immunological response to the vaccine than if the vaccine was administered earlier. (The sentence does not specify who recommended this.)

> **The recommendation is** that every pregnant woman consults her attending gynaecologist and discusses with him/her whether she will receive the vaccine, and what her risks are.

> "It is **definitely advisable** to get the booster dose regardless of the number of antibodies (...)", Dr. Venus told us. (Message sender avoids taking full responsibility, which he would have done if he had phrased the sentence as *I definitely advise*...)

> This **decision is being introduced** "to increase the citizens' health safety, as **it had been done** previously in the healthcare and social welfare systems". (The sentence does not specify who is introducing it.)

> **It is not advised** to get an antibody test. **The important thing to emphasise** is that a person can get an antibody test when they wish to know if they had been in contact with the virus, but this cannot mean anything to us as regards the future response to the infection. (The statement contains no specific information on who advises or who emphasises.)

In the analysed articles, both groups draw attention to the threat of developing serious symptoms of the disease, using words with a marked meaning that inspire extremely negative emotions for intimidation purposes:

The pandemic has been **ploughing through** the adult population globally for two years already, while children have mostly been spared the **bleak** statistics.

Bleakest prognosis / Get ready for an endless corona-winter (...)

A new **record** in the number of new cases in Croatia, 64 persons died with the coronavirus.

"The virus (...) continues to spread and mutate, and **it continues to kill**", he emphasised.

European countries introducing stricter coronavirus protection mandates again, protests **erupting**.

Low vaccine coverage in eastern Europe has resulted in "**brutally** high mortality rates", Politico reports.

The first group uses hyperboles and words with marked meaning, further exaggerating the already intimidating threats:

Germany, Poland, Hungary, Czechia, Bulgaria and Romania reported **record high** daily numbers of cases on Wednesday...

Only 27% of children aged 5-11 received the first dose of the vaccine in the USA (...). The number of hospitalized children (...) **peaked** this month, reaching as many as 914, a **drastically** higher number...

The fast spreading of the omicron strain has led to **record** high numbers of infections and hospitalizations of children.

The situation described caused a change of policy in many European countries, including the re-introduction of mask mandates and lockdowns, even where the vaccination rates are high, to avoid a **disaster** in the winter months.

Scientists send out an **alarming warning**: 'Forget about COVID-19, something much worse is about to hit us...'

The dramatic tone is reinforced in these examples by using intensifiers (*already*, *record high*, *only*, *as many as*, *continues to*: *for two years **already***, ***as many as** 914*, ***even** where the vaccination rates are high*, ***drastically** higher number*, ***continues to** kill*, ***only** 27% of children aged 5-11 received the first dose of the vaccine*).

In addition to the highlighted words, the second group often uses the future tense, as well as negation forms and adverbs expressing frequency (*never*), to inspire as much fear as possible. Such a choice of language also creates the impression that the speaker is reliable and well-informed (Vuković, 2014b, 224), and the message sender consequently earns the citizens' trust:

> This virus is here **to stay, and we will never get rid of it**. (...) we had known that it is impossible to eliminate and that **we will all catch it**. All the measures we are taking **will not reduce the number of people who will get sick**, but will only possibly **spread it out a little bit** over a longer period, he said.

> **The death toll will rise**. (...) approximately 6% of the infected will **end up** in hospital.

> The virus **will not go away** just because countries have stopped monitoring it.

Both groups very often use common expressions like *caution*, *new wave*, *another increase in the number of cases*, *risk*, and *scenario*, subtly maintaining constant tension by alluding to a future development of events that will push the number of new cases up even more:

> European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety Stella Kyriakides called on 27 member states of the Union today to take advantage of the summer to **prepare for a new wave** of coronavirus infections in autumn and winter.

> ... **Cases are rising again,** (...) which poses an additional challenge for the governments struggling with the effects of the **earlier waves** of the pandemic...

> ... all countries are detecting these strains more or less now, which has led to increased **caution**.

> The Government has called on the citizens to exercise special **caution** ahead of the upcoming long weekend and the upcoming summer school break.

> Omicron **can cause a fifth wave**, and if it merges with the fourth wave, things will get difficult. Delta needs to be put under control.

Infectious disease specialist professor Darko Nožić, PhD (...) **warned** about the possibility of the coronavirus and the Western Nile virus merging, because they have a similar clinical picture.

However, the significance of the discovery that the **risk of reinfection** in case of omicron is 2.4 higher than in the **first wave** is emphasised.

We must **exercise caution**, but we must not panic.

We bring you the possible mandate **scenarios**

Intimidation is also present in a number of articles that find legitimisation in listing numbers and statistical data. Both groups use such devices:

The number of cases is increasing in Croatia again: it is **up by almost 200** compared to yesterday. **1858 patients** are in hospitals, of which **239 patients** are on respirators.

The situation is the worst in the Split-Dalmatia County, where there were as many as **1500 new cases to 2500 tests**.

It was mentioned that the number of cases is on the rise in Serbia for both viruses: the coronavirus alone was **confirmed in 5,896 people** in the last 24 hours, and **14 people died** from the effects of the virus.

The Western Nile virus was diagnosed **in 34 cases, of which 11 have a serious clinical picture**, and **three have died**.

After intimidating, both groups offer their solution to the problem, which the message senders believe is the only right one. The two groups offer different solutions, depending on the ideology they advocate. The first group sees the solution in the observation of the mandates, vaccination, and the introduction of COVID certificates, believing that the objective should be to encompass as many citizens as possible of all age groups, while the second group is opposed to the mandates and the introduction of the certificates, and suggest that vaccination should focus on vulnerable groups, while the others should have the ability to choose for themselves. Both groups use excessive lexicalisation and special phraseology to persuade the citizens to side with their positions, citing scientific studies to give legitimacy to their views. They mention the names of vaccine manufacturers (*Moderna, Pfizer*) and the forms of scientific evidence that they refer to:

research/study/paper (by Moderna, Pfizer), analysis, scientific truth, based in science, leading magazine, researchers, scientists, university:

Study of the Moderna vaccine (...) indicates that the protection lasts for up to four months after full **vaccination**. People still have **high antibody levels**, which decline very little over time, and this means that the **protection** could **last longer**, she said, adding that **Pfizer's study** showed that the **vaccine protects** from the mutant models too.

... commenting on the **studies published in the Science magazine**, which maintain that **immunity lasts** for at least eight months after **vaccination**.

Acquisition of natural **immunity** has become a popular excuse to **avoid vaccination** against COVID-19, but a new **study by the University of Pittsburgh** has showed that the **antibody level** varies significantly after **infection**, and is insufficient in many cases to **protect** a person from **reinfection**.

Lauc (...) said that 98% of all the deceased who tested **positive** were over 50 years of age, and that a number of **analyses** have shown that the mandates will end up killing more people in total than the **virus** in this pandemic.

In short, **immunity** acquired from **recovery** is very **long-lasting** and very strong, Lauc emphasises. Enough very firm evidence has been collected so far to allow us to consider this statement a **scientific truth**. Recommendations that persons who have **recovered** from COVID19 should get the vaccine are not **based in science**: they are nothing other than **vaccine** manufacturers' marketing messages.

Leading medical journal JAMA published a **paper by researchers** from the John Hopkins **University** yesterday, who measured the amount of **antibodies** in the blood of persons who **recovered** from COVID-19 for almost two years. Their conclusion is clear: after **recovery**, you develop a similar **amount of antibodies** as after vaccination, but after **recovery, the antibodies** remain in the body for almost two years (and probably longer, but the **study** lasted for two years), while the antibodies developed after **vaccination** remain in the body for mere months.

Professional medical terms (Štrkalj Despot 2020) have become common-place in everyday communication, including: *infection/virus, recovery/morbidity/recovered/infected, immunity, (long-term) protection (duration), (high/low) level (amount) of antibodies, vaccine/vaccination/vaccine avoidance, positive/negative, symptoms, respiratory disease, SARS-CoV-2, COVID-19, strain*.

> … all countries are detecting these **strains** more or less now, which has led to increased caution.

> Recommendation on **vaccination** against COVID-19 after **recovery**…

> … it seems that people who have **recovered from the coronavirus** have **longer-lasting immunity**…

> **Immunity** after **coronavirus infection** lasts for at least five months…

> … **immunity** after **vaccination** lasts for at least eight months.

> … **Recovery** "provided **more protection against infection** than vaccination", he said.

Characteristic phrases that have taken on new meanings in the context of the pandemic have also started to be widely used: *safety, wave, scenario, caution, infection, protection, going forward, new strain, mandates / easing of the mandates / precautions, isolation / self-isolation, recommendation*.

> In response to a question about the **easing of mandates** in Croatia, she said that it is now winter…

> A **new wave of coronavirus infections** is quickly spreading in Asia…

> Even though the **fourth wave of the pandemic** has still not ended, the emergence of the new omicron strain of the **virus** has led the experts to announce the possibility of another, **fifth, wave** as early as at the beginning of 2022.

> The **recommendation** is that each pregnant woman discusses with her gynaecologist…

It is also noticeable that professional and unintelligible (medical) terms are being thrown around, creating the impression of the speaker's prestige

and knowledge. Such speech implies that the authorities must be trusted uncritically. Advocates of both groups use such devices:

> **In vitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment** and pregnancy are conditions that may heighten **the risk of blood clotting disorders and aggravate hidden health issues.**

> ... the condition that makes the woman **predisposed to a viral infection**. (...) there is a **concern regarding the potential impact on foetal and neonatal outcomes** (...) attention should be paid to the **clinical manifestation of COVID-19 infection during pregnancy**, **type of delivery**, **neonatal outcome** and **risk of vertical transmission** of COVID-19 infection from the mother to the child.

To persuade message recipients that they need to get the vaccine, the use of modality, customary political phrases and ideologemes inspiring emotions and compassion is characteristic of the articles in the first analysed group. Their role is to inspire trust in the message sender, but also to induce a powerful sense of responsibility in the citizens. Such language constructs signal that the lives of their loved ones and all other citizens depend on the behaviours and actions of every individual, in addition to their own lives:

> We need **solidarity**...

> On behalf of all Croatian doctors, they once again call on **every Croatian citizen** to get the vaccine to **protect themselves and others**.

> To **minimize the damage**, the **number of new cases**, and, **unfortunately, deaths,** it is very important now to **be very responsible** and **observe the mandates** until as many people as possible **get the vaccine**...

> He added that the use of COVID certificates in the public and government sector was necessary to show the **pattern of behaviour** and the **government's responsibility**.

In their opinion, the solution they offer is the only right solution, and everyone should accept it without question. In this way, responsibility is indirectly, and sometimes also directly, placed on the citizens, who are seemingly given a choice, but in reality are clearly told what exactly they

should choose, or else they will be held directly culpable for a possible deterioration of the *epidemiological situation*:

> There were 6136 new cases in Croatia in the last 24 hours. The coronavirus test positivity rate is at about 40 percent. This shows that the epidemic is still raging, that the virus is spreading, and that **we as a society are not cautious enough, we are not observing the epidemiological mandates**, and we **have not reached** the vaccination rate that would curb the spread of the virus in some way.
>
> **The message to the citizens should be that they directly influence the general situation in hospitals and in the healthcare system with their decision regarding vaccination**, said the Minister of Health Vili Beroš...

The next statement also suggests that the citizens are responsible by implying that they have not observed the mandates that have been introduced, which resulted in an increased number of cases:

> Experts associate the substantial increase in Split with Advent and Christmas gatherings.

Emotions and fear are also roused indirectly by drawing attention to the problems faced by healthcare professionals, letting people know that the healthcare system is struggling in other segments as well, and that the citizens will not receive timely and high-quality healthcare as a result. Special phraseology is also used to accomplish this: *healthcare*, *healthcare system*, *healthcare professionals*, *staff shortage*, *pressure*, *burden*, *rise in cases*, *patients*, *hospital*, *hospitalization*:

> The combination of the **sudden rise in** COVID-19 **cases** and **hospitalizations**, the worst flu season in recent years, and the shortage of staff due to illness puts the **healthcare professionals** and the entire **healthcare system** under substantial **pressure**.

> Out of this number, 765 infected **patients are in hospitals**, which has caused longer waits and the **cancellation of surgeries**.

> "We have not had such a difficult time since the war. There is nothing harder than watching a man die..." (the statement of a healthcare professional)

> ... which could cause an extra **burden** for the already **struggling healthcare system**.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the already enormous costs of the **healthcare system** even **higher**.

The **hospital system** adapted to the epidemiological situation caused by the coronavirus, which meant **postponements** of non-urgent **examinations**, **tests** and **surgeries**, further **hindering access to healthcare** for many citizens.

In situations when the citizens voiced doubt, demanded answers to questions about the safety of the vaccines and about other options to determine the existence or lack of immunity, and questioned the purposefulness of the vaccination for persons recovered from COVID-19, facts were often chosen and shaped selectively, and illogical statements and empty words and implications were used to avoid speaking about the immunity acquired from recovery, and persuade the citizens to get the vaccine. The devices used for this purpose included aggregation of information (expanded code) about the topic message senders wanted to emphasise, and eliminating information (restricted code) about the topic they wanted to avoid discussing. This form of communication was used by representatives of the first group:

> ... he recently said that antibody testing was **not recommended** for general use. Persons who are prone to infections, or immuno-compromised in general, can learn **important information about the success of the first two doses** from such tests, he explained. (The statement illogically suggests that antibody testing is not recommended, even though it can provide important information, but only to persons who are prone to infections or immuno-compromised. The readers never got an answer to the question why this does not apply to the rest of the population, who are not *immunocompromised*.)

> The **third phase of clinical trials was not carried out** because it is really demanding. However, most international public health institutions and gynaecological associations, including the Croatian Institute of Public Health, **recommend that pregnant women can nevertheless get the vaccine**, because **no serious side-effects have been registered in most cases so far**. (The statement suggests that vaccination of pregnant women is recommended, even though all phases of clinical trials have not been carried out.)

> **Study of the Moderna vaccine** (...) indicates that the **protection lasts for up to four months** since full vaccination. People still have high antibody levels, which decline very little, which means **that the protection could last longer**, she said, adding that **Pfizer's research showed that the vaccine protects** from the mutant models too. She believes that it is difficult to estimate for how long the vaccine should protect us, **because there are not enough long-term studies. Moderna is now planning a 13-month monitoring programme that will include the occurrence of possible longer-lasting side effects and protection** (...) preliminary studies have led them to **expect the protection to last for longer than a year. Optimists expect it to last for up to several years**, she underlined. When asked how many persons became infected with the coronavirus twice, Markotić said that **all reports would have to be reviewed** to be able to answer this question, **and all reports have probably not even been released**.

This last statement is an obvious example of punctuation of convenient facts about the benefits of the vaccine and the long-term protection it provides in spite of the shortage of firm and specific facts (*not enough long-term studies*), while avoiding discussion about the duration of immunity from recovery (making it clear that all studies have *probably* not been released, but suggesting that even the reports that are available have not been reviewed). An impression is created of hesitancy among the experts to release the results of the studies on immunity from recovery. Such incomplete statements, formulated with obvious bias, have probably been the greatest contributing factor to the citizens' mistrust in experts and authorities. There are also meaningless statements whereby words are uttered without anything actually being said:

> Dragan Primorac, member of the Government's Science Council, says that **there is only one recommendation: to follow the recommendations of the relevant authorities**.

The pandemic has also generated plenty of neologisms, which are present in both groups of articles (*booster shot*, *headquarterocracy*, *pandemic marketing*, *vaxxers/antivaxxers*, *coronisation*). Their role was to surprise and to insinuate a closeness and intimacy with the audience (Sorning, 1989, 108, as cited in Vuković, 2014b, 218).

The President said that he does not support **antivaxxers**, and that he has demonstrated this by example.

We have had a **headquarterocracy** for a year and a half.

... because it turned out that the people who had their **booster shot** (...) experienced no specific side-effects because the immune response after the **booster shot**...

... some of these test results merely indicate the presence of the virus in the person's nose, which can be due to **coronisation**...

... should not allow the people who run it to fall into the network of **pandemic marketing**.

... **antivaxxer** disinformation contributes to the risk.

There are also subtle (but also direct) references to the responsibility of institutions:

Given the **influence that bishops and priests have on the citizens, I'm sorry that they missed the opportunity** to underline the importance of vaccination as an important element in the fight against the virus (...) the holidays are coming, and **I trust that they will have the opportunity to call on their congregation** to observe the mandates, and protect their own health and the health of the nation. **I believe that they will show maturity and awareness in solving problems going forward** – he added.

This is an example of several manipulation techniques whose real purpose is to indirectly accuse the institution of not doing what it should have (*I'm sorry that they missed the opportunity*). The use of the verb *believe* is actually a substitute for the verb *expect*, and the sentence *I believe that they will show maturity and awareness in solving problems going forward* is actually a veiled accusation, implying that they should have already done so.

A similar method of accusing an institution and holding it liable is visible in the following example in the second group of analysed articles:

A **serious institution** such as the Medical Chamber **should take a comprehensive view of the problem**, and should not allow the people who run it to fall into the network of pandemic marketing. New findings clearly indicate that vaccinated healthcare professionals pose the greatest risk of bringing the virus into hospitals at

the moment. **I do not know why the Chamber has not drawn attention** to these two very serious, and yet **very easily remedied problems**, Lauc said.

This statement actually tells us that the Medical Chamber is not a serious institution, because it does not take a comprehensive view of the problem, and because it lets people fall into the network of pandemic marketing. The institution has also failed to solve the problem, even though it is very easily remedied (the message sender sees the problem, and has the solution).

Seeking to discredit those who do not share their views, message senders pander to those who they assume could be persuaded to share their views, while implying that the other camp does not have the described qualities, even though they should. Experts whose statements belong to the second group of articles use such devices:

> Secondary school and university students are the population that **thinks the most**, learns, and **strives to understand the world around them**. **It's a great pleasure to work with smart students**, and this is one of the rare reasons why I'm still at the university... (...) I take the greatest **pride** in the fact that our students, even though most of them have been vaccinated and have COVID certificates, overwhelmingly reject the idea that COVID certificates should be mandatory for everyone", Lauc wrote on Facebook.

This statement also implies that those who do not share the author's views have the opposite characteristics of those described: that is to say, they trust the authorities blindly and do not think, or *strive to understand the world around them*, which also downgrades anyone who holds a different opinion.

Furthermore, attempts to persuade others to side with the message senders' views often come down to positive presentations of oneself, using the strategies of legitimization (citing scientific studies, statistics and the international community) and delegitimization (negative presentation of others through direct insults, discrediting one's opponents, using words with negative connotations and irony) at the same time (see Vuković, 2014b: 237-238). Such examples are found in both groups of articles:

> If a member of the Government's Science Council says that the vaccination of persons under 50 years of age makes no significant

contribution to the response to the pandemic, I must publicly point out that more than 6,000 patients under 50 years of age have been treated for COVID-19 at Croatian hospitals. The number equals the capacity of the Dubrava Hospital times ten: it is as if you filled this hospital ten times over, Luetić said. (...) We have about 200 people in this age group who have died. This is four buses full of people whose vaccination is, according to Professor Lauc, not important for the pandemic, he added. Luetić also said that Lauc is not a doctor, that he lacks the required education, and that he will, in the long run, bear no responsibility whatsoever for the 200 people who died, or the 6,000 who were hospitalized."

Regrettably, Dr Luetić is taking advantage of his function to manipulate the public and the Parliamentary Committee on Health. It is an indisputable fact that 98% of all fatalities who tested positive for SARS-CoV-2 were older than 50. Vaccination, unfortunately, provides very little protection against infection, and vaccination of the younger population will therefore not protect the older population in any way. It will influence the pandemic only insofar as the persons who have had the vaccine will have milder symptoms. Since 50% of persons under 50 years of age in Croatia have already been protected by vaccination or recovery, even if we vaccinated 100% of persons under 50 years of age, it could reduce the number of deaths by 0.5–0.7% at most, Lauc retorted.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the analysis is that the articles about the coronavirus, published on the highest-readership Croatian web portals, were characterised by language patterns similar to those used in political discourse. The group that accentuates the danger of COVID-19 and advocates unconditional vaccination, and the group that opposes the mandates and the vaccination, equally use manipulative linguistic procedures to convince others of their own ideological principles. Since the representatives of the first group were an overwhelming majority in the Croatian media during the pandemic, their statements and reflections are also much more imaginative in their choice of linguistic structures as persuasion and

manipulation devices. They use various methods for downgrading others and holding them liable, emphasising only convenient facts and eliminating inconvenient ones, using imprecise words, intimidating their audience and purposefully rousing strong emotions to gain the trust of their audience, which should ultimately follow their instructions. They also often cite the global community and science as the authorities that should be trusted and followed unconditionally. The second group for the most part uses excessive lexicalization, intimidation, denigration, blame laying, and references to reason and scientific research that, according to their claims, the Croatian experts have chosen to ignore, which makes them directly responsible for the high number of cases. The first group sees anyone who opposes vaccination and the mandates as their adversaries, which includes citizens and experts alike, while the second group criticises only the representatives of the Headquarters and the Government (who decide about the mandates), portraying the citizens as the victims of their manipulation and "pandemic marketing". The first group for the most part uses more subtle structures to present their ideological principles, implying certain condescending attitudes, while the other group openly denounces the culprits, often aggressively and directly.

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