

**The Language of (Perma)Crisis:
Discourses and Politics of the 'New Normal'**

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Institute of Culture and Memory Studies, ZRC SAZU

The notion of crisis has emerged as a defining concept of global reality, but the language surrounding it is radically changing at the moment. While crisis was traditionally used to denote moments of major social and political transformation, the word is increasingly taking on a meaning of “a state of greater or lesser permanence” (Krzyzanowski et al. 2023). Marked by a global pandemic, a longstanding climate crisis, and the eruption of new waves of conflict, the third decade of the 21st indeed seems to be ushering in a new language of *permacrisis* that is clearly never just about naming. The rhetoric of a permanent ‘new normal’ has by now proven to carry much potential to reinforce inequality and exclusion. The open-ended semantics of crisis are a worrying echo of their historical use to strengthen politics of violence and even genocide as unavoidable (Pollack 2020). Their dynamics, nevertheless, are far from predictable, as felt in the ongoing tug-of-war over the meanings of words like ‘freedom’, ‘solidarity’, ‘(dis)information or ‘truth’.

This conference explores varied aspects of language that construct the contexts of crisis in the public realm. Within a broadly sociolinguistic and critical discourse perspective, it will examine different forms of crisis discourse, with a particular interest in representations of collectivity, division and solidarity. Bringing together scholars from a range of linguistic and geopolitical contexts, we hope to stimulate conversations about the role of language – as well as language scholars and academia – for all the power to perpetuate polarization, but also for the potential to imagine alternatives beyond normalizing the global systemic collapse as the only possibility for the future.

ABSTRACTS

Metaphorical potentials and the notion of *crisis* in Slovenian parliamentary discourse

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This talk explores the conceptualization of the word »kriza« (»crisis«) through an examination of metaphorical collocations in Slovene parliamentary debates, using the corpus of Slovenian Parliamentary Debates ParlaMint 2.1 (Erjavec et al. 2021). Building on previous research on metaphorical collocations (Deignan 2005; Philipp 2011; Patekar 2022), we identify and analyse collocations with »kriza« by employing the SketchEngine tool (Kilgariff et al. 2010) and its WordSketch function, alongside the MIPVU procedure (Steen et al. 2010) to identify the metaphorical components of these collocations.

The analysis focuses on the metaphorical transfer of features from the source domain to the target domain, revealing how selective transfer shapes different conceptualizations of crises. The identified metaphorical collocations such as *Adjective + Noun* (*deep crisis*, *heavy crisis*), *Verb + Noun* (*weather the crisis*, *fight crisis*); *Noun + Noun(gen)* (*the burden of crisis*, *healing of crisis*) suggest that crises in parliamentary debates are often conceptualized as tangible, physical entities or forces that act upon people or situations, emphasizing their intensity, agency, and the need to confront, endure, or overcome them. Adjectives describing physical dimensions or intensity imply that a crisis can be measured, felt, or have weight and depth meaning that crises can be more or less severe based on their physical characteristics. Verbs in collocations suggest that the crisis is a challenge or opponent to be fought, overcome, or dealt with in an active manner or that crisis is an active agent or force capable of inflicting harm or pressure. Several conceptual metaphors can be derived from the examples CRISIS IS A PHYSICAL OBJECT (e.g., *heavy*, *deep crisis*), CRISIS IS AN OPPONENT (e.g. *fight crisis*), CRISIS IS A DANGEROUS SUBSTANCE (e.g. *eruption of crisis*), CRISIS IS A FORCE (e.g. *the crisis has driven us*), CRISIS IS A DISEASE (e.g. *healing of crisis*) etc. Given the role of parliamentary debates in disseminating information through the media, understanding these conceptualizations is crucial to understanding how crises are framed in public discourse.

“It was the winter of despair”: War narratives, collective memory and the media framing of the 2020 Petrinja earthquake in Croatia

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On December 29, 2020, central Croatia was hit by a 6.2 magnitude earthquake, one of the most devastating natural disasters in Croatia's recent history. The earthquake, which had its epicentre in the town of Petrinja, resulted in the death of seven people, while Petrinja and other region's towns and villages were almost completely destroyed. This natural disaster happened during another crisis situation, Covid-19 pandemic that had started earlier that year, causing the sentiment of absolute catastrophe in the country.

The rich media coverage of these events allows for in-depth examination of media discourses and narratives about the crisis caused by the 2020 earthquake(s). The aim of this paper is to examine how discourses about the 2020 crisis situation intersect with Croatia's recent history and collective memory of the 1990s war. The paper analyses the discursive media framing of the natural disaster (earthquake) in relation to discourses and narratives about Croatia's 1991-1995 War for Independence, with a particular focus on the local population's experience of destruction, displacement, loss and marginalisation. The paper pays particular attention to the extent to which debates about destroyed houses that collapsed due to the earthquake were informed by debates about post-war reconstruction of the affected area. The main research questions are: what were the dominant media narratives about the earthquake and how did these narratives include memories of Croatia's 1990s war? In what way were memories of the 1990s war mobilised by different actors in the post-disaster period? How was the Croatian nation conceptualised in discourses about the 2020 earthquake?

Tigers, speeding trains and snowballs – explaining complex scientific concepts during the Covid-19 pandemic

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The lack of knowledge and understanding of the coronavirus transmission mechanisms marked the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. Besides trying to control the virus spread, there was one more challenge to address – the infodemic, which significantly affected people's willingness to comply with the measures and restrictions. Crisis communication thus became an important factor in coping with the uncertainty, which sparked varying discursive strategies (Charteris-Black 2021, Semino 2021, Štrkalj Despot & Ostroški Anić 2021, Wodak 2021). The need to effectively and persuasively explain complex scientific concepts resulted in the use of creative analogies and figurative language.

This paper examines the specific types of figurative expressions and analogies used by scientists and experts in the Croatian media to describe and simplify epidemiological concepts during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research combines a cognitive linguistics approach and critical discourse analysis to investigate a corpus of 18 newspaper articles, columns, and interviews published in two major Croatian newspapers from March to December 2020. The examples include referring to the virus as a *tiger on the loose* and a *reckless driver*, while controlling the spread was described as *putting obstacles to a speeding train* or a *giant snowball*. The paper attempts to determine: the types of figurative expressions used to explain epidemiological concepts, cognitive mechanisms that underlie these expressions and their role in media discourse. The results suggest that besides the established figurative expressions, some novel creative analogies and metaphors were used with different intentions, from explaining the transmission to conveying unpredictability and motivating behaviour change.

Building the tweets dataset TCMeta: A look at Covid-19 metaphors in citizens' social media posts

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To make sense of and talk about the new reality of the pandemic, politicians, media outlets as well as the general public have frequently resorted to metaphorical language. To investigate the discourse of ordinary citizens, user communication from social media is a distinct and valuable source of linguistic analysis. However, this translates to very large datasets which are impossible to manually annotate for linguistic phenomena such as metaphors within a reasonable time. While automatic methods for metaphor detection exist, less-resourced languages like Slovene often suffer from a lack of resources and tools. To bridge this gap and to explore and compare the public's metaphorical conceptualization of the pandemic in different countries, we employ a semi-automatic lexical-based approach to build TCMeta (Brglez et al. 2024), a multilingual dataset of Covid-related tweets annotated for relation-level metaphors. We assemble Covid-related tweets in English and Slovene and filter them for potential metaphors from four domains: WAR, STORM, TSUNAMI and MONSTER. Among those, WAR metaphors were observed to dominate in both languages, however, we observe differences in evoking specific frames. The approach also allowed us to discover other interesting metaphors, stemming from the domains of JOURNEY, GAME, EXPERIMENT, and the SUPERNATURAL. Moreover, we also highlight the issues related to the preprocessing of tweets featuring non-standard language use and other discourse markers, and the enduring need for manual annotation incorporating the wider context and multiple modalities.

Ecological activism and cultural heritage narratives in Serbia: Managing ecological crisis through a bureaucratic discourse

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All major global institutions have adopted a green agenda, and UNESCO is no exception. Within its bureaucratic discourse, one of the most important aspects of addressing the ecological crisis is the safeguarding of elements of intangible cultural heritage based on local knowledge about the sustainable development of the environment. In my talk, I will focus on the part of my research that deals with the effects of bureaucratizing conversations about issues that can lead to conflict in times of crisis, focusing on recent environmental and activist mobilizations in Serbia.

Using the concept of sustainable development, I will present an example of a multi-year study on cultural heritage in the Western Balkans, and its entanglings with local and global discourses surrounding ecological controversies. Specifically, I will shed comparative light on the perception of ecological crises and the language surrounding it (1) within communities at risk in the Jadar region in Serbia, particularly about their use of cultural heritage narratives and activist mobilization, and (2) formal ICH safeguarding discourse of the state and UNESCO. The presentation considers the question of whether it is possible to change reality by giving conversations about sensitive issues a bureaucratic framework. While there is a certain power of bureaucratic discourse in preventing identity-based conflict, can changing the way we talk about heritage, nation, territory, ownership etc. help change mindsets to better address the permanent and amplifying environmental crisis?

Looking back into the future: Sociological reflections on crisis before and after the end of state socialism in Romania

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The paper presents work-in-progress on the contribution of sociologists at the articulation of the analytical language on the state socialist period and the transition from socialism in Romania. Specifically, it looks at the ways in which the concept of crisis was used before and after 1989 in the main sociological journals of the time: *Viitorul social* (in the late 1970s and 1980s); *Sociologie Românească* and *Revista Română de sociologie* (1990s and early 2000s). The 1980s were a period of extreme austerity in Romania, whereas the social costs of transition became increasingly high from around the mid-1990s. I ask how these were reflected in expert discourse on crisis, considering the intertwined temporalities of crisis discourse: from the constraints on reflecting the present in the late socialist period, to the retrospective analysis of the recent past in the 1990s, the contemporaneous reflection on the present of transition, and the projections about the future before and after the end of socialism.

Running a humanitarian marathon: Metaphors used in Romanian investigative media reports on the Ukrainian refugee crisis

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The 2022 Ukrainian refugee exodus has put Romania on the map of host countries for refugees and, at the same time, it has tested the limits of Romania's (and Romanians') solidarity with and responsibility for hosting forcibly displaced people. This study seeks to examine how metaphors were used in Romanian investigative journalism reports to represent the Ukrainian war refugees and the solidarity with them. The study is part of a wider research project aimed at investigating the extent to which the volunteerism deployed by Romanian citizens and civil society organizations supports depoliticization of humanitarianism.

Drawing on previous work on metaphors of migration (Taylor, 2021; Strom & Alcock, 2027), this study uses a discourse-led approach to metaphor analysis (Cameron et al., 2009) to ask: a) what source domains are predominantly used in these reports to depict the refugees and Romanians' volunteerism; and b) to what extent the metaphors used frame refugees and humanitarianism positively or negatively. Findings show that the historically rooted and conventional water metaphors used to describe migration are predominant in the analyzed corpus. Refugees are metaphorically depicted as buoy-people, travelers, objects, while metaphorical expressions from the source domains of war, race, job, game, arithmetic are used to convey solidarity with the war-displaced Ukrainians. A closer look at the identified metaphors revealed that the positive evaluations they communicate regarding both refugees and the volunteering efforts of Romanians outweighed the negative frames, which seems to contrast with much of the previous research on metaphors of migration in the media.

Gender-sensitive language, linguistic ‘truths’ and anti-gender mobilizations in times of ‘gender crisis’ in Serbia

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Until the adoption of the Law on Gender Equality (2021) (LGE), gender-sensitive language was primarily the subject of scholarly works in the field of feminist linguistics and feminist activism in Serbia and the broader region, but it did not attract the attention of the general public. Public debates about its use emerged on the eve of the LGE in Serbia, and intensified especially after its adoption. LGE foresaw that the provisions on gender-sensitive language will enter into force three years after the adoption of the law - on June 1, 2024. In response to this, discussions about gender-sensitive language have become increasingly more inflamed and the public has become strongly polarized, with the involvement of powerful actors from the cultural, social and political life of Serbia. Public opposition to gender-sensitive language led to a broader anti-gender mobilization of various social actors who began to demand not only the abandonment of gender-sensitive language but also the overthrow of LGE. Eventually, the Constitutional Court in Serbia issued a decision on June 27 suspending the adoption of acts on the basis of the Law on Gender Equality until the completion of the constitutionality assessment procedure. The aim of the paper is to present the main ongoing public debates and statements and to identify the key actors. Subsequently, we analyze the themes and arguments that make up the ideological discourse against gender-sensitive language in the public sphere, including the scientific claims to linguistic ‘truth’ and ‘accuracy’, and wider social arguments of ‘gender crisis’ and threat. The paper uses a critical discourse analysis that aims to provide insight into how the arguments are interconnected and contextualized, and how they are connected to broader anti-gender ideological discourses, anti-gender mobilizations and contemporary discourses of crisis.

"The battle on the frontline": Violence against healthcare workers in the era of Covid-19

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In the media and on social networks during the pandemic, healthcare workers were portrayed as both heroes and villains, reflecting the measures taken by the government and the impact of the pandemic on society. The exceptional circumstances often led to hostility towards healthcare workers, which also included violent behaviour such as verbal abuse, harassment, physical attacks and damage to property. The presentation discusses the public discourse on healthcare workers in Slovenia during the Covid-19 pandemic; by analysing data from Slovenia and other countries, the presentation sheds light on the complex dynamics between medicine and society during Covid-19.

The study relies on interrelating methodological steps. The first involves the observation and documentation of media publications and posts on social networks from January 2020 to May 2023, focussing on communication in Facebook groups related to healthcare, Covid-19 and the anti-mask/anti-vaccination movement. The departing aim was to understand the psychological background of threats and insults against healthcare workers and to document violent events. The second step involved the open (free) and relational (selective) coding of violent incidents in the observed public communication using the criteria of the WHO typology on types of violence in healthcare (2020) and anthropological findings on the impact of militant language in public communication. Finally, content analysis was performed of discourse in Facebook groups such as Slovenian hospitals, university clinical centers, health centres, research and educational institutions, nursing homes, government pages on Covid-19, Covid-19 trackers, medical professional associations, anti-mask and anti-vaccination groups, advocacy groups, support groups for people during the epidemic, and other groups. The material was finally further interpreted.

The results indicate that verbal and psychological violence against healthcare workers has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. This

violence included various *ad hominem* insults, such as derogatory comparisons to animals, also directed at people who followed the recommendations, comments about the appearance of healthcare workers, mostly in relation to women, public ridicule and calls for lynching. Examples of physical violence included harassment at vaccination sites, stalking of exposed doctors, violent attempts to break into hospitals, and damage to the property of some doctors or health facilities. During the epidemic, healthcare workers were confronted with changing public attitudes that went from initial admiration to contempt and verbal and physical attacks resulting from the restriction of freedoms, conspiracy theories and lack of trust in medicine. Public discourse was flooded with various discourses rooted in militant language, further fuelling the anger of a section of the public. Mistrust in medicine and disrespectful attitudes continued into the post-epidemic period.

Persuasion in confusion: Science communication and pandemic vaccine discourse from a critical perspective

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Tracing the (dis)continuities of scientific and medical communication during the Covid-19 pandemic, this research deconstructs the discourse of crisis revealing a consistent miscommunication grounded in relations of power and growing distrust in authority . Specifically, crossing Critical Discourse Analysis and critical rhetoric, this paper analyzes public and institutional communication about the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. The application of two complementary theoretical frameworks reveals discourse negotiation and naturalization of power and ideology in a persuasive discursive practice of issuing successive contradictory messages regarding the vaccine's safety. The analysis demonstrates that transparent opposite social positions in terms of power distribution during the COVID-19 pandemic, new in contemporary democratic societies, call for a critical approach and engagement regarding science-related public narratives. Although the world has changed in its digital acceleration, the underlying critical turn of the 20th century remains relevant in the deconstruction of crisis communication characterized by change and confusion as essential ingredients of the “new normal”.

Framing effects of metaphor in crisis discourse and socio-cultural situatedness: A view from psycholinguistics

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In crisis discourse, metaphors may be used to impose a frame of interpretation, hiding some aspects of reality and highlighting others (Huang 2020). Using alternative metaphorical frames may lead to assessing the crisis differently. A case in point are the framing effects of the ego- vs. time-moving metaphor (we are approaching climate catastrophe vs. climate catastrophe is approaching) on the feeling of urgency and willingness to act with regard to climate change. Time-moving metaphors lead participants to assess the urgency and perceived risk of climate change as higher than ego-moving metaphors (Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau 2017). However, a recent study (Stanojević, Tonković, and Peti-Stantić 2023) has not been able to replicate the framing effect, hypothesizing that framing effects do not work across the board, but that they vary according to factors like participant opinions, the topic, etc.

In this paper, we discuss how constructional characteristics of metaphor and their diachronic distribution may play into this complex picture. More specifically, we look into ego- and time-moving metaphors with the expressions climate crisis, climate catastrophe, and climate disaster in the enTenTen21 and the time-stamped English Trends corpus available via Sketch Engine. Preliminary results suggest that these metaphors are not very frequent overall and that ego-moving metaphors greatly outnumber time-moving metaphors. The metaphors differ in what aspects of the crisis they usually refer to. Moreover, some of the metaphors may be highly evaluative or cooccur with evaluative elements (sleepwalking into a climate disaster; headed for unmitigated climate disaster). A diachronic analysis shows that climate change discussions (and, consequently, its metaphors) spike around the UN climate change conferences. Therefore, investigations of metaphor effects (at least) in the areas related to crisis discourse should take to heart the socio-cultural situatedness of crises, well known from crisis scholarship (e.g., De Rycker and Mohd Don 2013, 10).

Climate crisis in Croatian online news media: Metaphor, agency and news values

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The empirical material analyzed for this talk consists of approximately 100 multimodal texts from various Croatian online media sources (e.g., online editions of weekly and daily newspapers, online news portals). The texts, dating from 2020 to 2024, were collected using Google advanced searches with the Croatian equivalent of the keyword “climate crisis.”

We focus on the “anatomy” of the concept of the climate crisis in media representations, starting with its formal features: how prominent it is (its position in the text) and which related concepts it is linked to. Next, we analyze explicit definitions of the concept and how its characteristics are described. We then explore what the concept reveals or conceals in terms of agency and the representation of social actors, as well as how the climate crisis is metaphorically represented and how this representation relates to agency. For the purpose of this talk, the analysis of metaphorical representation is confined to the micro-contexts in which the term climate crisis appears. We also examine how metaphorical representations in micro-contexts construct news values by foregrounding certain aspects of the news while backgrounding others.

The theoretical approaches we draw on include discursive approaches to metaphor (Semino 2008), critical discourse analysis (van Leeuwen 2008), and discursive news values analysis (Bednarek and Caple 2017).

Framing energy transition as a socioeconomic threat: Tracing the social media discourses in central and eastern Europe

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One of the most pressing crises of our time, global warming, highlights the urgent need for energy transition, including the phasing out of fossil fuels. Politically, this transition is guided by frameworks such as the Green Deal, yet at the national level, stances on energy issues remain divergent. These differences create opportunity structures that energy companies exploit to shape public opinion and indirectly influence political decision-makers to maintain their operations.

The ongoing debate surrounding the lignite mine in Turow, located on the Polish-Czech border, offers a compelling case study of how such dynamics unfold. Using a feature-based pragmatic analysis, our study examines the discourse on Twitter regarding the Turow controversy. We found that the debate is framed as a political problem in the Polish and Czech Twitterspheres, while English-language social media discourse adopts a transnational environmental perspective, largely detached from the sentiments in the national discourses (Berrocal & Thielemann, 2024). This discourse divergence provides fertile ground for energy companies to intervene. In this case, the Polish energy company operating the Turow mine launched a public campaign that strategically exploited national sentiments. By framing the energy transition as a socio-economic threat, the strategic communication resonated with Poland's national stance on coal (Thielemann & Berrocal, 2023). This communicative strategy influenced public opinion and sought to exert indirect pressure on political decision-making processes. Our research contributes to the broader discussion on how national and transnational discourses on energy transition interact and how energy companies leverage these discourses to sustain their operations amidst growing calls for decarbonization (see also Thielemann & Savych, under review).

‘Too difficult for you to process’: Metapragmatics in Austrian political discourse during permacrisis

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As the implicit social contract between experts, publics, and states dissolves, and expert authority undergoes profound change (Reed & Reed 2022), the legitimacy of presenting arguments and participating in political discourse becomes increasingly contested. This study explores how metapragmatic devices (Hübler & Bublitz 2007) are used to evaluate the appropriateness of contributions to digitally enabled public discourse. Because metapragmatic devices construct norms of meaning-making, their analysis sheds light on beliefs and practices that legitimize discursive authority (Verschueren 2000).

The data for this study comprise a corpus of informal online discussions about televised interviews with the top five candidates for the 2024 Austrian parliamentary elections. In these digital discourse contexts, the boundaries between interaction and external discourse blur (Dynel 2023), potentially involving candidates and interviewers themselves. For instance, framing a candidate’s speech as too complex for the interlocutor to understand can challenge the latter’s authority to express their opinion about it while commenting on the candidate’s competence.

To identify patterns in metapragmatic strategies, the data were coded for explicit metapragmatic comments, the interactions they referred to, and the categories mobilized (e.g., identity-related, epistemic). These categories were then analyzed quantitatively to determine if discourse is framed in patterned ways. The results indicate systematic distortions in communication (Habermas 1981), shedding light on the dynamics of shifting political discourse, particularly in light of rising right-wing tendencies in Europe.

The long life of the Yugoslav crisis discourse

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In the mid-1980s, Slovenia, as part of Yugoslavia, was confronted with a growing economic and social crisis that led to a significant decline in living standards. This paper examines how the crisis discourse, which was initially downplayed by the Yugoslav authorities, moved to the centre of public and political debate in the mid-1980s. In particular, it examines the role of Slovenian opposition intellectuals known as the "Nova revija" circle, who used the crisis discourse to shape their political agenda against the communist regime. In November 1985, the leaders of Nova Revija initiated a survey on the causes of the Yugoslav crisis and invited contributions from a wide range of intellectuals. This survey not only reflected the perspectives of these intellectuals, but also revealed the different views on the national question, the socio-economic system and the nature of the crisis itself. Analysing these responses reveals the complex, multidimensional nature of the crisis discourse and its impact on political thinking in Slovenia and Yugoslavia. The paper places the crisis discourse in a broader historical and political context, compares it with other intellectual movements in East-Central Europe and analyses its long-term influence on Slovenian politics. The study concludes that the crisis discourse, originally directed against the Yugoslav communist regime, evolved over time, influencing political developments after Yugoslavia and persisting in Slovenian public life until it finally merged with broader European populist discourses in the 21st century.

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