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UNMASKING THE DISCOURSE: LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE MEANINGS OF THE MASK IN CROATIAN MEDIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

1. INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus pandemic has brought about numerous changes affecting almost every aspect of our daily lives, including the way we communicate. New guidelines for social distancing and using personal protection equipment, such as a mask, have also been reflected in the language we use. Most governments worldwide strongly advocated wearing masks, which sparked numerous debates and controversies over their real and perceived effectiveness. During the pandemic, the media also played an important role in shaping people's perceptions of masks, portraying them either as effective instruments for protection, an uncomfortable muzzle blocking one's freedom, or even as a disguise used for promoting a hidden agenda.

This paper aims to shed light on the linguistic aspects of mask-wearing, as well as on the different attitudes and debates around it. It focuses on the literal and figurative meanings of the word *mask* in the Croatian media

discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. The selected expressions were also analysed for any underlying conceptual mechanisms using the framework of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the Conceptual Metonymy Theory. Furthermore, to understand the role of these expressions in shaping the public discourse and perceptions regarding mask-wearing during the pandemic, we applied the Critical Discourse Analysis and analysed these expressions and the potential underlying ideologies. The paper presents an attempt to highlight the importance of figurative language use in times of the crisis and how it may impact public attitudes and behaviors around health issues.

This paper makes several novel contributions to the field of crisis and pandemic discourse analysis. Firstly, while numerous studies have examined coronavirus metaphors in English, this is the first broad analysis of mask-related expressions in the Croatian media discourse. In general, pandemic metaphors have been extensively studied, so we specifically examine how one of the debated measures, mask-wearing, was conceptualised during the coronavirus crisis. The analysis of literal and figurative meanings indicates that media discourse surrounding masks reflects broader societal divides that can be shaped into political and ideological issues through language.

2. MEDIA DISCOURSE DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Recognising the significant impact of the media discourse, linguists worldwide have examined how language and metaphors were employed in the media representations of the pandemic. The predominant depiction of the pandemic revolved around the concept of warfare, especially at the beginning when individuals were asked to take collective action and adhere to the recently implemented measures (Benziman 2020, Gillis 2020, Musolff 2022). Martinez-Brawley and Gualda (2020) confirm that politicians were actively using war metaphors, but as the pandemic progressed, the language related to solidarity, discipline and social responsibility became more prominent.

One of the significant endeavors on the international level was the #ReframeCovid initiative started by a group of linguists (Olza et al. 2021) from Spain and the UK in March 2020. This initiative was first launched on Twitter with the hashtag *ReframeCovid* and it attempted to critically examine the

figurative language related to the WAR frame, which dominated the media discourse at the beginning of the pandemic and to offer alternative ways of conceptualising and framing the pandemic. This collaborative multilingual collection is non-prescriptive and contains multimodal metaphors that describe the virus and the measures taken in response. The majority of the documented figurative expressions reveal that the pandemic was described as a journey, a sports competition, a natural disaster, a person or an animal. Other studies have also confirmed that the pandemic was often conceptualised as a natural disaster, with the virus being personified in different ways.

Besides the immediate effects of the virus, one of the highly debated topics was the use of masks as a protective measure. Social interaction changed drastically during the pandemic and the issue of wearing or not wearing a mask became a contentious subject of the discourse. Leone (2020: 59) argues that medical masks in public spaces express unclear functional messages. The meaning can be interpreted in three different communicative ways: what an individual means by wearing a mask; what is meant by people when one wears it; what is meant by the mask itself. The ambiguity surrounding the semiotics of mask-wearing is supported by Geeraerts (2022) as he considers both the perspectives of individuals wearing masks and those interpreting them. He suggested six interpretative configurations with regard to the representative speech acts: assertion, mistake, agreement, disagreement, irony and deception. The non-verbal aspect of mask-wearing was also studied by Charteris-Black (2021: 228), who explored the symbolic meanings of masks as one of the representative visual metonyms of the pandemic. He concluded that the metonymic meaning of the *mask* is based on the CAUSE FOR EFFECT metonymy, so the act of wearing a mask properly symbolises both one's personal safety and the protection of others. But besides its metonymic meaning, the use of masks during the pandemic also took on a fully ideological and metaphorical meaning, dividing the society into "maskers" and "anti-maskers". Those who were against the mask mandate created public signs and memes that showed masks as muzzles, symbolising oppression and the infringement of personal freedoms. Since masks cover the mouth, *muzzling* people like aggressive animals can be perceived as an attempt to silence the public (Mundt and Polzenhagen 2022).

We can conclude that the hybrid nature of masks, from hiding one's identity to protecting and silencing during the coronavirus pandemic, has led to a complex web of metaphorical meanings and interpretations, which will be more thoroughly discussed in the next sections.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of the paper is to examine literal and figurative expressions with the word *mask* in the Croatian media discourse and to explore their implications for public attitudes and behaviors related to mask-wearing during the pandemic. The research questions are the following: 1. What are the literal and figurative meanings associated with expressions containing the word *mask* during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Croatian media discourse? 2. Are these expressions based on any conceptual mechanism and which? 3. How do these expressions contribute to shaping the public discourse and perceptions regarding mask-wearing during the pandemic?

In order to answer these questions, a corpus-based analysis using Sketch Engine was carried out and a qualitative one afterwards. The corpus comprises newspaper articles published in the online editions of Jutarnji list and Večernji list, the two most widely read daily newspapers in Croatia. The articles included in the corpus covered topics related to COVID-19 and were published between March 1st, 2020 and March 1st, 2021. The corpus contains 1.378.976 words and is available upon request. The first step was to query the corpus for the word *mask* or its equivalents, such as *muzzle*. After that, the concordances and word samples were manually analysed for their literal and figurative meanings. The criteria for establishing figurative use are based on the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), a method for determining metaphorically used words in discourse (Pragglejaz Group 2007). The four basic steps of this method include reading the entire text, determining lexical units, determining the meaning of every lexical unit in the observed context and marking the ones as metaphorical if their contextual meaning differs from their basic meaning. The figurative expressions were also analysed for any underlying conceptual mechanisms using the framework of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the Conceptual Metonymy Theory developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). In order to identify conceptual metaphors and metonymies on which the figurative expressions are based, this part of the analysis relied on two metaphor repositories MetaNet(www 1) and MetaNet.HR(www 2). These repositories contain a list of conceptual metaphors and metonymies as well as semantic frames.

Furthermore, to understand the role of these expressions in shaping the public discourse and perceptions regarding mask-wearing during the

pandemic, we applied the Critical Discourse Analysis to comprehensively examine these expressions and their underlying ideologies. We relied on Fairclough's (1989, 1995: 74) interdisciplinary approach consisting of three dimensions: a text, discursive and social practice. The critical discourse analysis should include all three elements starting with text analysis, which examines the formal linguistic properties of the text. The next step is the interpretation which takes into account the relationship between the text and interaction. The final step is focused on the social context influencing the creation of the text and the interpretation of the social effects of that text. The final part of the analysis attempts to discover whether the discourse has any ideological features and how it reflects power relations in society.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Protection of oneself and of others was the main purpose of wearing a mask during the pandemic. A covered mouth metonymically represented the control of infection, but also certain metaphorical meanings emerged that were not explicitly related to health or safety (Charteris-Black 2021). Wearing a mask could be seen as an act of loyalty and support for the government and the measures, while on the other hand, those who refused to wear it, perceived it as a symbol of resistance against the government control and an assertion of personal freedom (Charteris-Black 2021: 229). Thus, taking the stand as "masker" or "anti-masker" has become a way for individuals to align themselves with a particular political ideology and assert their beliefs about personal autonomy. This was also reflected in the language used to describe mask mandate policies, with supporters referring to them as responsible and necessary measures, while critics often labeled them as violations of individual liberties calling them *muzzles*.

The analysis revealed that the word *mask* was primarily used in its literal meaning, as a protective measure against the spread of pathogens. The word *mask* was recorded 1.579 times in the dataset, with multiple interpretations and connotations attached to it. The literal meaning of *mask* occurred most frequently in collocations such as *nositi masku* (*wear a mask*) and *nošenje maske* (*mask wearing*) (N=680), followed by *zaštitna maska* (*a protective mask*) (N=148) and *staviti masku* (*put on a mask*) (N=22). These phrases illustrate the practical use of masks as a means to mitigate the transmission of the virus and protect oneself and others from potential contagion.

The topics in the media focused on whether masks should be mandatory or voluntary, and whether they should be worn by everyone in all public places, etc. Furthermore, journalists frequently discussed masks themselves, including their various types, efficacy and the escalating costs associated with obtaining them. Also, the media discourse included discussions regarding changes in etiquette, such as the avoidance of handshakes and promoted masks as a new societal norm. Health professionals strongly encouraged the use of masks describing them as *part of good manners*¹ and civilised behavior during the pandemic.

- (1) I psihijatar Ivan Urlič ističe da u pandemiji civilizirano ponašanje znači održavanje distance, higijene i **nošenje maske** i, ako je za to neke kraj svijeta, nek' im bude. (Večernji list September 1, 2020).

(Psychiatrist Ivan Urlič also points out that in the pandemic, civilised behavior means maintaining distance, hygiene and **wearing a mask**, and if it's the end of the world for someone, so be it.)

At the beginning of the pandemic, the recommendation was to wear a mask for our own protection, but as the understanding of the virus evolved, it became clear that masks also played a crucial role in protecting others. The media started emphasising this shift in the perception of mask-wearing, changing the focus from self-protection to the protection of others. The following example illustrates the need for a changed perspective.

- (2) Ako ti **maska na licu** može sutra poštediti baku, djeda, oca, majku ove bolesti, ne bi trebalo drugog argumenta. (Večernji list 13 August, 2020).

(If a **mask on your face** can save your grandmother, grandfather, father, mother from this disease tomorrow, no other argument would be needed.)

Due to the refusal of certain individuals to wear masks on account of their lack of fear of the virus, the media made efforts to emphasise the significance of solidarity and shared responsibility in protecting the vulnerable through the practice of wearing masks.

Besides being used literally, the word *mask* was also part of idiomatic expressions (N=9), which appeared in their conventional as well as modified forms. The three conventional idioms are *staviti masku* (*put on*

¹ "Maske su dio bontona", doctor Ozren Polašek, Jutarnji list, 10 November 2020.

a mask), *skinuti masku*, (take off/ remove a mask) and *maske padaju* (somebody's mask slips). According to Hrvatski frazeološki rječnik (2014), the Croatian dictionary of idioms, these idioms are based on the figurative meaning of masks as a disguise of one's true character or intentions. Therefore, when an individual wears a mask, they hide their authentic self or motivations and removing the mask exposes one's genuine character or true intentions.

The refusal of some countries to provide assistance to others during the pandemic revealed that the perceived solidarity in the European Union was merely a facade or a mask, which is illustrated by the following example.

- (3) ... ova kriza zbog koronavirusa, koja je svima nataknila maske na lice, metaforički **skinula maske** s mnogih lica. Uvijek kada EU pogodi kriza, a zaredale su u posljednje vrijeme, sve ono čime se inače Unija diči, solidarnost, suradnja..., strada prvo. (Večernji list 3 April, 2020).

(This crisis caused by the coronavirus, which has put masks on everyone's faces, metaphorically **removed masks** from many faces. Whenever the EU faces a crisis, and they have been happening frequently lately, everything that the Union usually prides itself on, such as solidarity, cooperation, etc., is the first to suffer.)

Also, the politicians and the decision-makers in one's own country were suspected of having hidden agendas when managing the pandemic.

- (4) Nekima su od nas stavili maske, ali su zato **pale njihove maske** – rekao je jedan od govornika na skupu. (Jutarnji list 8 November, 2020).

("Some of us had masks put on us, but then **their masks slipped**," said one of the speakers at the gathering.)

This was a statement by one of the protesters demonstrating against strict measures imposed by the government during the pandemic. He blamed the government for initially portraying a facade of concern for the well-being of the people, only to reveal their true intentions later on. The mask mandate imposed by the government at that time was seen by the protesters as a form of dictatorship or control. Charteris-Black (2021: 230) concludes that anti-maskers focused more on the metaphorical meaning OPPRESSION IS MASK-WEARING rather than on the metonymic meaning of masks being used for protection.

As the pandemic was ongoing, the debates and discussions surrounding wearing masks persisted in the media discourse, expressing different attitudes. The following example shows that the literal and figurative meanings of the act of *taking off a mask* are intertwined, as well as the meanings of a modified idiom *lose one's face*.

- (5) Korona nam je nesumnjivo otkrila kako nas je više ludih nego što je to do sada bilo normalno. Zato, unatoč svim apsurdima kojima nas je ova pošast izručila, ne treba iz vida izgubiti kako mnogi ljudi mogu trpjeti ozbiljne posljedice ako se ne ponašamo odgovorno... Jer, kad se **maske jednom budu skidale**, ne treba **ostati bez lica**. (Večernji list 29 August, 2020).

(The pandemic has undoubtedly revealed that there are more crazy people among us than what was considered normal until now. Therefore, despite all the absurdities this plague has thrown at us, we must not lose sight of the fact that many people can suffer serious consequences if we do not behave responsibly... Because once **the masks are taken off**, **we shouldn't lose our face**.)

In this context, the idiom *take off a mask* has multiple layers of meaning since it metonymically stands for the end of the pandemic when the mask mandate is over, but it also implies uncovering the true character of people who wore a mask. The conventional form of the second idiom is *lose one's cheek*, which has been modified by the substitution of *cheek* with *face*. In Croatian, the figurative meaning of *cheek* is one's honor or integrity, so the meaning of the idiom is to lose respect or to embarrass oneself. The reason for the lexical substitution can be explained by the usage of the first idiom *take off a mask* since a mask covers parts of a face and not only cheeks. Therefore, by taking off a mask, we see a person's face and discover their identity. This ties to the second idiom, *lose one's face*, whereby individuals who were irresponsible and refused to wear a mask, will be revealed as lacking integrity and can lose respect because of their actions.

In addition to the multiple meanings of *masks*, the figurative meaning of the word *muzzle* (N = 4) was also observed. The metaphorical use of the word *muzzles* instead of *masks* carries a connotation of oppression and silence. Muzzles are usually put on aggressive dogs to prevent them from biting, so the act of *muzzling* people during the pandemic points to a perceived attempt to exert authority and to dehumanise citizens who need to be "restrained". The figurative meaning of this expression is

based on the conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS. Furthermore, individuals who are mandated to wear *muzzles* can feel as if their opinions are being stifled.

- (6) Stoga možemo čuti komentare o besmislenosti nošenja maski, ali i vidjeti brojne ljude koji ih odbijaju nositi. Sintagma “sad smo svi ljudi s **brnjica-ma**” ne odražava samo vizualnu sliku ljudi s maskom na licu, već se odnosi i na ograničavanje ljudske slobode te “zauzdavanje” i kontroliranje ljudi, pretvaranje osoba u bezličnu masu “poslušnika”. (Večernji list 21 August, 2020).

(Therefore, we can hear comments about the meaninglessness of wearing masks, but also see numerous people refusing to wear them. The phrase “now we are all people with **muzzles**” not only reflects the visual image of people wearing masks on their faces but also refers to the restriction of human freedom and the “reining in” and controlling of people, turning individuals into a faceless mass of “henchmen”).

According to Mundt and Polzenhagen (2022), such a perception of masks is merely one of the numerous ways in which the pandemic has evolved into a deeply politicised matter. In order to demonstrate their opposition to the requirement of wearing masks, certain individuals wore masks with the inscription “government-mandated muzzle”. These particular types of masks can still be obtained for purchase on popular online platforms like Amazon and eBay. All this indicates that wearing a mask has become a highly contentious issue, intertwined with political beliefs and notions of personal freedom and autonomy.

In order to address the research questions surrounding the meanings and implications of wearing masks during the COVID-19 pandemic, a multi-faceted approach was employed. The analysis has revealed that the word *mask* was mostly used literally as a protective measure against the virus. This meaning is based on the CAUSE FOR EFFECT metonymy since the act of wearing a mask properly expresses the protection of oneself and others. This association gives rise to further metaphorical interpretations which include responsibility, solidarity, and compliance with government regulations. The figurative meanings of the word *mask* are mainly part of idioms related to hiding one’s true character or intentions. In addition, the analysis also uncovered a strong association between mask-wearing and notions of personal freedom since masks were described as muzzles, suggesting that this meaning is based on the PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS met-

aphor. All of these expressions played an important part in shaping the media discourse during the pandemic and influencing public perceptions of mask-wearing.

This study can contribute to our understanding of the pandemic discourse in several ways. Firstly, our analysis reveals diverse ways in which mask-wearing was conceptualised in the Croatian media discourse. The discussion between protection and freedom has been universally observed, but the specific metaphorical mapping of masks as muzzles was particularly emphasised in the Croatian discourse. Such a perspective could be linked to a post-socialist context in which the fear of government control may have historical origins.

Secondly, our observation of the connection between the metonymic protection concept and the metaphorical oppression framing reveals that everyday objects can quickly develop complex symbolic meanings during crises. While previous studies mainly recorded war and journey metaphors related to the coronavirus pandemic, our focus on masks demonstrates how a protective health measure can be transformed into a symbol of ideological debates.

The study also attempts to raise awareness that the effectiveness of health communication during crises can influence people's willingness to accept and follow the necessary measures. The analysis of the shift of masks from a protective tool to a symbol of oppression in public discussions points to the need for careful consideration of metaphorical framings before they shape the public understanding.

5. CONCLUSION

Wearing a medical mask before the pandemic was often seen as a common practice in certain cultures, particularly in the East Asian countries, where it was associated with personal hygiene and protection from pollution and illness. However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the symbolic meanings and implications of wearing masks took on a new significance all over the world. The transition from a culturally specific practice to a global health measure influenced how masks were discussed and represented in the public discourse. These rapid changes illustrate how a crisis situation can significantly alter the perception of everyday objects and practices in a short period.

Besides being perceived as an act of self-protection, wearing masks properly was also seen as an altruistic gesture demonstrating a sense of social responsibility. The shift from the metonymic meaning of protection to the metaphorical meaning of unreasonable oppression was also reflected in the language. This was evident either in the use of figurative expressions such as idioms related to hiding one's true character or intentions or in the association between masks and muzzles and notions of restrictions and a violation of personal freedom. The media discourse during the pandemic played an important role in shaping public perceptions of mask-wearing and the various metaphorical meanings associated with masks could influence individuals' attitudes. Our analysis of the Croatian media reveals how specific linguistic framings transformed a public health matter into a political issue.

In order to unmask the true meaning of wearing masks, it is important to recognise the multiple perspectives and interpretations surrounding their use. The Croatian case study presented here can contribute to a broader understanding of how language shapes social perceptions during health crises. More research is needed to understand the cultural, social and psychological factors that contribute to these complex meanings, taking into account different languages and perspectives. Future studies could examine the connection between specific linguistic framings and the actual behavior and public health outcomes. Understanding the power of figurative language in shaping public responses can significantly improve public communication.

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Abstract

During the coronavirus pandemic, a medical mask became a prominent symbol of prevention, leading to the increased use of the literal and figurative language with mask-related images. This paper aims to analyse expressions containing the word *mask* and their literal and figurative meanings in the Croatian media discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also examines how these expressions were used to convey different messages and attitudes towards wearing masks. The methodological approach involves analysing a corpus comprising articles from two major Croatian newspapers (*Jutarnji list* and *Večernji list*) published between March 2020 and March 2021. In order to determine the underlying conceptual mechanisms and ideological implications of mask-related phrases, the research is based on the frameworks of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the Conceptual Metonymy Theory and the Critical Discourse Analysis. The findings reveal that *mask* was primarily used literally as a protective measure, whereas figurative uses included idioms related to hiding the true character and metaphorical framing of masks as muzzles, implying control and oppression. These linguistic choices contributed to the polarisation of the discourse surrounding mask-wearing and transformed a health measure into a symbol of ideological conflict. The paper aims to broaden the understanding of how language reflects and shapes social perceptions, attitudes and behaviors during a crisis and provides insight into the role of figurative language in crisis and public health communication.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Croatian media discourse, masks, figurative language, critical discourse analysis

ODKRYWANIE DYSKURSU: DOSŁOWNE I PRZENOŚNE ZNACZENIE MASKI W CHORWACKIEJ PRASIE W CZASIE PANDEMII COVID-19

Streszczenie

Podczas pandemii koronawirusa maseczka medyczna stała się ważnym symbolem ochrony zdrowia, co doprowadziło do zwiększenia częstotliwości użycia tego słowa, zarówno w dosłownym, jak i przerośnym znaczeniu. W niniejszym artykule analizie poddane zostały wyrażenia zawierające słowo *maska* w jej dosłownym oraz przerośnym znaczeniu w chorwackim dyskursie medialnym podczas pandemii COVID-19. Ponadto przedmiotem badań był sposób, w jaki używano tych wyrażeń do formułowania komunikatów i opinii dotyczących noszenia maseczek. Metodologia badań obejmuje analizę korpusu składającego się z artykułów z dwóch wiodących chorwackich dzienników (*Jutarnji*

list i *Večernji list*) wydanych pomiędzy marcem 2020 i marcem 2021 roku. Do ustalenia mechanizmów konceptualnych oraz implikacji ideologicznych związanych z użyciem słowa *maska*, posłużono się teorią metafory konceptualnej, metonimią konceptualnej i krytyczną analizą dyskursu. Wyniki badań wskazują na to, że słowo *maska* początkowo używane było w znaczeniu dosłownym jako środek ochronny, natomiast znaczenie przenośne występowało we frazmach związanych z ukrywaniem swojej prawdziwej tożsamości oraz metaforycznym ujęciu maski jako kagańca, co sugeruje kontrolę i ucisk. Te określone wybory językowe przyczyniły się do polaryzacji dyskursu związanego z noszeniem maseczek ochronnych, a także przeobraziły środek prewencji zdrowotnej w symbol konfliktu ideologicznego. W artykule podjęto próbę zrozumienia, w jaki sposób język odzwierciedla i kształtuje percepcję społeczną, postawy i zachowania w dobie kryzysu oraz dokonano wglądu w rolę znaczeń przenośnych w komunikacji kryzysowej oraz debacie dotyczącej zdrowia publicznego.

Słowa kluczowe: pandemia COVID-19, chorwacki dyskurs medialny, maska, język figuratywny, krytyczna analiza dyskursu