

FRAMING CRISIS THROUGH LANGUAGE: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Public health crises are not only biological events but also discursive phenomena shaped by language and communication. This paper examines how language is used to construct, frame, and manage public perception during health emergencies. Drawing on principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA), the study analyzes selected public health messages to explore how authority, responsibility, and risk are linguistically encoded. The paper introduces the Discursive Framing–Alignment Model (DFAM), which explains how institutional discourse aligns public behavior through strategic framing. The analysis reveals that linguistic choices—such as modality, pronoun usage, and metaphor—play a crucial role in shaping compliance and trust. The study contributes to discourse studies by offering a structured framework for analyzing crisis communication and highlighting the power of language in shaping social response.

1. Introduction

1. Language in Times of Crisis

When institutions speak during a crisis, they do more than convey information—they **construct reality**.

Statements such as:

- We must act now
- The situation is under control
- Everyone has a role to play

are not neutral. They frame:

- urgency
- authority
- collective responsibility

This paper begins with the assumption that:

Crisis communication is fundamentally a linguistic process of framing and alignment.

2. Analytical Perspective: Discourse as Social Action

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) views language as:

- Constitutive of social reality
- Embedded in power relations
- Strategically deployed

Rather than asking what is said, CDA asks:

- How is it said?
- What does it do?
- Whose interests does it serve?

3. Data and Approach

The analysis draws on:

- Public health announcements (representative reconstructed excerpts)
- Government communication styles
- Media-aligned discourse patterns

The focus is not on quantity but on:

- Linguistic detail
- Discursive function
- Interpretive depth

4. Discursive Strategies in Crisis Communication

4.1 Modality and Authority

Excerpt 1:

Citizens must follow all safety guidelines.

The modal verb must signals:

- Obligation
- Authority

- Lack of negotiability

Contrast:

- Citizens should follow guidelines → softer, advisory

4.2 Pronouns and Collective Identity

Excerpt 2:

We are facing an unprecedented challenge.

The pronoun we:

- Creates solidarity
- Blurs institutional vs public boundaries
- Encourages shared responsibility

4.3 Metaphor and Conceptual Framing

Excerpt 3:

We are fighting an invisible enemy.

War metaphors:

- Create urgency
- Legitimize strong measures
- Simplify complex realities

5. The Discursive Framing–Alignment Model (DFAM)

5.1 Core Concept

Public discourse operates through two interconnected processes:

1. **Framing** → defining the situation
2. **Alignment** → guiding public response

5.2 Model Components

1. Framing Mechanisms

- Metaphor
- Lexical choice
- Narrative structure

2. Alignment Mechanisms

- Pronouns
- Modality
- Repetition

Table 1: DFAM Framework

Dimension	Linguistic Feature	Function
Framing	Metaphor	Shape perception
Framing	Lexical choice	Define reality
Alignment	Pronouns	Build solidarity
Alignment	Modality	Enforce behavior

6. Discursive Effects

The analysis suggests that these strategies:

- Increase compliance
- Enhance legitimacy
- Reduce uncertainty

However, they also:

- Limit alternative interpretations
- Centralize authority

7. Discussion: Language, Power, and Trust

The effectiveness of crisis communication depends not only on accuracy but on **discursive credibility**.

Overuse of:

- Strong modality → may reduce trust
- War metaphors → may induce fear

Balance is crucial.

8. Broader Implications

The DFAM framework can be applied to:

- Political discourse
- Media communication
- Institutional messaging

It provides a structured way to analyze how language shapes public behavior.

9. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that crisis communication is deeply embedded in linguistic and discursive processes. By introducing the DFAM model, it offers a tool for understanding how language constructs reality and aligns public action. Future research should explore cross-cultural differences in crisis discourse.

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