



Angewandte Linguistik



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Results of the COVIDisc project on the production, perception, and reception of COVID-19 discourses

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Project Background

Study Design

Results

Key Findings

Project Background

COVIDisc – A Focus on Vector Populations

- SNSF-funded project (6/2020-9/2021), collaboration between ZHAW (Digital Discourse Lab, Public Health) and USI (Public Communication)
- The project focused on 15-34 year-olds in the German and Italian speaking part of Switzerland (*vector population*)
- Research objective:

provide a deeper understanding of temporality of the discourses and the impact of local & regional dynamics of the pandemic on the public discourses and discursive practices

Project Background

1. Production of discourse

Simulation of the patchwork and dynamics of public discourses on COVID19 based on the specific patterns of language use in public and organizational media

2. Reception of discourse

Investigation of the representation of the vector population in public discourses and the perception of these discourses by members of these audiences

3. Reflection on discourse

Development of recommendations to strengthen and improve strategic crisis communication of public health organizations by managerial practices of audience and message design to impact on sense-making and early adoption of public health measures

Study Design

- Linguistically annotated corpus in german & italian
- 01/2020-10/2020
- DE: 55k texts, IT: 16k texts
- public discourse (federal & cantonal authorities, hospitals, NGOs, professional associations, journalistic media, universities, Twitter)



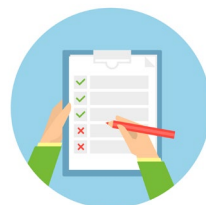
SWISS-AL

Corpus data

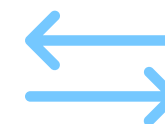
Triangulation

Interview data

- 915 participants
- Representative random sample of people aged 15-34, provided by FSO



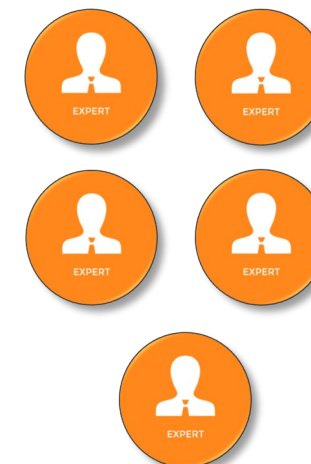
Survey data



Reflection in a
community of practice



- 60 participants (30 per language region)
- Recruited after survey



Qualitative interviews

- 12 guided interviews (e.g., federal administration, Public Health Schweiz, Pro Juventute)

Results: Production of Discourse

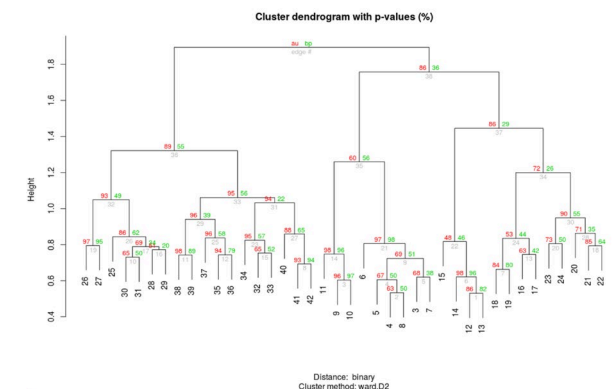
Common Ground

A **Common Ground** (i.e. shared knowledge) on Covid-19 emerges during the first three months of 2020 and is marked by characterizing the virus.

Typical **vocabulary** for January till mid March 2020:

- **Epidemiological characteristics:** *Lungenkrankheit, Erreger, Corona-Virus, Krankheit, Ausbreitung*
- **origin in China:** *Wuhan, Chinese/Cinese, asiatisch/asiatico, Peking*
- **Comparison with other diseases:** *Sars, Influenza, Grippe*
- **Authorities:** *BAG/UFSP, WHO/OMS, Christian Drosten*

Method: Clustering of weeks based on typical vocabulary



Results: Production of Discourse

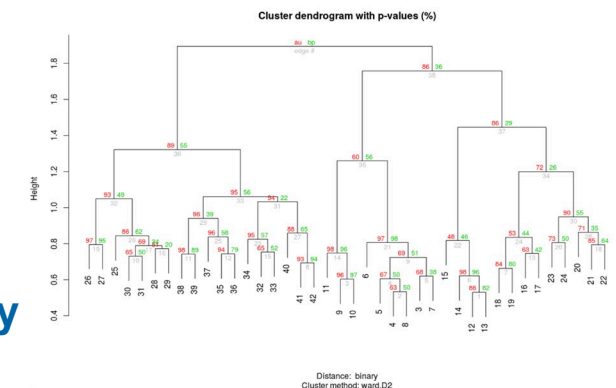
Solidarity

The **lockdown phase** is constructed as **a time of solidarity** in the Swiss society.

Typical **vocabulary** indicates a focus on Switzerland/the Swiss society, national measures' impact on everyday life and the perception of the lockdown as a key moment for public and private life.

- **Measures:** *Grossveranstaltung, Quarantäne/quarantena, Massnahme, testen/test, gelten*
- **Authorities:** *BAG/UFSP, Daniel Koch, Behörde, Bundesrat*
- **Pronouns:** *ich, wir, du, tutti*
- **Temporal Adverbs:** *jetzt/ora/adesso, momentan, derzeit*

Method: Clustering of weeks based on typical vocabulary



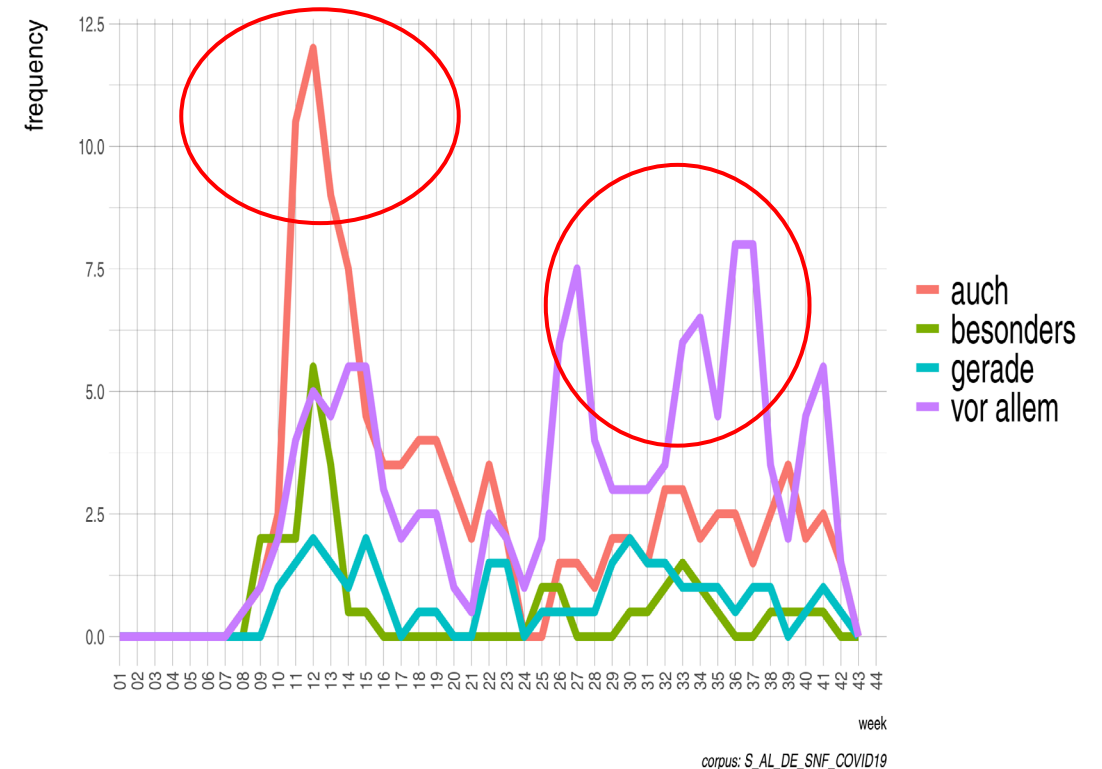
Results: Production of Discourse

Construction of the Vector Population

At the **beginning of the pandemic**, primary consequences for the vulnerable population dominate the discourse. The vector population is mentioned in the **context of lower health risks**.

The youth is constructed on the background of **economic consequences**. Other, less frequently mentioned secondary measures concern social life, physical and psychological health.

In **summer 2020**, the discourse is characterized by **blaming of the vector population**, triggered by superspreading events in clubs and bars.



Method: collocation analysis and syntactic analysis

Key Findings

1. **Notice of COVID-19:** Focus changes from China to Switzerland within 8 weeks.
 - VP → The first wave and the measures were perceived as the most important key moments
2. **Common ground on COVID-19** emerges during the first 3 months.
 - VP → not very worried about their own health.
 - Experts → the impossibility of objectively justifying measures is one of the greatest challenges
3. **Dangerousness & Communication:** The discourse quantifies the dangerousness and potential lethality of the virus. In *DE-speaking Switzerland*, this particularly marks the beginning of the pandemic; in *Ticino*, it marks the entire period and is characterized by a higher emotionality.
 - VP → reported negative considerations about emotional style and images in the media, especially Ticino.
 - Experts → avoiding scaremongering was one of the more important strategic principles of actors in public communication.

7 Key Findings

4. **Construction of VP** works especially against an economic background.

- VP mostly do not remember communication about them; however, they remember media criticizing and blaming them for their behavior.

5. **Solidarity:** discourse topic during the lockdown.

- VP → pandemic evoked a division among the population, among family/partner or among friends.
- Experts → To emphasize the need for an overall solidarity and simultaneously the need for audience specific strategies of messaging was one of the most challenging tasks for actors of public communication.

6. **Discourse Positions & Audience:** FOPH acts non-dialogical on Twitter

- VP → from Ticino suggest interactive communication format or more generally they wished to be listened by authorities.
- Experts → see need in adapting key messages for their specific target audiences, also together with NGOs.

7. **VP uses a variety of media** and social media, including official health websites.

- Importance of channel specific communication strategies and styles is one of the most important learnings for public communication strategies.

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