

Representations of Pandemic and Climate Crisis in Greek Language – Impacts on Communication and Social Inequality¹

Nikoletta Tsitsanoudis-Mallidis

University of Ioannina, Ioannina, Greece
nitsi@uoi.gr

Abstract. This paper explores how various contemporary crises, such as the pandemic and the climate crisis, are reflected linguistically in public discourse. It investigates the representations of these crises within language, highlighting the significant impact that social transformations and phenomena have on linguistic expression. Central to the analysis is how such crises induce notable shifts in word meanings, with familiar terms frequently acquiring new, multifaceted connotations. A key aspect of the study is the examination of semantic changes in specific words, where known audio patterns and verbal structures are employed to convey altered meanings—sometimes in ways that may confuse recipients. Although mainstream media often promote an image of broad consensus, these semantic shifts do not always result from the natural evolution of language among native speakers. Instead, they are frequently introduced in a top-down fashion, constructing a veiled reality. In this constructed reality, official narratives concerning economic, political, or social matters may obscure deeper truths, limiting public understanding of the actual crises they experience. Moreover, the study delves into how such linguistic redefinitions can weaken social protections and intensify social inequality. It also examines the impact of these shifts on education—particularly language education—by hindering students' ability to engage critically with public discourse. The research material includes texts drawn from newspapers, television news broadcasts, and social media platforms. The study is grounded in the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis. Ultimately, the paper seeks to shed light on the wider social implications of these linguistic transformations and the challenges they present to education in times of societal crisis.

Keywords: Linguistic Representation, Resemantization, Fear-Language

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1 Introduction

The role of the linguistic factor in the construction and consolidation of social consent regarding the various measures (restrictive, prohibitive, or other) taken during periods of severe crises is particularly significant [1]. Based on principles and positions of contemporary linguistic science, a certain perspective is ensured on the linguistic constructions that emanate from political and economic centers of power. Through the use of fundamental linguistic principles, the strategies of building consensus or even submission to restrictions are approached—as, for example, occurred during the pandemic—while emphasis is placed on the concepts of discipline, compliance, and individual responsibility.

Furthermore, examining how language functions through its ideological and representational roles uncovers its part in shaping political and social agreement, notably via the intricate mediating role of mass media. Equally crucial is grasping how listeners of public discourse respond to or follow expert advice—especially significant when reflecting on the pandemic situation and the two separate lockdown phases imposed as measures to control the virus' transmission.

In this article, we analyze:

- a. the observed resemanticization of familiar words for purposes of manipulation, and the role of neologisms as instruments for challenging authority,
- b. the role of the language of fear—or fear-language, as we have termed it—thus even creating a (visual) neologism,
- c. the notion of individual responsibility and its instrumentalization for victim-blaming [2], [3],
- d. the deliberate rationalization of fear and the cultivation of trust-based relationships as a countermeasure to mechanisms of imposition and domination.

2 Theoretical Framework / Background

This study is grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which examines how language is shaped, manipulated, and redefined in times of crisis, highlighting the link between power, ideology, and linguistic practices. CDA provides a framework to understand how semantic changes and resemanticization occur under the influence of social, political and economic power structures [4]. In times of crisis, such as during the pandemic and, previously, in Greece during the economic/memorandum crisis, the phenomenon can be observed whereby, on the one hand, the meanings of familiar and well-known words change overnight, and on the other hand, neologisms appear—namely newly coined lexical units or existing lexical units that acquire a new sense [5]. As Newmark notes, translating or interpreting neologisms requires careful consideration of context, since newly coined or resemanticized lexical units are closely tied to social and historical circumstances. At various points in modern history, such words have served as tools to challenge authority or as forms of (counter)criticism by citizens, acting as channels of resistance against oppression and control experienced by middle and lower social classes.

3 Methodology

The present study is based on the analysis of texts from the public sphere, with particular emphasis on journalistic discourse, focusing on the last fifteen years—a period marked by a succession of major crises (economic, health-related, and climatic). The research material consists primarily of television news bulletins and current affairs programs, complemented by a limited number of advertising texts. The selected material was recorded, transcribed, and subsequently analyzed in accordance with the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)[4]. A substantial part of the observations and findings discussed in this article has been previously presented and developed in recent scholarly publications by the author [6], [7], [8].

4 Results

4.1 Linguistic Practices and Meaning Negotiation in Times of Crisis

As we have argued in a relatively recent study [6], just as from the side of authority no consent was sought from the community for the semantic alteration of a familiar phonetic sequence, with the same freedom—but this time with a playful or mocking attitude—those subjected to authority acted with a kind of linguistic libertinism.

Emotions played a significant role including insecurity, disgust, and aversion to the policies being implemented (e.g., nekraila, skatila, fascistila, lamogiofylaki, etc.). Cliché words were rare, since the dominant feature was the subversion of established linguistic codes, with imaginative compositions (faskelometro, etc.). The verbal fragments available in the research arsenal are inexhaustible, especially when considering the material provided on social media platforms.

4.2 The Concept of Fear-Language and the Intent Behind Its Creation

In a recent book co-authored with Nikolas Prevelakis [8], we studied the role of language in relation to crisis situations and social pressures, such as the pandemic, the ongoing climate crisis, but also previous ones such as the memorandum/economic crisis. We found that common patterns are followed, relating to ideological indoctrination and manipulation [9], [10], highlighting the fact that language does not merely manipulate but is itself manipulated when mobilized with specific aims by political-economic power, as well as by the authority of “experts.”

Figurative language is extensively employed as an effective means of immediate dissemination and comprehension of information, and of instilling fear in people. Metaphor is considered an inescapable part of the way humans communicate ideas and experiences [11]. Conceptual metaphors in times of crisis, such as periods of austerity, are very frequent in the public sphere [12].

4.3 The Climate Crisis Discourse: Emerging Vocabularies on Hold?

With the evident anxiety for the planet’s future in relation to climate change, one may surmise that language maintains “vocabularies in waiting,” since every current and

future development will inevitably be described through its system of signifiers and signifieds. At the same time, it is assumed that newer terms will also emerge, either in the form of neologisms or as resemanticized products of familiar phonetic forms.

It is highly probable that, once again, numbers will assume a central—if not intimidating—role in shaping public perception and discourse. This pattern has already been observed in various recent crises, such as for example, the memorandum crisis in Greece. Equally notable is the semantic transformation—or resemanticization—of words traditionally linked to the natural world, many of which have acquired entirely new meanings with the rise and dominance of digital technology [13], [14].

4.4 Language Layers of the Climate Crisis: A Dialogue Proposal

Over the past two years, we have proposed the inclusion of the term “language layers” in conference discourse, especially when referring to the vocabularies of crises [7]. The term highlights the sequential, elastic, and temporally bounded vocabularies that accompany successive crises.

As scholars of linguistic science, we aim to cultivate critical processing skills in students and university learners, encouraging imagination, reading, and linguistic autonomy as a means to reduce social and educational inequalities [15].

4.5 On Responsibility and the Quiet Weight of Words

Within the framework of research endeavors that aim for deep social connection, the systematic invocation of “individual responsibility” functions as the ground upon which guilt construction and blame assignment unfold [2]. Appeals to trust and responsibility rhetorically elevate the addressee while transferring structural responsibility onto individuals [8].

5 Discussion – Conclusion

Within such a framework, the intense pressures exerted on language are revealed—pressures that aim to align it with politics of fear. According to Critical Discourse Analysis, there are no innocent texts in the public sphere [4]. Linguistic redefinitions may erode social protections and increase social inequalities, particularly when imposed top-down, affecting language education and students’ ability to critically engage with public discourse.

The language of fear spreads rapidly across mass media and social networks, generating waves of panic and distrust toward science and its representatives. This framework also highlights the role of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation in shaping public perception and amplifying the language of fear [16]. Ultimately, the recipient of crisis discourse faces not only objective problems but also the need for rational handling of fear and commitment to democratic systems grounded in trust and creativity.

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