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Shaping the UK Government's public communications on COVID-19: general, follower, other?

Chris McVittie 

The death rate in the United Kingdom from COVID-19 is, per capita, one of the highest in the world. Here, I examine three ways in which the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, has communicated to the UK population the actions that are necessary to deal with the pandemic. Using principles of discursive psychology and Bakhtinian analysis, I consider how Johnson's descriptions discursively construct the government's actions, the actions that are required of the population, and agency for reducing the spread of COVID-19. Relying on metaphors of war, claims to follow the science, and expressions of concerned advice, Johnson's communications are shaped to manage the accountability of his government and himself for varying potential outcomes of the pandemic, allowing them to take credit if their efforts are treated as successful but to attribute responsibility elsewhere if the incidence of COVID-19 illness and deaths continues to increase.

Keywords: *Accountability; Addressivity; Bakhtin; COVID-19; Discursive Psychology; Pandemic; UK Politicians*

The current COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences for individual and public health needs little introduction. At the time of writing (July 2021), global cases of COVID-19 exceed 189 million, with deaths from the disease exceeding 4 million (John Hopkins University, 2021). During 2021, attention has focused on locations

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that include India (Pandey & Nazmi, 2021), Nepal (Weissenbach, 2021), and Indonesia (Jamaluddin & Berlinger, 2021) as sites where COVID-19 infections, especially cases resulting from the readily transmissible delta variant, have surged in recent months. Elsewhere, the incidence of cases continues to rise (e.g. Elamroussi, 2021), with increasing rates of infection pointing to the continuing need for action to address transmission of the disease and to ensure availability of healthcare. Against this background, there is a clear need for governments and other policy-makers to communicate effectively the actions that they are taking, and those required of local populations, to halt the spread of the disease and to address the ongoing pandemic.

Here, I examine the ways in which one national leader has communicated with the population during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the UK, as of July 2021, the recorded death toll exceeded 128,000, over 1920 per million population (Statista, 2021), one of the highest rates in the World. Yet, since COVID-19 first arrived in the UK in January 2020, the UK has had three national lockdowns, and as of July 2021 continues to place restrictions on the activities of businesses and movements of the population. Rates of infection across much of the UK are currently rising (Alford, 2021), leading to warnings from the UK's Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Witty, that further hospitalizations could risk overwhelming the UK National Health Service and that the pandemic still had "a long way to run in the UK" (Bowden & O'Connor, 2021). Notwithstanding such concerns, however, the UK Government on 12 July 2021 announced that it was "the right moment to proceed" to lift many of the restrictions then in place (UK Government, 2021). The UK context, then, provides fertile ground for studying public communications throughout the course of the pandemic. The aim of this paper is to examine how the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, has during the pandemic communicated with the UK population, in particular how he has framed the actions that his government is taking in relation to public health and the actions that are required of the population themselves to prevent transmission of the disease and to maintain individual health.

Method

The data come from press conferences and daily briefings given by Boris Johnson between 12 March 2020, the date of the first press conference on the subject, and 12 July 2021 when he announced that the UK Government was lifting many pandemic-related restrictions. These data were coded for all instances in which Johnson referred to the COVID-19 pandemic itself, to the actions that he and his government were taking, or to actions required of the UK population. All passages of potential relevance were selected out for detailed analysis.

Analysis drew upon principles of two approaches to the study of communication. The first of these, discursive psychology (McMullen, 2021; McVittie & McKinlay, *in press*), highlights the constructive nature of language, that is when speakers produce descriptions of phenomena they are not (merely) reporting what is to be taken as self-evident, but instead are constructing specific versions of those phenomena to

attend to interactional concerns. Attention focuses on these discursive constructions and the actions that speakers are seeking to accomplish in describing phenomena in specific ways. The second approach draws on the writings of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, specifically his focus on the “addressivity” of language (Bakhtin, 1986). By addressivity, Bakhtin refers to the dialogical quality of language and how the utterances that speakers produce are oriented to potential recipients: “addressivity focuses attention on how acts have trajectories created for presumed audiences and hoped-for ends” (Graue, Kroeger, & Prager, 2001, p. 473). Thus, analytic attention focuses on how speakers shape their communications to be heard by an anticipated audience.

Here, the data were examined to consider how Johnson constructed the position of the Government, and the actions required of the population to control the pandemic. I consider also how these communications were addressed to the broader population. The extracts presented below exemplify these communications.

Findings

During the course of the pandemic, the UK Prime Minister’s communications have relied on three broad forms of talk: war metaphors, following the science, and concerned advice. These are considered in turn below.

War metaphors

One recurring description of proposed measures for dealing with the virus and its consequences has framed the issues in terms of being engaged in a war against COVID-19. As Benziman (2020) notes, Boris Johnson in the early part of the pandemic repeatedly deployed metaphors of the virus as the “enemy” that put the country on a war footing. For example, Johnson in the course of daily briefings during March 2020 argued on different dates that “This enemy can be deadly, but it is also beatable—and we know how to beat it,” “the enemy is invisible,” and “that’s the way we’re going to win, we’re going to beat it, and we’re going to beat it together.” Such descriptions allowed Johnson “to demand behaviors and actions of [his constituency] that might not have been accepted in other circumstances. The complete change in daily rituals and the need to endorse new behaviors that were at times contradictory to human instincts, were made possible by this framing” (2021, p. 253). And on 23 March 2021, one year on from the date of the first UK lockdown, Johnson continued to refer to UK efforts to tackle the pandemic in such terms, referring to these efforts as “fighting in the dark against a callous and invisible enemy” (Davies, 2021).

Framing attempts to tackle the pandemic by means of war metaphors allowed Johnson to address the population as leader of the war effort, in effect as a general. Messages issued in this way comprised repeated orders to members of the broader population, such as the daily repeated instruction of “Stay home – Protect the NHS –

Save lives,” which became routinized parts of everyday communications. And, this construction addressed the population as those required to obey the orders that they received.

This form of address however brings its own problems, in that speakers who shape their messages in terms of a war effort, effectively as generals, can be expected to direct that effort toward successful outcomes. There arises the question of what happens if these outcomes are not met, or if “we” do not appear to be winning the “war,” or if orders issued by those in command are seen to be ineffective or contradictory. The issue, then, becomes one of accountability: leaders who assume responsibility for defeating the virus can be treated as accountable for the outcomes, successful or otherwise. It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that, as the pandemic has continued in the UK with rising numbers of casualties, Johnson in his communications to the UK population has tended to rely less on metaphors of war than in the earlier stages of the pandemic.

Following the science

A second form of message, often repeated in 2020 and 2021, has taken a rather different form. Johnson has frequently described his government’s actions as being dictated and led by “the science”: “we must, and we will, be led by the science,” “we will follow the science,” “we are following the science,” “when the science changes we must change our response.” While such references were throughout 2020 used almost interchangeably with references to “war,” as the pandemic has continued “the science” has been a primary focus of Johnson’s communications. Such references resulted in the phrase “we’re following the science” becoming in effect a “mantra” (Institute for Government, 2020), repeated on numerous occasions but with little concern as to its accuracy or content.

Although many have questioned whether the Government has indeed consistently taken up advice received from its scientific advisors, for present purposes attention focuses on what Johnson has sought to accomplish through this shaping of his messages. Analysis shows that this phrase offered a somewhat different framing of the Government’s role and actions than those made available by war metaphors. First, instead of being responsible for taking charge and leading, the Government is presented as “following” in efforts to control the pandemic. Second, what it is following is constructed as something singular, suggesting that there is one accepted course to be followed: “the science.” And, third, this construction is presented as being incontrovertible and authoritative in having agency to determine the behaviors of human actors.

This linguistic deployment of the authority of science relies upon what has been termed an “empiricist repertoire” (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984), in which agency is attributed to a definitive entity beyond human actions. Attribution in these terms is designed to distance Johnson and the UK Government from accountability for their actions; if efforts to deal with the pandemic do not succeed, then the blame

lies with “the science,” not those who were misguided by it. This talk is designed to address the population essentially as witnesses to the Government’s efforts: the population is to be assured that Johnson and his Government have acted responsibly, in line with recognized authority on the matter. By shaping his messages in this way, he constructs himself and other ministers as not accountable if their efforts do not succeed; they are following what is determined elsewhere.

Concerned advice

Empiricist accounting offers one way in which Johnson can seek to avoid accountability. It is not however the only means of doing so. Before the relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions for Christmas Day 2020, the Government at the same time as relaxing the rules was encouraging the population not to take advantage of the relaxation, a somewhat contradictory stance. This contradiction is encapsulated in advice given by Johnson on 16 December 2020 as to whether the population should meet with family members at Christmas 2020:

We have come to this moment, a great global festival, a turning point, a time of year that is of immense emotional and spiritual importance. But also a moment for us to exercise extreme caution ... (Johnson, 2020)

The extract above displays two especially interesting features. First, drawing on the collective pronouns “we” and “us,” Johnson seeks to address the UK population as one of them, someone who shares their concerns. Second, the form of talk seen here closely resembles talk commonly found in a rather different context, that of prejudice and its avoidance. Researchers who study how individuals attempt to avoid accusations of prejudice have noted that in such a linguistic structure the “but” functions as a disjunction marker that separates two inconsistent claims. Thus, in the common form of argument “I’m not a racist but ...” (van Dijk, 1984), the clause that precedes the “but” provides an ostensibly favorable claim that sets a context in which the following (unfavorable) argument is to be heard.

Here, this form of utterance allows Johnson to offer a description of an event that he and others associate with joyful and spontaneous activity, “a great global festival,” while laying the basis for arguing that people should not participate in such activity. Rather, he suggests, people should “exercise extreme caution.” As seen below, he takes up this argument later in his speech.

We are all collectively across the UK, governments at every level, asking you to think hard and in detail about the days ahead and whether you can do more to protect yourself and others. (ibid.)

Above, Johnson adopts a somewhat different stance from that seen in his earlier talk. First, the pronouns here, unlike those earlier, do not seek to align him with the population generally. Instead, there is a clear separation between himself and other policy-makers (“we”) and the general population (“you”). This reformulation allows him to specify the actions relevant to each group. Second, the action of policy-

makers is framed as one of “asking,” suggesting a request instead of a directive as to how people should act. Conversely, the responsibility for safeguarding public health is placed upon the general population: it is for them to decide “whether you can do more to protect yourself and others.”

Addressing the UK population in this way, Johnson attributes accountability for maintaining public health to members of the population themselves rather than to his government. On this argument, the Government is not issuing orders but rather expressing concern as to how people might act and the potential consequences. The extent to which members of the population are protected against COVID, or not, is framed in terms of their actions and the outcomes.

A similar message is seen in the extract below, taken from the 12 July 2021 Press Conference at which Johnson announced that the UK Government was lifting COVID-related restrictions.

We’re updating our guidance for the clinically extremely vulnerable on how they can keep themselves safe and I generally urge everyone to keep thinking of others and to consider the risks. (Johnson, 2021)

Again, Johnson addresses the population in terms that treat them as responsible for maintaining their own health and that of others. One group, “the clinically extremely vulnerable” are constructed as responsible for “keeping themselves safe,” while the whole population is presented as being responsible not just for themselves but also for “others.” Thus, the message is shaped in terms that render members of the population themselves as solely accountable for any consequences of the lifting of restrictions; the Government in communicating in this way constructs itself, by contrast, as expressing concern (“generally urge”) but not as having accountability for health consequences of its actions.

Discussion

The different forms of communication outlined above have co-existed throughout much of the time since the pandemic first materialized in the UK. In this respect, not only have Johnson’s public messages at many times appeared confused and at odds with each other, but it is increasingly clear that these are designed to address widely varying possible ends. Should the Government’s efforts to deal with the pandemic turn out to be more successful than seen to date, then Johnson can seek to take credit for leading efforts to defeat the virus. However, should the number of casualties continue to increase, this can be attributed to failures in the direction of “the science” or to the decisions and actions of the general population in putting themselves and others at risk. All these messages are addressed to an anticipated audience that might be approving or critical of attempts to address the pandemic, and are shaped toward self-serving attributions of where accountability for ultimate success or failure might lie. The extent to which these communications will succeed in achieving this end, and where the UK public finally attribute accountability for the deaths resulting from the pandemic, remains to be seen in due course when

Johnson's and his government's efforts and actions throughout the course of the pandemic eventually come under detailed scrutiny.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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