



# LINGUE CULTURE MEDIAZIONI LANGUAGES CULTURES MEDIATION

9 (2022)

2

Communicating COVID-19: A Linguistic and Discursive  
Approach across Contexts and Media

Comunicare il COVID-19: un approccio linguistico  
e discorsivo a media e contesti

*Edited by / A cura di*

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# Occupational Health and Safety during COVID-19

## A Cross-National Comparison of Discursive and Communication Practices in Italy and the US

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7358/lcm-2022-002-pman>

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines legal communication in Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) discourse and investigates the rhetorical strategies implemented at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, the paper focuses on a dataset of legal provisions introduced as emergency legislation – measures adopted to tackle unprecedented circumstances – in Italy and the US, in order to identify commonalities and differences when informing the general public of the measures laid down particularly to protect workers in the workplace. This paper is intended to contribute to research in discourse analysis in OHS, an area of expertise which has been given fresh momentum since the onset of the pandemic. The decision to examine Italian and US emergency legislation was made in consideration of the cultural and legal differences between the two countries, which give rise to a number of discursive approaches to emergency management.

*Keywords:* COVID-19 communication; discourse analysis; Occupational Health and Safety (OHS); persuasion; workplace legislation.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main concerns of national governments during the pandemic has been the protection of workers' health and safety, in particular, limiting the spread of COVID-19 at work. In addition to minimizing the risk of infection, safeguarding the workforce during the pandemic

also ensured business as usual, particularly in essential sectors that were regarded as necessary to national economies. The gravity of the public health emergency called for swift action, so different provisions were put in place by the authorities with the aim of enabling employers to protect their employees in the workplace.

These regulations adopt a range of discursive and communication resources potentially affecting the implementation of and compliance with health and safety legislation. In this respect, COVID-19 – like other unprecedented events, more generally – gave rise to uncertainty, as competing narratives were deployed to inform the public about protective measures. Legislators and policy-makers usually try to seek legitimation for the initiatives adopted by referring to the need for greater security, i.e. that of workers in our case. As a result, the way the framing of Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) becomes a fundamental issue, as do the main features employed.

Against this backdrop, this paper investigates the main aspects of legal communication in OHS discourse, examining the discursive strategies adopted at the height of the pandemic. Specifically, the paper analyses the rhetorical devices and the way they were received in different cultural contexts. To this end, a comparative analysis is carried out of emergency legislation – i.e. legal provisions dealing with unexpected circumstances without going through the traditional legislative process – adopted in Italy and the US in the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a view to highlighting distinctive features and commonalities with respect to the communication practices put in place. This paper is intended to contribute to research in discourse analysis in OHS, a domain that has attracted increasing consideration recently, especially following the onset of the pandemic.

These introductory remarks will be followed by an analysis of previous research in OHS discourse (section 2). Examining the relevant literature will help to better frame the discussion of the methodology and findings, outlined in section 3, and conclusions will be drawn in section 4.

## 2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In considering linguistic disciplines, it may be argued that OHS discourse has been examined with particular reference to language

barriers affecting minorities' understanding of prevention rules and attempts to facilitate interaction. In this respect, it has been stressed that health and safety concerns are heightened when workers cannot comprehend the language in which safety instructions and warnings are given, resulting in forms of disadvantage (Mowbray 2012). In other words, in work settings featuring linguistic and cultural diversity, psychosocial and physical risks increase for all participants because of the complexity of interactions and understanding between the workers (Crichton and O'Neill 2016).

The communication of OHS rules on the part of experts to laypeople – either in monolingual or multilingual settings – is another widely-researched area. This topic has attracted increasing attention recently, as conveying clear instructions contributes to a higher degree of compliance with OHS rules. More generally, unambiguous safety communication leads to a better understanding of preventive measures, thus enhancing workplace safety practices (Narayan and Nair 2021).

Narrowing the focus to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), one interesting approach to OHS is the one adopted by Zoller (2003), who draws on Foucault to frame OSH regulation and implementation systems as a disciplinary discourse that manages and structures knowledge about workplace risks. Disciplinary power operates through multiple discourses to produce forms of knowledge and identity. In this way, discursive and ideological practices produce and normalize these constructed power relationships by framing what is considered possible in any given moment (Zoller 2003). In the context of this paper, this perspective is relevant considering that the OHS provisions discussed here were included in emergency legislation, which was passed during the COVID-19 pandemic using fast-track procedures. As a result, implementation of OHS regulations implies a power relationship, namely between legislators on the one hand and employers and workers on the other.

Arguably, OHS has become even more critical following the onset of the pandemic. In some cases, it has been stressed that discourse around certain occupations – e.g. nursing – has changed during COVID-19, giving rise to a newly articulated narrative which has positively influenced their reputation in OHS terms (Jones 2021). In some other cases, the analysis has considered the way OHS has been constructed and negotiated by means of certain communicative strategies in particularly problematic workplaces. In this respect, it has been pointed out that discursive strategies have been formulated to take on responsibility, crit-

icize other people's actions or argue in favour of certain safety strategies. Interestingly, these linguistic techniques also serve to promote what the official body deems to be norms or rules (Rasmussen 2010). In the next section – and following up on previous research – an analysis will be conducted on how OHS discourse is constructed in emergency legislation in the Italian and the US context.

### 3. METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Prior to investigating the documents selected, it is necessary to consider the methodological framework forming the basis for the present analysis. With a view to providing a comparison of the communication strategies implemented in Italy and the US in emergency legislation during the pandemic, two sets of provisions were examined, namely Italy's *Decreti del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri* (Prime Ministerial Decrees, hereinafter DPCMs) and the US Executive Orders, for a total of 66 documents. Specifically, the focus was on the rhetorical devices contained in the sections concerning the measures put in place to tackle COVID-19, considering the period from February 2020 to September 2021. The reason for selecting these provisions might be ascribed to the fact that they share similar characteristics, i.e. (a) they both have prescriptive character; (b) they are intended to deal with emergency situations; (c) they have immediate application. Tiersma (1999) argues that there exist three types of legal documents: operative legal texts – i.e. orders, statutes, contracts – are characterized by a performative function and a more rigid structure, whereas expository (judicial opinions and textbooks) and persuasive (briefs and memoranda) texts are more fluid from a textual point of view as they serve different purposes. Arguably, while DPCMs and Executive Orders are first and foremost intended to create and modify legal relations (Tiersma 1999), they also perform persuasive functions, in that the situation at the time called for lawmakers to enforce strict rules. The discursive mechanisms investigated below were selected manually, by comparing and contrasting excerpts from the texts forming part of the dataset.

### 3.1. Appeal to authority

Investigating the DPCMs and the Executive Orders, the first aspect that can be noticed is that they both make reference to some sort of higher authority, appealing to an authoritative figure in order to convey and strengthen the message (Taylor and Partington 2017). The extracts below provide evidence in support of this claim (*Tab. 1*).

*Table 1. – Argument from Authority in DPCMs and Executive Orders.  
Source: information compiled by the authors.*

DPCMs	EXECUTIVE ORDERS
In consideration of the <i>declaration of the World Health Organization (WHO)</i> of 30 January 2020, which characterized COVID-19 as a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) [DPCM of 1 March 2020]. (Own translation, emphasis added)	<i>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Surgeon General, and the National Institutes of Health</i> have concluded that mask-wearing, physical distancing, appropriate ventilation, and timely testing can mitigate the risk of travelers spreading COVID-19. (Emphasis added)
<i>Following the World Health Organization's declaration</i> of international public health emergencies on 30 Jan. 2020 [DPCM of 1 March 2020]. (Own translation, emphasis added)	Ensure that workers covered by such plans are adequately protected from COVID-19, consistent with any revised guidance or emergency temporary standards issued <i>by the Occupational Safety and Health Agency (OSHA)</i> . (Emphasis added)
<i>Given the World Health Organization's declaration</i> of 11 March 2020 in which the COVID-19 epidemic was characterized as a 'pandemic' [DPCM of 8 March 2020]. (Own translation, emphasis added)	<i>According to a recent study</i> , too many workers are exposed to COVID-19 and need further protection. (Emphasis added)

When analysing the use of this rhetorical device, there are two aspects that can be stressed. In the excerpts above – but this approach is recurrent in other parts of the statements examined – the argument from authority is put forward not so much to corroborate a theory. Rather than being used to support certain views, making reference to claims from leading institutions in both the Italian and the US statements serves as a justification for the COVID-19 measures about to be implemented. This interpretation supports the argument that consensus – in this case towards the policies adopted – plays a role in the impact of expert opinion when it is used in an argument from authority (Hornikx

2022). This holds true especially when some degree of uncertainty exists about the effectiveness of the measures implemented.

The other element which is worth investigating is the type of authority resorted to in the two sets of documents. The US statements make mention of national institutions – The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Surgeon General, and the National Institutes of Health, among others – while most of the Italian statements appeal to a supranational body, the World Health Organization (WHO). While doubts arise as to whether this is a deliberate move, an interpretation can be put forward about the choice of these authorities. In relation to the Italian case, opting for an internationally renowned institution appears to serve the purpose of seeking the support of the general public as regards the measures to be implemented (e.g. mask-wearing, social distancing, business closures). In this connection, mention should be made of the fact that some measures were opposed by the trade unions and the Opposition alike. Consequently, quoting the claims of an impartial, non-national source might strengthen the credibility of the message delivered. Additionally, most Italians appear to trust the WHO. According to a survey carried out in 2020, 7 Italians out of 10 regard the WHO as a reliable source of medical information (WHO 2020). As for the US, national institutions were referred to consistently in the texts examined, a fact which can be given two possible explanations. The first one is that – especially when President Trump was in office – growing public distrust of the WHO was reported in the US (Pew Research Centre 2020). Added to this was the fact that probably laypeople in the US have greater familiarity with national bodies than with the WHO, in some quarters seen as a distant entity, also in geographical terms. Consequently, in order to ensure acceptance of the measures put forward, choosing a nationally-recognized authority was regarded as a more suitable move. This reinforces the view that the choice of the persuasive authority is certainly influenced by the audience to which the message is addressed (Taylor and Partington 2017).

### 3.2. *(Negative) implicit evaluation*

A further aspect that can be stressed when examining the texts collected is the frequent use of language which frames the issue – COVID-19 – in negative terms (*Tab. 2*).



Table 2. – Negative Implicit evaluation in DPCMs and Executive Orders.

Source: information compiled by the authors.

DPCMS	EXECUTIVE ORDERS
[...] the evolution of the epidemiological situation and the particularly widespread character of the epidemic which led to an increase of the number of cases nationwide [DPCM of 9 March 2020]. (Own translation, emphasis added)	The COVID-19 pandemic has <i>exposed and exacerbated severe and pervasive health and social inequities in America.</i> (Emphasis added)
<i>A state of emergency has been declared for six months</i> in the national territory concerning the health risk related to the outbreak of diseases resulting from transmissible viral agents [DPCM of 8 March 2020]. (Own translation, emphasis added)	The virus has attacked our Nation's economy as well as its health. <i>Many businesses and non-profits have been forced to close or lay off workers.</i> (Emphasis added)
<i>The supranational dimensions of the epidemic</i> and the involvement of multiple areas across the country necessitate proper measures [DPCM of 11 March 2020]. (Own translation, emphasis added)	Healthcare workers and other essential workers, many of whom are people of color and immigrants, <i>have put their lives on the line during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.</i> (Emphasis added)

In the context of this paper, ‘evaluation’ is understood as “a cover term for the expression of the writer’s or the speaker’s attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feeling about the entities and propositions that he or she is talking about” (Thompson and Hunston 2000, 5). In this sense, it has been argued that implicit evaluation takes place through ‘tokens’ of judgment’, i.e. a factual, objective description of events which are socially value-laden (Haarman 2006). In our examples, portraying the pandemic as a global tragedy can be seen as an example of a token of judgment. There is overwhelming agreement that the pandemic has given rise to dire consequences around the world. Therefore, COVID-19 is framed for the addressees as an enemy to be fought in a proactive fashion. In other words, this ‘socially, value-laden description of events’ might implicitly prompt the addressee to take action against this state of affairs – e.g. wearing masks or complying with lockdown measures, also known as sheltering in place. This approach is also in keeping with Trapp’s categorization, according to whom evaluative propositions – which are employed to attach value judgments to objects, people, institutions or ideas (Trapp 2005) – can be divided into two subcategories, namely value claims and policy claims. While value claims make a declaration of values without explicitly urging any particular action, policy claims make state-

ments about value and action (Trapp 2005). Arguably, the texts examined in the context of this paper contain examples of policy claims: they assert an evaluation, including an explicit call for action.

Clearly, pointing out the adverse effects of the pandemic is intended to work in favour of the legislator, in this case the executive, as this way of framing the narrative can help overcome reluctance to comply with the measures they intend to enforce, preparing the general public to accept strict policies which were put in place against the virus spread. In addition to promoting a certain viewpoint of the issue in question and depicting the pandemic as an ominous event – the evaluative language used in the statements examined is also intended to ensure social order. This is in line with the arguments that significant links exist between language and power and that power relations work increasingly at implicit levels through language (Fairclough 1995).

### 3.3. (Over)specification

The texts making up the dataset compiled for this study also contain instances of overspecification (Tab. 3).

Table 3. – (Over)specification in DPCMs and Executive Orders.  
Source: information compiled by the authors.

DPCMs	EXECUTIVE ORDERS
[...] events and shows of any kind, whether public or private, <i>including those taking place in cinemas and theatres</i> , are suspended [DPCM of 1 April 2020]. (Own translation, emphasis added)	Accordingly, to save lives and allow all Americans, <i>including the millions of people employed in the transportation industry, to travel and work safely</i> , it is the policy of my Administration to implement these public health measures. (Emphasis added)
Suspension of work activities for businesses, save for those providing essential and public utility services, <i>which also include veterinary practices and those that can be carried out at home or away from the office</i> [DPCM of 8 March 2020]. (Own translation, emphasis added)	There is established a COVID-19 Pandemic Testing Board (Testing Board) for all employees. <i>The Testing Board shall include representatives from executive departments and agencies (agencies)</i> . (Emphasis added)
Closure of all commercial activities, with the exception of those of public utility and essential public services, <i>including commercial establishments for the purchase of essential goods</i> [DPCM of 9 March 2020]. (Own translation, emphasis added)	To bolster the capacity of the Nation's healthcare systems to support workers, <i>including healthcare staff</i> . (Emphasis added)

It is a truth universally acknowledged that legal texts tend to be lengthy and verbose. Reasons for this state of affairs include “the nature of the recipient structure, the complicated relationship the draftsman seems to have with different recipients and the nature of the loyalty they are required to display in their drafting practice” (Bhatia 2017, 163). In the texts examined, while the need to address a varied target audience – consisting of both specialists and laypeople – and the ensuing difficulties resulting from dealing with this heterogeneity might justify the prolixity of legislative texts, there is more to this than meets the eye. Interestingly, it is frequently the case that in the documents examined specification takes place at the textual level through parenthetical clauses – often introduced by the verb ‘to include’. In legal discourse, parenthetical clauses are employed in order to highlight important details and avoid misleading interpretations of certain matters. However, in the statements investigated here, this textual device does not seem to serve this purpose, because the measures laid down in the legislation foreground their universal character (i.e. “any kind of” or “all Americans” in some of the excerpts above). Therefore, if parenthetical sentences are not used to provide additional details about certain legislation, the question arises about their actual purpose. In general, legislation is intended to govern the behaviour of individuals in society through the use of rules and regulations. In this respect, one cannot fail to note that the statements examined appear to be over-specific when referring to workers or industries which will be affected the most by the measures implemented to tackle the pandemic. In other words, detailing some categories and omitting others might be indicative of the fact that they will bear the heaviest burden of the pandemic, especially at the time of implementing stringent measures which will no doubt affect them economically. This specification is therefore significant, as it can be interpreted as a warning to those sectors that will be hit the hardest by the measures implemented to tackle the pandemic. Omitting the parenthetical clauses in the US and the Italian texts would not compromise the meaning and content of the legal provisions, as they would be as precise and all-encompassing as the integral version. However, the function of language as a tool for exercising control comes to the fore again. In this sense, this discursive practice – i.e. being overly specific in relation to the scope of legislative provisions – might have implications for power and control in different socio-political systems (Bhatia 2010), e.g. compliance with emergency legislation, adherence to social behaviours and COVID-19 measures.

### 3.4. Popularization

The legal texts examined for this study feature examples of interdiscursivity. In other words, a discourse about a specific topic can take as its starting point one field of action and proceed through another one. This is also the case considering that discourses and discourse topics spread to different fields and discourses. They cross between fields, overlap, refer to each other or are in some other way socio-functionally linked with each other (Wodak and Meyer 2005). In the dataset examined, interdiscursivity can be seen in the overlapping between terminology belonging to the legal and the medical domains. While this aspect should come as no surprise – i.e. after all, the provisions contained in the documents deal with OHS – it is interesting to note that this hybridization causes discursive strategies to cut across different fields. One example of this is popularization – a communication process that involves the conveyance of specialized knowledge to the general public for education or information purposes (Gotti 2014) – which plays an important role also when used as a device to form or express stance and opinions (Myers 2010) (*Tab. 4*).

*Table 4. – Popularization in DPCMs and Executive Orders.  
Source: Information compiled by the authors.*

DPCMs	Executive Orders
[...] Workers should comply with respiratory hygiene (e.g. <i>sneezing and/or coughing into a handkerchief</i> ) [DPCM of 4 March 2020]. (Own translation, emphasis added)	The American workers have united behind a policy of mitigation strategies, including social distancing, <i>to flatten the curve of infections and to reduce the spread of COVID-19</i> . (Emphasis added)
In order to cope with the epidemiological emergency from COVID-19, <i>several regulatory interventions were made and multiple measures were introduced</i> , particularly for the protection of workers [DPCM of 10 April 2020]. (Own translation, emphasis added)	Vaccine safeguard workers from getting infected and severely ill, <i>and they significantly reduce the likelihood of hospitalization and death</i> . (Emphasis added)
Protective instruments for public and private workers engaged in activities aimed at ensuring the fulfilment of <i>essential and basic needs</i> [DPCM of 14 March 2021]. (Own translation, emphasis added)	Measures include wearing masks when around others, physical distancing, and other related precautions recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). <i>Put simply, masks and other public health measures reduce the spread of the disease</i> . (Emphasis added)

Two aspects can be pointed out when discussing the polarization devices in the dataset investigated. First, it may be noted that at times concepts pertaining to specialized discourses are popularized – i.e. reformulated – in order to be appreciated by laypeople. More often than not, this approach serves the purpose of facilitating understanding while ensuring acceptance. In this respect, many instances were found in which complex notions were explained in simple terms in order to enable non-specialist readers to make sense of the message conveyed. This is particularly the case when popularization implies rewording parts of discourse concerning measures or rules adopted to tackle the pandemic or limit its spread. A second point that can be made when examining the dataset compiled for this paper is that popularization can come in many forms. Previous studies have provided important insights into the nature of this knowledge dissemination process, listing a number of linguistic phenomena associated with this process – e.g. denominations, definitions, explanations, reformulations, generalizations, to name but a few (Calsamiglia and van Dijk 2004; Nikitina 2020). In this respect, and especially in the English-language material, repetition or reformulation techniques were particularly widespread as a means for confirmation or reinforcement. This leads us to assert that popularization is meant not only to adjust and adapt the communication of given contents, but also to persuade the addressee as to the reliability and validity of their meanings (Sala, Maci, and Gotti 2016).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper examined legal communication in OHS, paying particular attention to the strategies put in place in two different countries during the pandemic. For this purpose, an analysis was made between two sets of texts, namely DPCMs and Executive Orders, respectively drafted in Italy and the US as a response to COVID-19. Research into OHS discourse has attracted increasing attention following the outbreak of the pandemic and has been investigated from different research perspectives, due to the relevance it acquired when policy-makers were dealing with critical and unprecedented developments. A series of communicative techniques were outlined which were intended to ensure acceptance of the drastic measures laid down to protect workers. In this respect, while the legislative provisions examined were legally binding, they

encountered considerable resistance at the time of their implementation, especially because some perceived them as limiting their freedom to work, affecting their livelihood in a time of uncertainty. In both the countries examined, trade unions, workers and some political parties staunchly opposed the initiatives put forward by the governments to slow down the spread of the virus at the workplace. For this reason, communication played an important role in persuading the general public of the gravity of the health emergency and the need to comply with the emergency measures. For example, appealing to a higher authority to gain credibility with the addressees served precisely this purpose. The recourse to different authorities can be explained with the fact that some cultural differences exist between the countries analysed and with anti-WHO propaganda disseminated by the White House at some point in the midst of the pandemic. In relation to the US case, it is true that some documents made reference to the WHO, yet this happened only to a limited extent, as priority was given to national institutions which laypeople probably regarded as more trustworthy. Making use of language that was negatively connotated was a widespread feature of the documents examined. It can certainly be argued that it could not be otherwise, as the statements outlined the dire consequences of COVID-19. However, in communicative terms, placing emphasis on the negatives could have prompted the general public to comply with legislation, though unwillingly, in order to reduce the risk of contagion. Acceptance was also sought by mentioning the hardest-hit sectors and preparing them for even stricter OHS measures (overspecification). As a clarification device, overspecification in the provisions under examination might give rise to redundancy. Consequently, one possible interpretation is that it could be used as a means to make workers aware of the difficulties to be faced before returning to business as usual. The same can be said of the other technique which was investigated in this paper, i.e. popularization, which in all probability was not only employed for the purposes of clarification but also to help the addressees to form an idea about the scope of the initiatives put forward to protect the workplace. While making no claims to being exhaustive – e.g. future research could focus on the way information was organized and ordered to seek the approval of the general public of OHS measures – this paper highlights the links between emergency legislation, language choice, and the perceptions of the general public, pointing out how certain discourses can be instrumental in facilitating the implementation of law, even during a crisis.

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*How to cite this paper:*

Manzella, Pietro. 2022. "Occupational Health and Safety during COVID-19: A Cross-National Comparison of Discursive and Communication Practices in Italy and the US". *Lingue Culture Mediazioni / Languages Cultures Mediation – LCM* 9 (2): 169-182. doi: <https://doi.org/10.7358/lcm-2022-002-pman>