

# Rhetoric of American Identities

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(CORONA)REACTIONS / (KORONA)REAKCJE

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**KATARZYNA MOLEK-KOZAKOWSKA**

UNIVERSITY OF OPOLE

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9455-7384>

[molekk@uni.opole.pl](mailto:molekk@uni.opole.pl)

**Report on corona-discourses studied online**

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## Report on corona-discourses studied online

Despite lock-down conditions in most countries resulting in the isolation of academic communities, there are numerous attempts to reach out and engage in research and dissemination across countries in the virtual format. DiscourseNet community – an international association of discourse analysts based in humanistic and social sciences – has inaugurated monthly open online workshops that bridge multidisciplinary and multilingual interests of discourse scholars across the globe. On April 24, 2020 a workshop was organized to discuss the virality of corona discourses. On May 22, 2020 it discussed economic discourses and the construction of post-national identities in Europe following the post-pandemic economic conditions. On June 19, 2020 a talk was given to present a framework for studying emotions as an ideological framework to experience social change, including pandemics. The videoconferences offer a two-hour long interactive presentation, chat-based Q&A and general discussion. As many as 80 participants from as far away as Chile and Australia attend.

The inaugural April workshop, which was based in London, showcased recent research on coronavirus discourses going viral by Johannes Angermuller (Open University) and Juliane Reinecke (King's College) entitled “Science and populism in the coronavirus controversy: the celebrity logics of expert discourses.” The workshop initiated a debate on how discourse analysts should deal with a crisis caused by COVID-19 and how to make sense of the new political, social, cultural and media conditions in public communications. The focus of the presented studies was on expert (medical) discourses being drawn into the mediatized political confrontations. Not only do the ongoing medical developments fail to pinpoint precisely which policies to implement, but the vested interests of various communicators (politicians vying for reelection, celebrity doctors vying for fame, pharmaceutical companies vying for profits, scientific institutions vying for funding) make fair deliberation even more challenging. The complexity is confounded when powerful media institutions and social media platforms embark on promoting their own agendas and editorial lines amidst the uncertainty and disinformation.

That is why the workshop traced the unequal distribution of visibility of various virus-related issues and stakeholders, which is a result of “celebrity logics” in the presentation of the pandemic, particularly the focus on a “miracle drug” hydroxychloroquine in France (Angermuller) and the US (Reinecke). The main observation from the case studies presented is that (populist) leaders have been eager to draw on virus-containment-and-cure-related science selectively to appeal to the crowd. Also politicians might show distrust of established experts and opt for fringe voices and arrogant celebrity medical figures to stir controversy and cover up their failures. At the same time commercial media thrive on counter-discourses and are purposefully fueling controversy, which allows them to keep high viewing figures. Partisan media could be seen as reducing complex pandemic-related issues to binary oppositions and singled-out cases to keep their loyal audiences. The role of article/bulletin titles, tickers and infographics as well as rhetorics promoting statistics and mathematical models to boost credibility has been discussed.

The May workshop was based in Germany and featured Jens Maeße (Gießen) discussing a newly emerging geography of power in Europe seen as more diffuse than a former west-east divide. In “Post-national identities: How discourses of economics create social positions in European power/knowledge regimes,” the presenter compared economic data and policy papers related to industrial relations and labour relations in contemporary Europe internally and in the context of growth of China’s innovative technologies. The focus on economic discourse as “a lexis,” or “a signifying system” with a large metaphorical field for conceptualization of economic plans and assessments allows researchers to see how experts argue for specific policies in the face of a looming economic crisis.

For example in Poland (which was analyzed as the workshop’s case study), there has been a clash between the dramatic vocabularies of (1) “progress,” change and “development at high speed” fostered by “investment” and “competition” in a deregulated market and (2) a discourse of “stability,” “sustainability” and natural growth based on local, regional and national resources. According to analysts of economic discourses, each of these discursive formations breeds different identifications with political parties and translates into either cosmopolitan or nationalistic stances. It remains to be seen how these already entrenched discursive formations will be mapping onto corona discourses and the latest textual and argumentative strategies related to the economic crisis and the scenarios for restarting of the individual European states’ economies.

The June workshop featured a presentation by Adriana Bolívar (Universidad Central de Venezuela) with a talk on three national cases: the Chilean “emotional crisis” (October 2019), “love for the people” in the Venezuelan Bolivarian revolution (1998-2020), and the COVID 19 pandemic as “felt” in Mexico. All of them

have focused on developing a framework for the critical study of ideology from the perspective of emotions and the pathos that drives political change. Indeed, the context of Latin American politics seems to be best suited to study emotions in micro and macro dialogic situations across left and right politics and with both democratic and authoritarian overlays manifested over the last decade.

The COVID-19 study brings reflections on how an initially optimistic, even euphoric, reception of a newly elected president Obrador, and Mexicans' hope for transformation for the better, deteriorated with the pandemic generating fear for life, mistrust of public authorities and lack of solidarity, let alone instances of violence directed towards medical staff and institutions of healthcare. The study of mediated political corona discourses revealed the increase in public expressions of such emotions as fear, sadness and anger that hardened the authoritarian streak in the political elites that had previously been committed to the moral renewal of the country's social and economic system and the improvement of conditions of the common people.

The debate in the last workshop revealed the need for new theoretical and methodological approaches to studies of discourses, and, as did the previous ones, identified new research areas and topical issues for communication scholars, public deliberation and media researchers, as well as specialists in linguistics and rhetoric.

For recordings from workshops and announcements of new initiatives see the network's website <https://www.discourseanalysis.net/DN>