

# Pandemic pragmatics: War metaphors, social cohesion, and the need for a new “menu”

**Daniel J. Kim**<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>McMaster University, Faculty of Health Sciences

In the discourse of health crises, language and framing are conceptually inseparable: how a health-related notion is communicated shapes the frame through which it is understood [1-3]. This means that with the emergence of a viral pandemic, how it is reported to the general populace plays a critical role in processes of responsive decision-making and public opinion. Especially when it comes to the attribution of blame, framing has a central role, since it can dictate who or what is problematized [4]. Language is therefore embedded with the potential to either fuel or quell the associated risk of the crisis. Extant literature strongly reinforces this notion of an inextricable link between the content of language and the contours of perception. For example, in her explication of the ideological dimensions of media messages, Heck [5] asserts that “when a message is emitted it is not only what is said that has a significance but also the way it is said, and what is not said but could be said”. The discipline of pragmatics also evidences the importance of this link, as it seeks to look beyond the literal meaning of an utterance or sentence by including context in the evaluation of the expression-meaning relationship [6]. Its context-focused conceptual structure renders metaphors as more than just literary devices used to enrich language – they are a key mechanism in the toolbox of meaning-making that directly feed into processes of societal intersubjectivity [7]. A multi-layered exchange of parallelism emerges as the figuration of pragmatic meaning thr-

ough metaphorical language also reflects meanings of perceived reality and moral understanding [8].

Despite this incontrovertible consensus on the importance of language and framing, gaps remain in the literature regarding best practices for health crises messaging. A standard set of competencies for communicating public health crises has yet to be established [9], allowing for trendy language to dominate how pandemics are framed and discussed. One such trend, common throughout various mainstream channels of public information, is the war metaphor. Linguistic analogies to military terms and images have been widely and unquestioningly used to characterize health crises in mass media, social media, and government press. The COVID-19 pandemic presents a prime example of this hegemony – war metaphors were adopted as the go-to linguistic medium for illustrating danger and urgency, with the intent of expressing a compelling call to action in mainstream news. This is evidenced by Ogbodo and colleagues’ [2] content analysis of eight leading global media outlets which found 375 articles that directly espoused a “conflict” frame, including notions of the “frontline” and how “battling” coronavirus as a healthcare worker felt like “war”. The war metaphor also dominated social media spaces – topic modeling of tweets with #Covid-19 found that most of the Twitter discourse employed figurative way frames [10].

A Metaphor Identification Procedure of public broadcasts from the Prime Ministers of Malaysia and Singapore found that war metaphors conceptualized COVID-19 in political spheres as well [11]. The euphemism of a “long battle ahead” was used to frame the pandemic as urgent and dangerous, and this frame was not exclusive to specific cultures – on several occasions, President Donald Trump of the United States and President Emmanuel Macron of France referred to the virus as an “invisible enemy” and that “we are at war” [2].

Alternatively, social cohesion theory explores the degree of, as well as the factors involved in, both the absence of latent social conflict and the presence of strong social bonds [12]. Its beneficent essence substantiates social cohesion as a fundamental ingredient of any healthy society and its capacity to overcome health crisis, including pandemics. Yet pragmatic analyses suggest that the blaming implications of war metaphors seem to lie in opposition to social cohesion. For example, Wald [13] describes how “outbreak narratives” can affect the “identities” of the people concerned. From this conceptual lens, an inherent binarization of ‘friend’ and ‘foe’ can be identified in the war metaphor. With this notion is the innate need to attribute blame to a specific entity as the ‘villain’ of the situation, often being people groups due to the essentialist perception of warfare as occurring between humans. As the disease is vilified through military language, the villainizing narrative is extended to carriers of the disease, therefore discreetly painting patient populations, in addition to those of similar visible profiles, as ‘foes’. From an intersectional perspective, at the end of such a sequence is the exacerbation of social stigma, racism, and other unjust and divisive social forces.

Dhanani and Franz [14] present a strong example of this through their experimental st-

udy of the effects of COVID-19 framing in the United States. The war metaphor frame created a conceptual space wherein the notion of a threatening outgroup was essentialized and themes like ‘invaders’ and ‘militants’ correspondingly became intertwined with foreign populations closely linked to disease “threats”. In conjunction with this greater warfare narrative, the use of stigmatizing language and Asian framing led to sharp increases in American xenophobia and prejudice. The attributions of blame and risk escalated political tension and violence on both the local (within the United States) and global (against China) levels, thereby reinforcing the contrariety of the war metaphor frame and social cohesion. Furthermore, such spikes of racialized social discord presented a continuation of Murdocca’s [15] idea that pandemic media spectacles were often contingent upon spatial delineations of race and degeneracy, in line with the war narrative of a distinct ‘enemy’. The resulting representation of immigrants as vectors of disease reinforced the coercive power of the state and society over racial bodies and ultimately promoted the dehumanization of racialized identities within and across state borders. Similar consequences followed the employment of war metaphors by Prime Minister Modi of India in his public addresses about COVID-19, which engendered an inflammatory and aggressive blaming narrative that increased harm to already disadvantaged populations [16,17]. Together, these cases illustrated a ‘blame game’ that is antithetical to social cohesion and catalytic for violent inequity.

Metaphors are useful because they provide a way to express complex or abstract information in comparatively simple and concrete terms [18]. However, their powerful ability to frame perception necessitates scrutinizing their inconspicuous features and

enigmatic real-life outcomes, especially in situations where an acute disease phenomenon is accompanied by immense public information flow. In the context of pandemics, pragmatic analyses suggest an intangible relationship between the blaming implications of war metaphor norms and social rift. Thus, a different mode of expression is required – one that exchanges themes of conflict and violence for language connotated by peace and cooperation. One method can be drawn from the scholarship of Frank [19] who advocates for a need to think with stories in medicine, as opposed to the conventional metaphors of war. Similarly, the metaphor of a journey, common in the cultures of Sub-Saharan Africa, to illustrate the HIV experience presents another avenue by which militaristic notions can be surrendered for themes that better support the goal of healing and recovery [20].

Overall, ‘pandemic pragmatics’ reveals a grave need for plurality in the “metaphor menu” [21] of pandemic discourse in order to address the counterproductive impacts of war metaphors on how societies associate with pandemics. Moreover, a pursuit of social cohesion must be inherent in how pandemics are framed throughout local and global communication to actively extinguish the potential for the disadvantaging of certain populations.

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