

Fear Generation and Policy Legitimization Through Proximization of Threat in COVID-19 Discourse

*Safaa Mustafa Alshanawani**

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 has sparked a massive amount of uncertainty, panic, distress, and fear among the general public. In the absence of a vaccine or approved treatment (at that time), media briefings, press conferences and news headlines seem to have had one clear mission: to report the uncontrolled spread of the virus, death toll, and consequences of poor preventive measures by governments. The international institution which may be considered the official source of news updates on COVID-19 is the World Health Organization (WHO).

This paper aims to study the pattern of fear generation in the discourse on the novel coronavirus in the speeches given by WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, over a time span of ten months, starting January 2020 until October 2020. Since public discourse is often designed to justify policies set by policy-makers, decisions made by governments or measures set by officials to be followed by their audiences in order to prevent, neutralize or combat possible threats are also crafted by public discourse. Employing the tenets of Proximization Theory (henceforth PT), the paper reveals how the WHO Director-General's speeches comprise a variety of discursive strategies that evoke fear of the virus and legitimize the actions directed by the WHO and implemented by the governments of the world countries to face the threat of COVID-19. Accordingly, the study addresses the following questions:

- a) How is fear linguistically generated in the discourse on COVID-19?
- b) How does the Spatial-Temporal-Axiological model, posed by PT, detect the lexico-grammatical strategies of policy legitimization in the discourse on COVID-19?
- c) How far is PT successful in analyzing the proximization of COVID-19 threat in the selected speeches by WHO Director-General?

* Assistant Professor at Alexandria University.

Cairo Studies in English 2021(2): 164-186. <https://cse.journals.ekb.eg/>
DOI: 10.21608/cse.2022.59476.1088

The paper overviews the theoretical framework—PT, along with its spatial-temporal-axiological categories—on which the analysis of data is based. It also reviews a number of empirical studies that have implemented proximization in discourse studies. In Section 3, the investigated data and the methodology used in analyzing it are laid out. Section 4 includes a detailed analysis of data in light of the spatial-temporal-axiological categories of PT, and each analyzed category is directly followed by discussion. Finally, Section 5 is a conclusion which summarizes the research findings and suggests avenues for further studies.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1. Proximization Theory

PT has been developed by Polish linguist Piotr Cap (2006; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2017; 2019), who was greatly inspired by British professor of cognitive linguistics Paul Chilton (2004, 2014) and his Discourse/Deictic Space Theory. Chilton (2004) represents proximization as a model that has three axes: spatial, temporal and modal, which Cap later adapted and labeled the third axis as “axiological” (2006, 2013).

Proximization is a discursive strategy that has persuasive power over the addressees, as it “put[s] the discourse addressee in the center of events narrated to him/her” (Cap 2006, 4). The main aim of proximization as a strategy is to “presen[t] physically and temporally distant events and states of affairs (including “distant”, i.e., adversarial, ideological mind-sets) as directly, increasingly and negatively consequential to the speaker and her addressee” (Cap 2013, 3). As a result, the speaker employs additional discursive strategies that either seek to prompt preventive response from the audiences, or justify and legitimize policies set by policy-makers against the clear encroaching threat, or both.

Cap claims that legitimization involves cognitive and emotive coercion, “an intention to affect the beliefs, emotions and behaviors of others in such a way that suits one’s own interests” (2013, 33). Cognitive coercion involves the modification of the discourse recipients’ mental representations, the construction of new representations, or the reinforcement of new ones. Such strategies, in turn, affect the recipients’ emotions, which is known as “emotive coercion”. The purpose of all these coercive strategies is to alert the discourse recipients to a forthcoming threat, which requires their approval of immediate pre-emptive actions.

PT subsumes three frameworks: the spatial proximization framework, the temporal proximization framework, and the axiological proximization framework. Each framework deploys a number of lexico-grammatical choices

that are assigned to the categories of space, time, and value, respectively (Cap, 2013). Cap (2017) refers to the speaker and their addressee as inside-deictic-centre (IDC) entities, and to the peripheral entities as outside-deictic-centre (ODC) entities, which are the source of the threat, and which symbolically seem to be crossing the DS (Discourse Space) to invade the IDC entities. This is the broad sense of “proximization”, which is defined as “a forced construal operation meant to evoke closeness of the external threat, to solicit legitimization of preventive measures” (Cap 2017, 16). Since PT subsumes three frameworks: the spatial, temporal and ideological, the threat envisaged can be construed in those three aspects.

Cap (2017, 17) defines the three aspects of proximization as follows:

- a. ‘Spatial proximization’ is a forced construal of the DS peripheral entities encroaching physically upon the DS central entities (speaker, addressee).
- b. ‘Temporal proximization’ is a forced construal of the envisaged conflict as not only imminent, but also momentous, historic and thus needing immediate response and unique preventive measures.
- c. ‘Axiological proximization’ involves construal of a gathering ideological clash between the ‘home values’ of the DS central entities (IDCs) and the alien, antagonistic (ODC) values.

Cap (2013, 2017) claims that the speaker’s lexico-grammatical choices reflect their construal of the encroaching ODC threat. Each proximization strategy is realized in the speaker’s rhetoric by a set of lexical choices and grammatical patterns that enact the given strategy. Such linguistic realization of the envisaged threat has the power to legitimize actions against the threat.

1.2. The linguistic realization of spatial proximization

The spatial proximization framework subsumes a range of linguistic elements at the lexical and grammatical levels to account for a) the positive characterization of the IDC, b) the negative characterization of the ODC, c) the movement of the ODC towards the IDC, and d) the range of the negative consequences of the ODC’s invasion of the IDC. Cap (2013, 105) lists these categories as follows:

- (1) Noun phrases (NPs) construed as elements of the deictic center of the DS (IDCs)
- (2) Noun phrases (NPs) construed as elements outside the deictic center of the DS (ODCs)
- (3) Verb phrases (VPs) of motion and directionality construed as markers of movement of ODCs towards the deictic center

- (4) Verb phrases (VPs) of action construed as markers of impact of ODCs upon IDCs
- (5) Noun phrases (NPs) denoting abstract concepts construed as anticipations of impact of ODCs upon IDCs
- (6) Noun phrases (NPs) denoting abstract concepts construed as effects of impact of ODCs upon IDCs

Cap (2013) states that the first three categories are the main categories of spatial proximization: they account for the IDC entities, the ODC entities, and the symbolic, threatening movement of the ODC towards the IDC, or its symbolic invasion of its territory. He states that the next three categories are extra, yet equally important categories, as they account for the extent of the destructive consequences of the ODC impact. Thus, the six categories need not be employed in the text under scrutiny at the same time.

1.3. The linguistic realization of temporal proximization

Temporal proximization can be symbolically represented on a time axis which features the speaker's present, or "now", at the centre of the axis, while known events of the past and foreseen future events are located on either end of the axis. Cap (2013) points out that future events necessarily refer to events of the *near* future, which reinforces the legitimization of the speaker's and their affiliates' *prompt* action. The two solid arrows pointing to "Now" from the right and the left ends of the axis represent two temporal shifts. The first shift is the construal of the past events and actions carried out by the ODC entities as informing the speaker's present and reminding them of the destructive consequences of the past ODC actions. The second shift is the future-to-present shift, which construes the ODC envisaged ominous future actions as an emerging threat that can materialize in the speaker's present. As for the dotted arrow that moves straight from the Past frame, passing through Now and reaching the Future frame, it symbolizes the collected premises from the past and present events that serve as premises for the future. Hence, Cap defines temporal proximization more technically as "a symbolic "compression" of the time axis, and a partial conflation of the three-time frames, involving two simultaneous conceptual shifts" (2013, 85). All this gives the speaker the legitimization of their current/future pre-emptive actions which they seek.

Temporal proximization makes a distinction between two concepts of time, real time (RT) and construed time (CT), each of which has distinct linguistic markers. The distinction between the linguistic markers of RT and CT is explicated by Cap as follows:

RT markers denote events as happening at dated points in time, while the CT markers “fit” these points (and the events), by analogy and other means, into preferred temporal frames. It should be remembered that the RT markers do not only denote actual past events, but can also describe or presuppose future point-in-time events, which the CT markers turn into durative phenomena. They are “durative” in the sense that they can be construed as occurring anytime between the now and the infinite future. (2013, 111-112)

The lexico-grammatical markers of temporal proximization are laid out by Cap (2013, 112-4) as follows:

- (1) Noun phrases (NPs) involving indefinite descriptions construing ODC actual impact acts in alternative temporal frames
- (2) Discourse forms involving contrastive use of the simple past and the present perfect construing threatening future extending infinitely from a past instant
- (3) Noun phrases (NPs) involving nominalizations construing presupposition of conditions for ODC impact to arise anytime in the future
- (4) Verb phrases (VPs) involving modal auxiliaries construing conditions for ODC impact as existing continually between the now and the infinite future
- (5) Discourse forms involving parallel contrastive construals of oppositional and privileged futures extending from the now

1.4. The linguistic realization of axiological proximization

Axiological proximization is defined as “a forced construal of a gathering ideological conflict between the ‘home values’ of the DS central entities, IDCs, and the ‘alien’, antagonistic values of the ODCs” (Cap 2013, 94). Just like the two earlier strategies of proximization, i.e. the spatial and temporal, axiological proximization similarly involves the narrowing of the construed distance between the IDC and ODC, yet this narrowing poses a danger to the IDC on an ideological level and threatens the “values” of the IDC entities, leading to a physical clash.

Cap (2013, 119) points out that ideological proximization is manifested lexico-grammatically in discourse by the following means:

- (1) Noun phrases (NPs) construed as IDC positive values or value sets (ideologies)

- (2) Noun phrases (NPs) construed as ODC negative values or value sets (ideologies)
- (3) Discourse forms no longer than one sentence or two consecutive sentences involving linear arrangement of lexico-grammatical phrases construing materialization in the IDC space of the ODC negative ideologies.

In his analysis of the US-war-on-Iraq discourse, Cap (2013) notes that such ideological clash surfaces in single-word nominals referring to the IDC values, such as “freedom” and “democracy” and others referring to the antagonistic ideology of the ODC such as “dictatorship” and “radicalism”. It is worth noting that axiological proximization may not always be detected in texts in which speakers use proximization as a discourse strategy. For instance, Cap’s (2017) analysis of legitimization strategies in the discourse of cyberspace (or cyber-terror) reveals the existence of fear-inducing representations of the online, virtual world. Nevertheless, his analysis shows that the discourse of cyber space does not contain an axiological element as it “does not prescribe clear links between postures and actions of the antagonistic groups; nor does it link its fearful anticipations to the negligence and inaction on the part of the home group” (Cap, 2017, 65.) This reiterates the fact that the three STA frameworks of proximization need not be simultaneously at play in all texts which feature proximization discourse.

2. Empirical Studies on Proximization in Political Discourse

PT has been mainly used to analyze the mechanism of proximization in political discourse. Chilton (2004) uses it to analyze three different types of political communication at the domestic level. First, he studies broadcast political interviews and analyzes their microstructure, then moves to parliamentary assemblies, and finally inspects political speeches and the coercive strategies that force particular emotive and cognitive responses. Chilton (2004) also analyzes international political discourse exemplified by the address given by President George W. Bush on 7 October 2001 which sought to legitimize war on Afghanistan as a response to the attacks on The World Trade Center and the Pentagon a month earlier on 11 September 2001.

Cap (2006, 2008, 2010, 2014) applies PT to the discourse of the US war-on-terror, and the Iraq war in particular. He analyzes G. W. Bush’s speeches at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) on 26 February 2003, three weeks before the US military troops entered Iraq on 19 March, and also excerpts from Bush’s address to British academics at Whitehall Palace in London, England, on 19

November 2003, in which he discusses Iraq policy. Cap distinguishes the two opposing camps—the IDC entities and the ODC entities—as those of “the western democracies” on the one hand, and the Middle East “dictatorships and regimes” on the other (Cap, 2010). In his sequential studies, Cap investigates the proximization strategies that are used by Bush to legitimize going to war in Iraq.

Abuarrah (2016) employs PT to study the different discursive functions that the adverb ‘now’ has in political discourse. He examines a number of political speeches and argues that the speaker’s deliberate inclusion of the temporal deictic adverb ‘now’ in their speech has the ability to change the structure of the hearer’s cognitive space. This is achieved through proximizing threats, thus making the hearer more likely to comply with directives, legitimize the proposed policies, and take immediate action.

Similarly, Abdelhameed (2020) investigates the aspects of proximization in political discourse, particularly in the presidential speeches by Johnson and Bush in which the speakers aim to legitimize waging war on Vietnam and Iraq, respectively. Abdelhameed sheds light on the speakers’ employment of lexico-grammatical choices, deixis and modality to proximize foreign threats and legitimize actions against those imminent threats. The study reveals that both Johnson and Bush use proximization strategies—though with varying degrees—to achieve their goals, which are to increase U.S. military forces in Vietnam and topple the Iraqi regime and overthrow the government.

Mando and Stack (2019) also employ PT as a tool to delineate the rhetorical and proximization strategies used in the discourse of 43 articles, published in different periodicals, representing the Asian carp as a threat to the American waterways. The study reveals the writers’ structural and lexico-grammatical choices that establish the Asian carp as an outsider threat with foreseen ecological and economic damage that is continually getting nearer to the deictic center, which is the Great Lakes of North America. The authors argue that the physiological threat of the Asian carp—their rapid growth rate, adaptability, etc—to existing ecosystems in the United States could be regarded as a metaphor for the threat posed by immigration on national security.

Though PR was originally formulated to deal with instances of political communication (presidential addresses, parliamentary debates), its application has been extended to cover a wide range of public discourses, such as immigration debates and anti-tobacco campaigns (Cap, 2017). PR has also been used as a tool for discourse analysis in the domains of health and modern technology in which a distant threat—such as cancer and cyber threat—is

represented as imminent to the speaker and their addressees. The present research attempts to trace the proximization devices in COVID-19 discourse.

3. Data and methodology: The STA Model

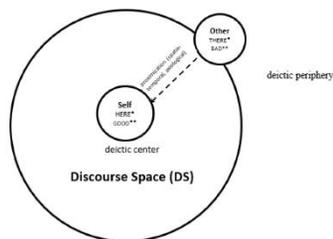
This study applies the same methodology—which is a cognitive-pragmatic approach—which Cap (2010, 2013, 2017) applies in accounting for the mechanism of proximization in public communication. It is important to stress the fact that the current study is a qualitative study rather than a quantitative one, meaning that conclusions are drawn from the linguistic analysis and interpretation of data and are not based on lexico-grammatical frequency counts that are quantitatively verifiable. Accordingly, the study aims to shed light on the different proximization strategies that public speakers use to influence their addressees and justify their proposed actions by providing concrete examples from the data under investigation. The instrument of analysis utilized in the study is the STA model, which comprises three frameworks—spatial, temporal and axiological—to account for the three proximization strategies public speakers may employ in their rhetoric.

The WHO Director-General's remarks at the media briefings on COVID-19 constitute the data of this study. The briefings span a period of ten consecutive months: from January 2020 to October 2020. The WHO website <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches> contains 126 speeches given by the WHO Director-General at the media briefings on COVID-19 during the aforementioned period. It is worth noting that the present study examined all the speeches, yet did not extract samples from all of them. The corpus items listed in the tables in Section 4 are only exemplary of the linguistic categories.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion: Proximization Strategies

Before analyzing the data, it is important to illustrate how PT envisages the physical relation between the IDC and ODC entities. Central to PT is the notion of deictic or discourse space (henceforth DS) which is substantially derived from Chilton's (2004, 2014) Deictic/Discourse Space Theory. Chilton symbolically views discourse space as a sphere where all social entities and the relationships between them cognitively exist. Chilton's architecture of DS symbolically situates the speaker (Self), with whom the positive qualities are associated, at the deictic center, whereas antagonistic entities (Other) and their negative qualities are positioned at the periphery. The distance between the Self and the Other may be construed as physical or spatial distance, temporal distance, or ideological distance. Such distancing is manifested in the speaker's linguistic choices which depict the Other as a distant yet potential threat to the Self and its in-group.

When a speaker employs proximization strategies in their discourse, the physical architecture of the discourse space which existed prior to their speech symbolically changes. The following figure (Figure 1) is a symbolic representation of the three aspects of proximization in the DS.



4.1. The linguistic realization of spatial proximization in the data

The above-listed categories of the spatial proximization framework have been inspected and detected in the speeches given by the WHO Director-General on COVID-19 and published at the WHO official website. The lexico-grammatical items which are considered manifestations of spatial proximization are classified in Table 1 below.

Figure 1. Proximization in discourse space (DS) (Cap 2019, 10)
 * centre-periphery opposites in spatio-temporal proximization
 **centre-periphery opposites in axiological proximization.

Table 1: Key lexico-grammatical and discourse items of the temporal proximization framework

Category	Key corpus items
1) Noun phrases (NPs) construed as elements of the deictic center of the DS (IDCs)	1. We; 2. WHO; 3. WHO and partners; 4. Leaders; 5. citizens; 6. countries; 7. societies; 8. regions; 9. public health; 10. lives; 11. livelihoods; 12. schools; 13. students; 14. staff; 15. faculty; 16. community; 17. the world; 18. people; 19. governments; 20. populations; 21. health workers ; 22. low- and middle-income countries; 23. economies

<p>(2) Noun phrases (NPs) construed as elements outside the deictic center of the DS (ODCs)</p>	<p>24. COVID-19 pandemic; 25. the virus; 26. this outbreak; 27. novel coronavirus; 28. unknown pathogen; 29. unprecedented outbreak; 30. the disease; 31. public enemy number one; 32. a common enemy; 33. threat</p>
<p>(3) Verb phrases (VPs) of motion and directionality construed as markers of movement of ODCs towards the deictic center.</p>	<p>34. [can cause] severe disease [<i>to IDC</i>]; 35. before the virus [gets a foothold] [<i>in the IDC</i>]; 36. it [can kill] [<i>the IDC</i>]; 37. it [causes] milder symptoms [<i>to the IDC</i>]; 38. what sort of damage this virus [could do] if it were to spread in a country with a weaker health system; 39. The only aim of the virus is [to find] people to infect; 40. This outbreak [could still go] in any direction; 41. Now that the virus [has a foothold in so many countries], the threat of a pandemic [has become] very real 42. globally the pandemic [is actually speeding up];</p>
<p>(4) Verb phrases (VPs) of action construed as markers of impact of ODCs upon IDCs.</p>	<p>43. countries [are losing] gains made as proven measures to reduce risk are not implemented or followed; 44. The COVID-19 pandemic [is causing a significant loss of life, disrupting livelihoods, and threatening to undo much of the progress we have made]; 45. The pandemic – and the measures taken in many countries to contain it – [have taken a heavy toll on lives, livelihoods and economies];</p>

<p>(5) Noun phrases (NPs) denoting abstract concepts construed as anticipations of impact of ODCs upon IDCs</p>	<p>46. [emergence] of a previously unknown pathogen; 47. [the risk] of it becoming more widespread globally; 48. [the likelihood of spillover] of a novel pathogen from animals to humans is increasing</p>
<p>(6) Noun phrases (NPs) denoting abstract concepts construed as effects of impact of ODCs upon IDCs</p>	<p>49. That is our best chance of preventing [a broader global crisis]; 50. You can prevent [people getting sick]; 51. This is a time for taking action now to prevent [infections]; 52. In several countries across the world, we are now seeing [dangerous increases in cases]</p>
<p><i>Source:</i> https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/</p>	

The corpus items in Table 1 above demonstrate how COVID-19 is construed as a physically vicious character with an imminent destructive impact. First, the negative characterization of the ODC entity, which is COVID-19, through the use of fear-provoking noun phrases in category (2), puts the ODC in stark contrast with the IDC entities which are characterized as neutral and harmless in category (1). In addition, the verb phrases that represent categories (3) and (4) construe the physical distance between the IDCs and ODCs as gradually narrowing, and therefore, alarming. The italicized phrases inside square brackets (in corpus items 34, 35, 36 and 37) are not corpus expressions—they are contextual elaborations provided to show the direction of the movement of ODC towards the deictic center. Cap (2013) argues that spatial proximization aims to highlight the tangible consequences of the ODC impact, and that is achieved through the inclusion of many IDC lexical items in categories 5 and 6 that represent the entities affected by the ODC impact.

Spatial proximization seeks to portray the consequences of the ODC impact as massive and global. This is visible in Table 1 in the lexical items representing category (1). The WHO Director-General’s speeches disclose that the range of IDC entities that are threatened by the ODC is rather limitless, as the IDC entities include whole “regions”, “societies”, “health workers” and even school “students”. In addition, the use of quantifiers such as “many” (corpus item 41), and comparative forms as in “a broader global crisis” (corpus item 49) and “more

widespread” (corpus item 47), conceptually extends the IDC territory affected by the ODC impact and increases the intensity and capacity of the ODC impact.

One of the coercive tools that proximization typically utilizes is reasoning by analogy which serves to infer information about an “unknown” entity by systematically resembling it to a “known” thing. The examined data displays a regular construal of the ODC as an “animate” entity; that is, the threat is provided with human traits. Such characterization of the threat maximizes its speed and impact and reinforces its invasive character. This is realized in Table 1 in the noun phrases referring to COVID-19 as “enemy”; however, the personification of the threat as a dangerous killer is most visible in the verb phrases denoting the actions this virus can do: “it can cause severe disease”, “before the virus gets a foothold”, “it can kill”, “it could still go in any direction”, etc.

More importantly, Cap (2017, 79) stresses that metaphor is the “prime lexicogrammatical carrier” of spatial proximization. In their 1980 book *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson propose that

[m]etaphors may create realities for us. [...] A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies. (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 156)

Metaphors, in this perspective, have conceptual structures. In the speeches under analysis, the ODC invasion of the IDC territory is construed through the employment of the metaphor COVID-19 IS ENEMY, which conceptualizes the IDC as geopolitically threatened by the invasive ODC. This conceptual metaphor has clearly shaped the language used to report the news of the virus, which is manifested in the underlined phrases in the following extracts from the speeches:

We have a common enemy which is dangerous, and which can bring serious upheaval – social, economic and political. (Feb 7)

This is a time for all of us to be united in our common struggle against a common threat – a dangerous enemy. (April 15)

This is a common enemy. Let’s keep that solidarity up. We’re one human race, and that suffices actually. This is an invisible enemy against humanity. (March 19)

This virus is presenting us with an unprecedented threat. But it's also an unprecedented opportunity to come together as one against a common enemy – an enemy against humanity (March 18)

As you know, global coordination is key in fighting a dangerous enemy like this coronavirus (Feb 20)

The fight against rumours and misinformation is a vital part of the battle against this virus. We rely on you to make sure people have accurate information about the threat they face, and how to protect themselves and others. (March 5)

As we battle COVID-19, ensuring health systems continue to function is an equally high priority as we recognize the risk to life from any suspension of essential services, like child immunization. (May 20)

The first vaccine could be ready in 18 months, so we have to do everything today using the available weapons to fight this virus, while preparing for the long-term. (Feb 11)

We are at war with a virus that threatens to tear us apart – if we let it. (March 26)

Hence, the COVID-19 IS AN ENEMY metaphor constructs not just the way we perceive the virus as a threat that can attack, hurt and destroy us, but also the way we should act toward it. As a result, this analogy deliberately legitimizes the actions the speaker calls for in his speeches: to devise preventative measures, wage war on the virus, etc. As Lakoff and Johnson state,

Personification is a general category that covers a very wide range of metaphors, each picking out different aspects of a person or ways of looking at a person. What they all have in common is that they are extensions of ontological metaphors and that they allow us to make sense of phenomena in the world in human terms—terms that we can understand on the basis of our own motivations, goals, actions, and characteristics. (1980, 34)

4.2. The linguistic realization of temporal proximization in the data

The five lexico-grammatical categories of temporal proximization laid out in section (2.1.2) are realized in the speeches of the WHO Director-General as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Key lexico-grammatical and discourse items of the temporal proximization framework

Category	Key corpus items
(1) Noun phrases (NPs) involving indefinite descriptions construing ODC actual impact acts in alternative temporal frames	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The COVID-19 pandemic is [an unprecedented global crisis]; 2. We are not just fighting to contain [a virus] and save lives. We are also in [a fight] to contain the social and economic damage [a global pandemic] could do; 3. We have [a common enemy] which is dangerous, and which can bring [serious upheaval – social, economic and political]. This is the time to fight it in unison; 4. The emergence of [any new pathogen with the potential to cause severe illness and death] is of grave concern and must be taken with the utmost seriousness; 5. This outbreak is testing us in many ways. It's a test of political solidarity – whether the world can come together to fight [a common enemy] that does not respect borders or ideologies; 6. Over the past few weeks, we have witnessed the emergence of [a previously unknown pathogen], which has escalated into [an unprecedented outbreak], and which has been met by [an unprecedented response]. 7. before the virus gets [a foothold]; 8. We are working to prevent [human-to-human transmission]; 9. we must all act together now to limit [further spread]; 10. In a world that is heating up and where intensified human activity is shrinking wild spaces, the likelihood of [spillover of a novel pathogen from animals to humans] is increasing.
(2) Discourse forms involving contrastive use of	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. It [took] more than 2 months for the first 100,000 cases to be reported. For the past two

<p>the simple past and the present perfect construing threatening future extending infinitely from a past instant</p>	<p>weeks, more than 100,000 new cases [have been reported] almost every single day;</p> <p>12. [Last week, China reported] a new cluster of cases in Beijing, after more than 50 days without a case in that city. More than 100 cases [have now been confirmed];</p> <p>13. It's hard to believe that just two months ago, [this virus (...) was completely unknown] to us. As of 6am Geneva time this morning, there were 42,708 confirmed cases reported in China, and tragically [we have now surpassed 1000 deaths - 1017 people in China have lost their lives] to this outbreak</p>
<p>(3) Noun phrases (NPs) involving nominalizations construing presupposition of conditions for ODC impact to arise anytime in the future</p>	<p>14. We continue to work closely with the Chinese government to support its efforts to address this outbreak at the epicenter. That is our best chance of preventing [a broader global crisis];</p> <p>15. Of course, [the risk of it becoming more widespread globally] remains high;</p> <p>16. So let's use this opportunity to prevent [further spread] and to control it;</p> <p>17. We are working to prevent [human-to-human transmission];</p> <p>18. countries must stay alert to [the possibility of resurgence];</p> <p>19. [the likelihood of spillover of a novel pathogen from animals to humans] is increasing</p> <p>20. aggressive, early measures can prevent [transmission before the virus gets a foothold]</p>
<p>(4) Verb phrases (VPs) involving modal auxiliaries construing conditions for ODC impact as existing continually between the now and the infinite future</p>	<p>21. People infected with COVID-19 [can still infect others] after they stop feeling sick;</p> <p>22. the global COVID-19 outbreak [can now be described] as a pandemic;</p> <p>23. The economic impact of the pandemic in humanitarian settings [can aggravate already dire living conditions];</p> <p>24. Deep budget cuts to education and rising poverty caused by the pandemic [could force at least 9.7 million children out of school forever];</p> <p>25. If we don't get rid of the virus everywhere, we [can't rebuild economies anywhere];</p>

	<p>26. What's really concerning is the vast spectrum of symptoms that fluctuate over time, often overlap and [can affect any system in the body];</p> <p>27. Access to medical oxygen could be the difference between life and death for some patients, but there is already a shortage in many countries, which [could be exacerbated by this epidemic];</p> <p>28. At the same time, lifting restrictions too quickly [could lead to a deadly resurgence];</p> <p>29. In the last 100 days, COVID-19 has shown us [the damage it can mete out in wealthy nations];</p> <p>30. We are yet to see [the devastation it could wreak in poorer and more vulnerable countries];</p> <p>31. Without help and action now, poor countries and vulnerable communities [could suffer massive devastation];</p> <p>32. If countries rush to lift restrictions too quickly, [the virus could resurge and the economic impact could be even more severe and prolonged];</p> <p>33. Gaps in essential care [can result in many more deaths than the coronavirus itself];</p> <p>34. We are already seeing the economic and social effects of this pandemic in high-income countries. In poor communities, [those effects could be even more severe and long-lasting];</p> <p>35. Early evidence suggests most of the world's population remains susceptible. That means [epidemics can easily re-ignite];</p> <p>36. We know that this virus [can cause] severe disease, and that it [can kill];</p> <p>37. We don't know what [sort of damage this virus could do] if it were to spread in a country with a weaker health system;</p>
<p>(5) Discourse forms involving parallel contrastive construals of oppositional and privileged futures extending from the now</p>	<p>38. [<i>oppositional</i> if the basics aren't followed, there is only one way this pandemic is going to go. It's going to get worse and worse and worse]. [<i>privileged</i> But it does not have to be this way. Every single leader, every single government and every single person can do</p>

	<p>their bit to break chains of transmission and end the collective suffering].</p> <p>39. [<i>oppositional</i> The epidemics in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy and the Republic of Korea demonstrate what this virus is capable of. But this virus is not influenza]. [<i>privileged</i> With the right measures, it can be contained].</p> <p>40. [<i>oppositional</i> Any country that looks at the experience of other countries with large epidemics and thinks “that won’t happen to us” is making a deadly mistake. It can happen to any country]. [<i>privileged</i> The experience of China, the Republic of Korea, Singapore and others clearly demonstrates that aggressive testing and contact tracing, combined with social distancing measures and community mobilization, can prevent infections and save lives.]</p> <p>41. [<i>oppositional</i> As some countries start to open up, we see cases and deaths starting to spike and concerns about potential lack of hospital capacity]. [<i>privileged</i> This is a critical moment for countries and we ask leaders to put targeted measures in place that we know can suppress the spread and ensure that health systems and workers are protected.]</p>
<p>Source: https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/</p>	

The first lexico-grammatical category of the framework displays the fundamental role construed time (CT) plays in the temporal proximization framework. Using markers of indefiniteness, such as determiners “a”, “an”, “any”, or another” with singular nouns, or indefinite plural nouns results in the construal of RT (real time) events that actually happened at some point in time as events that could have occurred any time—before their real time, at the moment of speaking, or at any moment in the future (Cap, 2013). In other words, this is how CT markers could turn real time (RT) events into durative phenomena.

Following Cap’s (2013) representation of the phrase “a September morning”, which is taken from a speech given by George W. Bush on February 26, 2003 and regarded by Cap as an epitome of temporal proximization, the phrase “any new pathogen with the potential to cause severe illness and death” extracted from

the speech given by the WHO Director-General on January 29, 2020 can be analogically interpreted as follows. The indefiniteness of the phrase “any new pathogen” in the WHO Director-General’s statement “The emergence of any new pathogen with the potential to cause severe illness and death is of grave concern and must be taken with the utmost seriousness” employs the two concepts of time: RT and CT, and allows the indefinite phrase to apply to multiple timeframes: the past frame, the “now”, and the future frame. Though we know that the speaker is speaking at the time (RT) of the outbreak of COVID-19, the indefiniteness of the phrase he uses to refer to the present time pathogen (i.e., COVID-19) allows the addressees, through a forced construal, to recollect other pathogens that broke out in a different time frame (i.e. the past), such as SARS in 2003, MERS in 2019, and Ebola in 2014 (still around in 2020), that were equally deadly and disastrous. However, more importantly, the marker of indefiniteness, “any,” forces the construal of “any new pathogen” in the future frame as it stresses that such a pathogen can break out at any point in time, that it is continually threatening, and can reoccur in the future. This intensifies the legitimacy of the present/future preemptive actions that the speaker calls out for in all his speeches. Figure 2 below illustrates how the indefinite phrase “any new pathogen” applies to three temporal frames:

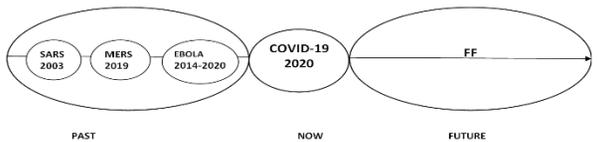


Figure 2. “Any new pathogen” dividing the time axis into three temporal frames

The second lexico-grammatical category of the temporal proximization framework clearly contrasts the safe past with the hazardous future by the means of juxtaposition of a fact that existed in the past frame and that which has happened in the present frame and will continue to take effect in the future frame. This is overtly represented in the statement “It’s hard to believe that just *two months ago*, this virus (...) *was completely unknown* to us. (...) and tragically *we have now surpassed* 1000 deaths - 1017 people in China *have lost* their lives to this outbreak”, said by WHO Director-General on February 11, 2020. The threat—which was nonexistent at one point in the RT past frame, then occurred at a later point in the RT past frame, then extended to affect the present RT, and is expected to reach the future frame—can be illustrated as follows:

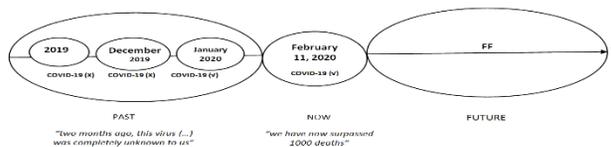


Figure 3: Contrastive use of the simple past and the present perfect construing threatening future extending infinitely from a past instant

As regards the third category in the temporal proximization framework, while it has multiple representative lexico-grammatical corpus items, it is perfectly represented in corpus item (20) by the WHO Director-General’s statement “aggressive, early measures can prevent transmission before the virus gets a foothold” on February 27, 2020. By the time the speech was delivered, it had become evident that one of the threats of COVID-19 is that it is easily transmitted from one human to another. The nominalization of “transmission” places it in both the present RT—or the “now” frame—as well as the construed future, rendering the menacing “transmission” of the virus expected at any moment. In addition, the non-deictic temporal clause “before the virus gets a foothold”, in which the present simple tense has futurate reference, explicitly refers to the predictable future threat that will inevitably take place unless proper preventive action is hastily taken.

In category 4, the modal auxiliaries designated by Cap are mainly the modals of ability, “can” and “could”, which are followed by bare infinitives. Though Cap suggests that the “now” is basically coded by adverbials of time such as “now” or “at this moment”, such adverbials have not been explicitly employed by the speaker in the investigated corpus. Nevertheless, the present “point-in-time” is marked by the present simple tense of the verb phrases listed as corpus items representing category 4 in Table 2 above, which makes the ODC impact not only existent in the RT but also durative, which in turn intensifies the fear associated with the threat.

Finally, category 5 aims to depict the “contrast between the “privileged future” (the future favored and pursued by the speaker) and the “alternative”, “oppositional future” (the future disqualified by the speaker)”, both of which are extensions of the present (Cap 2013, 90). According to Cap, the two views of the futures are in competition with each other. Each of the corpus items representing category 5 in Table 2 above constitutes the two views; the oppositional view predicts the grim future ahead if pre-emptive measures are not taken, while the privileged, rational view shows the way out of this turmoil if immediate action is taken. It is palpable that all the five categories of the temporal proximization framework serve one clear purpose: to legitimize the action called out for by the speaker and ensure its credibility.

4.3. *The linguistic realization of axiological proximization in the data*

As pointed out by Cap (2010, 2013, 2017, 2019), axiological proximization relies on the opposition and antagonism between the value systems of the IDC and ODC camps. It involves the speaker's construal of an ideological conflict between the IDC and ODC, such as the ideological conflict between democratic and autocratic regimes in Cap's aforementioned studies (see section 2.2). In contrast to the spatial and temporal frameworks, the lexico-grammatical corpus items that qualify as linguistic markers of axiological proximization are considerably smaller than the items qualifying in the former frameworks.

In the WHO Director-General's speeches, the axiological element in the discourse on COVID-19 is not quite detectable, scarcely appearing in the Director-General's repeated calls for nations to stand together and cooperate in an attempt to prevent the spread of 'rumors' and 'stigma' associated with COVID-19. Hence, the contrast between the set of values of the IDC and ODC entities seems to be mainly realized by noun phrases construed as IDC positive values and others as ODC negative values, both of which qualify as members in the first two categories in Table 3. As for the third category, which Cap (2010, 401) admits to be "complex enough to require a thorough text explanation," the inspected data detected one instance of a four-part linear sequence of lexico-grammatical paradigms ((NP1+VP1) +(VP2+NP2)) that could qualify as member in the third category. The lexico-grammatical items representing axiological proximization in the WHO Director-General's speeches are laid out in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Key lexico-grammatical and discourse items of the temporal proximization framework

Category	Key corpus items
1. Noun phrases (NPs) construed as IDC positive values or value sets (ideologies)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. facts; 2. resilience; 3. inventiveness; 4. solidarity; 5. kindness; 6. science; 7. accurate information; 8. credible sources; 9. solutions; 10. reason; 11. solidarity; 12. truth-tellers

<p>2. Noun phrases (NPs) construed as ODC negative values or value sets (ideologies)</p>	<p>13. fear; 14. threat; 15. enemy; 16. myth; 17. trolls; 18. conspiracy theorists; 19. rumours/rumors; 20. politicization of the pandemic; 21. stigma; 22. stigmatization; 23. misinformation; 24. false information;</p>
<p>3. Discourse forms no longer than one sentence or two consecutive sentences involving linear arrangement of lexico-grammatical phrases construing materialization in the IDC space of the ODC negative ideologies ((NP1+VP1)+(VP2+NP2))</p>	<p>25. And myths and misinformation about vaccines are adding fuel to the fire, putting vulnerable people at risk. (NP1): myths and misinformation about vaccines (VP1): are adding fuel to the fire (VP2): putting (NP2): vulnerable people at risk</p>
<p><i>Source:</i> https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/</p>	

As stated earlier, the table exposes that the corpus items representing categories 1 and 2 in the axiological proximization framework embody the ideological clash between the “home values” of the IDC entities and the “antagonistic values” of the ODC. This clash materializes linguistically through the speaker’s positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, which may be regarded as implicitly indicative of the positive and negative ideologies of the IDC and ODC, respectively. Accordingly, a number of the corpus items representing category 1 can be directly matched to their opposite counterparts in category 2 as follows:

- 1. facts vs. 19. rumors
- 6. science vs. 16. myth
- 4. solidarity vs. 21. stigma/ 22. stigmatization

- | | | |
|-------------------------|-----|---|
| 8. credible sources | vs. | 17. trolls |
| 12. truth tellers | vs. | 18. conspiracy theorists |
| 7. accurate information | vs. | 23. misinformation/ 24. false information |
| 5. kindness | vs. | 13. fear |
| 9. solutions | vs. | 14. threat |

As for the complex third category which consists of two parts, Cap (2013, 120) describes the first sequence (NP1+VP1) as “abstract-ideological”, while the second (VP2+NP2) as “concrete-physical”. This designation is meant to show how an abstract, remote possibility (“myths and misinformation about vaccines”) can gradually materialize into a tangible, physical threat (“people at risk”).

As explained earlier, axiological proximization construes alien ideologies as encroaching upon the ideology and values of the IDC, which would result in the narrowing of the conceptual space between the ODC and IDC and prompt an imminent clash. The lexico-grammatical analysis in Table 3 reveals that the construal of the threat in COVID-19 discourse does not predominantly utilize axiological proximization elements. Comparing Table 3 to Tables 1 and 2—which display the lexico-grammatical items for spatial and temporal proximization, respectively—it becomes conspicuous that COVID-19 discourse relies primarily on spatial and temporal proximization strategies, and only marginally on axiological strategies. Accordingly, the discourse on COVID-19 exemplified by the WHO Director-General’s speeches construes the virus as physically *trespassing* the IDC territory, and *the past events* as premises for current and future pre-emptive actions.

Conclusion

Proximization is a theoretical apparatus that provides methodological, analytic tools to account for the regularities underlying public speakers’ goals which mainly involve legitimization of actions and policies. Though it is most evident in the domain of state political discourse, in which political speakers seek to legitimize and win their addressees’ approval for pre-emptive actions against an imminent threat, proximization has extended to cover a wide range of domains, such as health, environment and technology. The present study has attempted to investigate proximization in the relatively new domain of discourse studies, which is health discourse.

The present paper has performed a lexico-grammatical analysis of selected speeches on COVID-19, given by WHO Director-General, in light of PT and the SPA model. The investigated data has revealed that the discourse on COVID-19

predominantly evokes fear of a construed enemy entity, embodied in the virus, threatening the home entity, represented by the speaker and his addressees. It has also shown how strong fear appeals enhanced by spatial, temporal and axiological strategies—which are also coercive strategies—have the power to solicit the addressees’ legitimization of the speaker’s pre-emptive policies to combat the threat posed by the pathogen.

The study has demonstrated how PT is a viable critical tool of analysis of threat-based discourse, which is a core element of public communication. The analysis of the speeches in terms of PT has been performed on multiple levels: a) the conceptual level of the Discourse Space (DS) organization, and b) the coercion level, where the text is treated as a specimen of legitimization discourse which seeks to justify and win the addressees’ support for actions called for by the speaker. At the DS conceptual level, the speaker’s lexical choices demarcate the deictic center and deictic periphery. At the deictic center, the speaker unmistakably construes himself, his addressees, their affiliates and shared territories as the ‘good Self’. At the deictic periphery, the pathogen is positioned and perceived as the ‘bad Other’. The speaker’s lexico-grammatical choices also construe the peripheral entities as trespassing the distance in DS and attempting to invade, both spatially and temporally, the deictic center. At the coercion level, the spatio-temporal proximization of the threat has shown to be an effective coercion instrument, as it enhances the appeal of the pre-emptive measures the speaker calls for and solicits legitimization of action to be taken against COVID-19 which WHO is demanding. Hence, the study has proven that PT successfully detects the discursive strategies adopted by the WHO Director-General, by which he seeks to generate fear of the novel coronavirus by construing it as an inevitable, impinging threat, and induce action against it. Finally, the analysis has revealed that the discourse on COVID-19 relies heavily on spatial and temporal proximization, and less clearly on axiological proximization. The lexico-grammatical analysis of data in light of the SPA model has demonstrated that the pathogen is construed as possessing a spatio-temporal nature rather than an ideological one, making it capable of trespassing the IDC territory and causing harm to the IDC entities at the present time and in the future.

The present study aspires to open avenues for further applications of PT. As COVID-19 is still in sight, and with the development of different COVID-19 vaccines, widespread public concerns about the safety and effectiveness of the vaccines have spurred. Anti-vaccination discourse which seems to be thriving has spread skepticism and fear of the vaccines whose efficacy is yet to be approved. The world seems to be divided into pro-vaccine and anti-vaccine camps, each of which views the other as an external, antagonistic ODC entity,

and uses discursive appeals and strategies to proximize the Other's threat. Accordingly, the present study invites further explorations into COVID-19 discourse, particularly into anti-COVID-vaccination discourse.

Works Cited

- Abdelhameed, Hammam Abdelbary. 2020. "Proximization in the War Speeches of Lyndon B. Johnson and George W. Bush: A Comparative Critical Linguistic Analysis." Unpublished MA Thesis, Sohag University.
- Abuarrah, Sufyan. 2016. "'Now': A Marker to a Different Mental Representation and Proximization of Threat." *Acta Linguistica Hafniensia* 48, no. 2: 195–218.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03740463.2016.1216774>
- Cap, Piotr. 2006. *Legitimization in Political Discourse: A Cross-disciplinary Perspective on the Modern US War Rhetoric*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars.
- , 2008. "Towards the Proximization Model of the Analysis of Legitimization in Political Discourse". *Journal of Pragmatics* 40: 17–41.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0378216607001762?via%3Dihub>.
- , 2010. "Proximizing Objects, Proximizing Values: Towards an Axiological Contribution to the Discourse of Legitimization." In *Perspectives in Politics and Discourse*, edited by Piotr Cap and Urszula Okulska, 119–142. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0378216609001520?via%3Dihub>.
- , 2013. *Proximization: The Pragmatics of Symbolic Distance Crossing*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- , 2014. "Expanding CDS Methodology by Cognitive-pragmatic Tools: Proximization Theory and Public Space Discourses." In *Critical Discourse Studies*, edited by Christopher Hart and Piotr Cap, 189–210. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- , 2015. "Crossing Symbolic Distances in Political Discourse Space." *Critical Discourse Studies* 12, no. 3: 313–329.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17405904.2015.1013481>.
- , 2017. *The Language of Fear: Communicating Threat in Public Discourse*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

- , 2019. "Discourse Studies: Between Social Constructionism and Linguistics. A Critical Overview." *Topics in Linguistics* 20, no. 2: 1–16. <http://sciendo.com/downloadpdf/journals/topling/20/2/article-p1.xml>.
- Chilton, Paul. 2004. *Analysing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- , 2014. *Language, Space and Mind: The Conceptual Geometry of Linguistic Meaning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mando, Justin and Garrett Stack. 2019. "Convincing the Public to Kill: Asian Carp and the Proximization of Invasive Species Threat." *Environmental Communication* 13, no. 6: 820–833. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17524032.2018.1492949>.
- World Health Organization. 2021. *Speeches*. Last modified January 13. <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/>