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The Voice of Authority Vis-a-Vis the Covid-19 Pandemic

Abstract
Although it has not been spared criticism, the World Health Organization (WHO) represents an authoritative voice when it comes to managing health issues, especially those concerning the recent epidemiological emergency. Since the outbreak of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, there has also been an *infodemic*, an overabundance of information, which makes it difficult to separate the 'wheat from the chaff', true from fake news. This paper focuses on carrying out a semio-linguistic analysis in an effort to explore the communicative traits of the *communiqués* issued by WHO. To this end, the linguistic and discursive strategies used to foster an impression of truthfulness and create trust regarding the information concerning the Coronavirus pandemic were explored. The analysis strives to highlight the interplay of *simulacra* and semantic configurations functional to the 'discursive efficiency' of the official statements of the organization.

Keywords: Enunciation, Pandemic, Semio-Linguistic, Isotopy

Introduction

This contribution is part of a vaster project dedicated to the study of the communication methods used to narrate the pandemic caused by COVID-19, less frequently known as SARS-CoV-2. These two acronyms were used internationally to indicate the latest member of the coronavirus family. It was initially referred to a flu-like viral infection restricted to Wuhan, the most populous metropolis of Central China. However, despite the rigorous containment measures applied by the Chinese authorities and due to the complacent lack of proactive response by the rest of the planet, it soon evolved from cluster to epidemic and to pandemic. As the disease spread, so was the language used to narrate the progress of the deadly virus. The ironically appropriate jargon used by the media made it go 'viral'. As a result, health agencies and governments were forced to face the reality and deal with the diffusion of the pathogen, warn the world population, and provide solutions. When the gravity of the situation dawned on those responsible for the well-being of the citizens of the world, they were obliged to find the linguistic formulas best suited to issue warnings and provide reasonable advice without generating all-out panic. They had to devise the most balanced way of communicating the urgency of the outbreak without arousing disproportionate fear.

Admittedly, communication is always a complex weave of human input and output, and it is full of pragmatic and emotional content conveyed by language. In the case of COVID-19, communication, initially hesitant and uncertain, escalated to generate a surfeit of information where the general public had extreme difficulties in separating the 'wheat from the chaff', credible from fake news. As Sobel[1] stated, "the COVID-19 outbreak and response has been accompanied by a massive 'infodemic': an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it". This means that messages, if they are to be heeded, need to come from trustworthy sources whose reputation bestows weight on the information conveyed because of the credit the addressees attribute to the addresser. This is the case of the World Health Organization (WHO)[2] whose *communiqués* were designed to be taken seriously, that is,

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[1]Howard L Sobel currently works as Regional Coordinator for Re Maternal, Child Health and Quality Safety at the Regional Office for the Western Pacific, World Health Organization, Manila, Philippines. https://www.who.int/laos/news/detail/26-06-2020-ministry-of-health-prepares-lao-media-to-report-on-the-next-covid-19-outbreak.

[2]Hereinafter referred to simply as "WHO", without the definitive article since, in a certain sense, "WHO" is a personification of the organisation. This is because, in the English-speaking world, it is pronounced as if it was the interrogative personal pronoun. Like "WHO", "COVID" and "SARS" are pronounced as if they were words, unlike acronyms where the letters are separated by full stops and pronounced separately.

acknowledged as pertinent, trustworthy and truthful by the world's medical, political, and general community. As the agency of the United Nations Organization founded in 1948 to deal with issues of health at the planetary level, WHO is considered the world's foremost authority on well-being and pathology. This was despite recent threats by the US President, Donald Trump, and the US administration to withdraw their support from the Organization,[3] a move challenged by one of the medical field's most prestigious journals, the British *Lancet*.[4]

This paper focuses on a number of the official *communiqués* made available by WHO, whose mission it is to "promote health, keep the world safe and serve the vulnerable, with measurable impact for people at country level".[5] This goal, clearly pragmatic in intent, is expressed by means of "verbal practices, that is semiotic processes located within natural languages" (Greimas & Courtés, 2007, p.248).[6]

A semio-linguistic analysis of the communicative dimension of a selection of WHO's texts was carried out to shed light on the discursive strategies and the enunciative configurations devised to build up an impression of truth and trust regarding the information conveyed. This study aims to characterize the *persona* behind the communication addressed by WHO to a planetary audience to warn the world's population about the gravity of the disease and to inform people regarding precautions to take in the name of the common good. In the words of Landowski, "Beyond or from this aspect of choices made relating to the lexical and stylistic surface of texts, and also independently of the values conveyed, our primary task is to account for the discourse from the point of view of its ability 'to act' and to 'cause to act' thanks to modelling and, more often, by modifying the relations existing between the agents it involves as linguistic interlocutors" (Landowski, 1999, p.11).

Corpus and Methodology

The textual corpus analyzed here consists of documents issued by WHO and made available on its official website.[7] It includes an ongoing source of releases, opening remarks, reports, recommendations,[8] all revolving around the coronavirus pandemic, from January to August 2020. Table 1 displays the details of the WHO corpus:

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[3]https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/07/politics/us-withdrawing-world-health-organization/index.html.
[4]https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)31527-0/fulltext.
[5]https://www.who.int/about/who-we-are/our-values.
[6]When an English version is not available, the quotations are translated by the author of the present paper.
[7]https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen..
[8]TWITS are not included in the corpus.

Table 1. WHO corpus details

Number of files	71
Tokens (running words)	109,671
Types (distinct words)	7,084
Type/token ratio	6.65

While compiling this corpus, it was decided to accept the suggestions made by Greimas, who, as far back as the 1960s, anticipated the future developments of *corpus linguistics*. This linguist provided a definition of 'corpus' claiming that "a certain number of individual texts, on condition they are chosen according to non-linguistic criteria guaranteeing their homogeneity, may be formed into a corpus and this corpus may be considered as sufficiently isotope" (Greimas, 1966, p.93). In the same publication, he added: "We shall say that a corpus, to be well-formed, should satisfy three conditions: it should be representative, exhaustive and homogeneous" (Greimas, 1966, p.143). Accordingly, the temporal range of the corpus presented here covers a significantly lengthy period of the pandemic studied and includes a sufficiently large number of texts. Taking thematic redundancy into consideration and since the corpus includes texts that are variations on a single theme (COVID-19), they may be seen to follow sufficient non-linguistic criteria.

Given their strong communicative component WHO's *communiqués* may be configured as 'discourse in the field' destined to "call and respond, to dissuade and convince; a discourse of people to transform people and relationships between people and not just a medium for re-producing reality" (Fabbri & Marcarino, 1985, p.9).[9] As a result, it appeared that this linguistic analysis should avail itself of a semiotic approach. Adopting a textual-analysis perspective, this approach was applied to examine the enunciational instance implemented within the text and to answer the following question: "what has been mediated by this instance, as regards the virtual structures that constitute upstream characteristics of the enunciation" (Greimas & Courtés, 2007, p.104).

The semiotic approach in this study relies on the idea of textual semiotics as envisaged by Greimas. Of the several priceless analytical tools developed by the Lithuanian semiologist, the conceptual apparatus of the enunciation, that is, "the linguistic instance, logically presupposed by the very existence of the utterance, which bears its traces or marks" (Greimas & Courtés, 2007, p.104), was adopted. Another notion that proved particularly pertinent here was 'isotopy'. This was introduced first by Greimas in 1966 and had a significant impact upon the field of semiotics. An isotopy consists of the "recurrence of certain semic categories

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[9]Also available at https://www.paolofabbri.it/discorso_politico/.

(figurative or non) throughout a stretch of language used to create semantic homogeneity and coherence which, from the point of view of the enunciator, provides the reading pathway" (Fabbri & Marrone, 2001, p.146).

The present linguistic analysis used the *Wordsmith Tools* software package (Scott 2012) frequently employed in corpus linguistics. The *Wordlist* function was particularly productive. This was employed to calculate the number of occurrences and the frequency of the most recurrent words. From these, the discursive isotopies guaranteeing continuity of meaning along the entire chain of discourse were selected. It is upon these that the coherence of WHO's communication seems to rest.

Meaning at Global and Local Level

To account for the totality of the meaning conveyed by the texts examined, we considered our corpus as a macro mosaic-like text where the significance was constructed at the local level, in the single communiqués that comprise it, and also at the holistic level of the corpus on the whole.

The isotopic pathway enables us to grasp the semantic organization of the discourse produced by WHO at different levels. In his Sémantique Structurale, Greimas (1966) stated that a text is "the set of meaningful elements that rest upon the isotopies chosen within the limits of the corpus" (1966, p.145). Informed by Florczak, it is also possible to make a distinction between "systemic isotopy, meaning the presence of the same isotopic trait within different sememes out of context, and "discursive isotopy" as iteration of the same isotopic trait within different sememes in context" (2003, p.53). In the case studied here, isotopies produce an iteration of some semantic components functional to those 'effects of meaning' that WHO intends to construct. As Ablali asserts, commenting on the statements contained in Greimas's Sémantique Structurale:

"Some effects of semes, isotopies and narrative actions are established not only within a single text, but can be found between different texts belonging to the same corpus. An intertextual dimension, hidden by linearity, appears here upon which rests the holistic aspect of meaning constructed as a whole and which is more than the sum of its parts. For Greimas, no texts should be seen in isolation. Access to meaning is profiled in other texts in localities directly contributing to the construction of the conditions of significance" (Ablali, 2017, p.4).

An analysis of the occurrences of the twenty most frequent content words in the corpus enables us to identify various isotopic axes that traverse the texts. Also, they are used to organize the cognitive contents and grasp the attention of the recipient of the information conveyed. Table 2

below contains the results of the search performed with *WordSmith Tools* using the *Wordlist* function:

Table 2. The twenty most frequent content words

Item	Frequency	%	Texts	%	Item	Frequency	%	Texts	%
Health	1,069	0.97	67	95,71	Risk	296	0.27	39	55.71
COVID-19	973	0.89	65	92,86	Transmission	292	0.27	27	38.57
Countries	485	0.44	49	70	Virus	250	0.23	39	55.71
Measures	456	0.42	39	55.71	China	231	0.21	18	25.71
Cases	412	0.38	32	45.71	Community	224	0.20	34	48.57
Response	380	0.35	51	72.86	Disease	224	0.20	39	55.71
Public	330	0.30	45	69.29	Including	216	0.20	47	67.14
People	325	0.30	52	74.29	Pandemic	214	0.20	44	62,86
Global	306	0.28	48	68.57	Support	211	0.19	40	57.14
World	306	0.28	55	78.57	Care	198	0.18	38	54.29

The first three words, *health*, *COVID-19* and *countries*, are frequent keywords that appear frequently in the *communiqués* published by WHO. They sum up the core topic of the corpus examined here, that is, they are the prime indicators of "the pragmatic choice with which one establishes what one is speaking about or wishes to speak about" (Lorusso & Violi, 2004, p.30). Also, they specify the 'narrative programme' contained in the logotype *World Health Organization* which is present in the para-text of each *communiqué*. These lexemes create a "presumption of isotopy" (Bertand, 2002, p.121), suggesting ways of interpreting the texts and facilitating a "uniform reading of the discourse, as emerges from the partial readings of the utterances that constitute it" (Greimas & Courtés, 2007, p.171). The analysis of Table 1 permits us to trace at least three systemic isotopies running through the corpus and which resurface locally to serve specific discursive strategies. The planetary importance of the health problem linked to COVID-19 is conveyed to the reader by the isotopy of 'spatiality' established through words like *countries*, *global*, *world*, *China*, whose signifying effect underlines the seriousness of the health problem, while also ushering in the notion of the global dimension of the disease and the need for a worldwide cooperative response. The isotopy of 'totality' created by *public*, *people*, *community*, including, *pandemic*, on the other hand, emphasizes the involvement of individuals as members of groups and

as persons belonging to a social entity. This isotopy of 'totality' or, if we prefer, of 'collectivity' when related to the "presumption of isotopy" mentioned above acts as a bridge between the private and collective spheres. Similarly, the word *pandemic* acts as an isotopic connector between the social and the technical-medical isotopy of 'infectious pathology' by linking words like *COVID-19, transmission, virus, disease*, and *cases*. Finally, a set of words constitute the isotopy of the 'response to infection': *response, support*, and *care*. The following analysis examines the isotopies underscoring the topic of the enunciation and how, combined with other isotopies, they are used to bestow 'discursive direction' on the texts and capture the attention of the public earning its consensus.

The Enunciational Axis

According to Greimas's (1966) theory of semiotic ascendency, truth is not a matter of correspondence with reality, but an effect produced by the text. The information published by WHO concerning COVID-19 was designed to be taken seriously, perceived as important and truthful. One may ask, therefore, how WHO's *communiqués* managed to convey credibility, an impression of truth, and generate trust in the data presented. To this end, it is necessary to examine the texts from a two-fold perspective: one from the contents that are enunciated and the other from how the contents are enunciated. This dual perspective is meant to analyze the enunciational axis, that is, "the linguistic instance, logically presupposed by the very existence of the utterance, which bears its traces or mark" (Greimas & Courtés, 2007, p.104). It is possible to study an enunciation only by starting from the text itself, that is, the enunciated object. This is always present in the utterance, even when imperceptible since its absence often appears more significant than its presence. As Marrone writes, when discussing semiotic 'branding':

"As objects bear the brand of their manufacturers inscribed within them as a mark of the action taken to construct them, so too linguistic statements carry within the brand - me / not-me, now / not-now , here / not-here – referring to the subject of the enunciation, that is to the enunciator (the textual simulacrum of the person who produced it) and to the enunciatee (the textual simulacrum of the person addressed) (Marrone, 2007, p.157-158).

According to the semiotic model referred to by Marrone, an enunciation can be seen as a form of action where an operating Subject, the Enunciator,[10] seeks to transmit to the Recipient, the Enunciatee, an Object of value. It should be noted that in this semiotic theory, Enunciator and

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[10]In semiotics, the names of the actants are usually written with a capital latter. The same will be done here.

Enunciatee are textual *simulacra*, i.e., linguistic images of the writer and the reader. The Enunciator, the textual *simulacrum* of WHO, also acts as an Addresser-manipulator inscribing values in the Object (WHO's utterances about COVID-19) proposing it to the Enunciatee, the textual *simulacrum* of the Recipient of WHO's messages. To achieve this conjunction with the Object of value, the Enunciator needs to implement a persuasive action capable of fostering agreement with the Enunciatee. In is way the Enunciator is also configured as a manipulator, acting upon the Enunciatee who stands on the opposite side of the communication axis. The latter acts as an Addressee-appraiser who evaluates the values inscribed in the Object and decides whether or not to accept the Enunciator's proposal. What the WHO-Enunciator proposes is a cognitive type of Object of value, though oriented pragmatically, which contains values like health, well-being, and survival. It is therefore configured also as an Adjuvant, that is a "magic tool" in the Proppian[11] sense, used to achieve the conjunction desired and to defeat the Anti-subject (COVID-19). This kind of discursive manipulation assumes the form of an agreement of trust or a fiduciary pact constructed in and by WHO's *communiqués*.

The Fiduciary Pact

Management of knowledge is, therefore, the central dimension of WHO's enunciations, since the main purpose of its *communiqués* is to provide people with knowledge, let them know what is happening, how things stand, and how to react. As Lorusso and Violi have suggested, "management of knowledge always implies a persuasive and an interpretative action; the Enunciator aims at persuading the Enunciatee, who, in turn, is called upon to interpret (accept or reject) the contents of a communicative act" (2004, p.103). If, as Greimas asserts, every discourse is "the fragile place where truth and falsity, untruth and secrecy are inscribed and read" (1983, p.103), the interpretive act carried out by the Enunciatee cannot ignore the 'veridictive' status of the discourse implemented by WHO-Enunciator. This is not an ontological form of truth but according to Greimas, a matter of 'veridition', that is, the 'truth-bearing' product of an agreement between the two actants of the communicative exchange, a discursive truth. Hence, a series of argumentative and truth-bearing strategies aimed at establishing an enunciative pact between the Enunciator and the Enunciatee which, "while based on the results of a cognitive deed, is not in itself of a cognitive but, rather, of a fiduciary nature" (Greimas, 1983, p.109).

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[11]In Propp's *Morfologija skazki* [Morphology of the Folktale] (1928), the *Helper* permits the protagonist to solve problems or prepare the action to take, while the *Opponent* (the Anti-subject) opposes him.

1   Referential and Enunciative Illusion

The fiduciary pact is implemented through a set of veridictive moves that oscillate between 'being true' and 'appearing true' aimed at persuading the reader to believe in what is proposed, an indispensable prerequisite if one needs to have something done. One technique is based on *utterative disengagement*,[12] which cancels all traces of the Enunciator and avails of a 'not-me, not-now, not- here' tactic, which produces a 'referential illusion':

"On December 30th, 2019, three bronchoalveolar lavage samples were collected from a patient with pneumonia of unknown etiology – a surveillance definition established following the SARS outbreak of 2002-2003 – in Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital. Real-time PCR (RT-PCR) assays on these samples were positive for pan-Betacoronavirus. Using Illumina and nanopore sequencing, all the genome sequences of the virus were acquired. Bioinformatic analyses indicated that the virus had features typical of the coronavirus family and belonged to the Betacoronavirus 2B lineage. Alignment of the full-length genome sequence of the COVID-19 virus and other available genomes of Betacoronavirus showed that the closest relation was with the bat SARS-like coronavirus strain BatCov RaTG13, identity 96%" (WHO, 28 February 2020).

The subject of the utterance is hidden behind a discursive construction, which produces an objectified kind of utterance, whose enunciating subject remains indefinite. Greimas (1994), however, properly defines this strategy as 'objectifying masking' since, even where impersonality seems to triumph, the Enunciator is unable to hide every trace of his/her presence. For example, the explanation provided between parentheses can only be attributed to the urgency felt by the Enunciator to explain and justify. This attempt at depersonalising the author's discourse was prompted by a precise strategic purpose. If a piece of discourse seeks to masquerade itself as 'objective', it creates the impression that an objective piece of knowledge exists and this produces the effect of truth. The text mimes secure knowledge, imposes itself as an exclusive informer thus producing a veridictive representation.

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[12]The English word *disengagement* translates the French word *débrayage* that refers to the expulsion from utterances of elements referring to the 'I, here, now' of the situation of the enunciation. It is therefore the negation of the instance of the enunciation. It is obtained by building the statement around 'not me, not here, not now'. We speak of *actantial disengagement* (*débrayage actantiel*) when there is a disjunction between the subject of the utterance and the subject of the uttered: the subject of the utterance is a 'not me', while the subject of the utterance is hidden. We can also have a *temporal disengagement* (*débrayage temporel*), that is the projection on the utterance of a 'not now', and a *spatial disengagment* (*débrayage spatial*), that is 'not here'. By *enunciative disengagement* (*débrayage énonciatif*), we mean the projection into the utterance of simulacra of the subject of the enunciation, while *utterative disengagement* (*débrayage énoncif*) means the projection of subjects other than those of the enunciation (impersonal speech, third person).

The Enunciator typically flaunts a competence presumed to be superior to that of the Enunciatee, which translates into a piece of discourse characterized by alethic modalities of necessity and possibility (*requires*, *can*). Thus, it focuses "exclusively on the conditions of existence of the object and the statement of the relationships between things, regardless of any kind of subject; moreover, they are valid for everyone: they designate the objectification of knowledge" (Bertrand, 2002, p.197-198):

Stopping the spread of COVID-19 requires finding and testing of all suspected cases so that confirmed cases are promptly and effectively isolated and receive appropriate care, and the close contacts of all confirmed cases are rapidly identified so that they can be quarantined and medically monitored for a 14-day incubation period of the virus (WHO, 14 April 2020).

The enunciating subject remains indefinite here too. The text appears before our eyes without anyone having enunciated it. Furthermore, the present tense loses its deictic value, as it does not signal a contemporary event but a scientific and atemporal truth.

The credibility of the Enunciator can be constructed through a discursive strategy based on what the Speaker (WHO) announces, that is "a *simulacrum* miming an enunciational act within a text" (Greimas – Courtés, 2007, p.105). In this specific case, it entails a *simulacrum* "of a self-referential nature: a class of subjects enacting the enunciation" (Landowski, 1999, p.202):

"WHO announces the launch of the WHO Academy app designed to support health workers during COVID-19, and the WHO Info app designed to inform the general public" (WHO, 13 May 2020)

Here the Enunciator (WHO) is in reality an "I/we" hiding behind the third person singular. This actantial *engagement* produces an 'effect of presence' due to identification between the enunciated subject and the subject of the enunciation. This is achieved by creating an 'enunciative illusion', "as if the discourse, the reflection of a subjectivity expressing itself without mediation, provides direct and fully transparent access to the truth of the subject who enunciates" (Landowski, 1999, p.202).

This egocentric role of the Enunciator that resorts to self-reference using the third person, referred to the proper name of the organization (WHO), is typical of institutional discourse "in which the [speaker or writer] is a spokesperson of an institution [speaking or writing] not as 'I', the personal ego, but as a public identity or role" (Lerman, 1983, p.77):

"WHO continues to review the evidence on antibody responses to SARS-CoV-2 infection" (WHO, 24 April 2020)

"The World Health Organization (WHO) today published a first indicative survey on the impact of COVID-19 on health systems based on 105 countries' reports" (WHO, 31 August 2020).

The Enunciator is the institutional voice of the organiation, which deserves credit also because of its constant and active commitment with scientists, in the fight against COVID-19. The temporal *engagement* (*continues*, *today*) underlines the organization's unremitting role as guarantor of the seriousness and reliability of the Enunciator. This self-referential strategy is also target-oriented and tells a lot about the identity of the Enunciatee. While it is true that WHO is an institutional source addressing a global audience, it is also true that its *communiqués* are often used by journalists to produce news, and this is what Jacobs (1999), referring to press releases, calls 'tellability' or "a kind of preformulated discourse which meets the formal requirements of news reporting" (Jacobs, 1999, p.227). The use of the deictic *today* also tends in this direction, which "in part constitutes the warrant for the report, i.e., to say it happened 'today' is to claim it as potential 'news'" (Sacks, 1992, p.72) of relevance to *communiqués*.

The credibility of the Enunciator as a subject with higher competence than the Enunciatee is enhanced by claims of his/her ability to interpret data and envisage scenarios:

"The inability to pay for healthcare is another major challenge for many. On current trends, WHO estimates that this year, 2020, approximately 1 billion people (almost 13 percent of the global population) will be spending at least 10% of their household budgets on health care. The majority of these people live in lower middle-income countries" (WHO, 13 May 2020).

This strategic device belongs to the practices of 'imaginative enactment' mentioned by Lakoff, that is, to "practices of imaginative enactment: tools such as scenario planning" (Lakoff, 2007, p.254). The Enunciator seeks to create scenarios based on data that are certain and well-known in the sphere of science/medicine. The discursive placement of the estimates provided by WHO, encapsulated as it is between two constative sentences, presented as unquestionable facts (see the two sentences underlined) seems to bestow more credibility upon the forecast.

Elsewhere, the truthfulness of WHO's statements depends on the use of a collective, often dual, claimant:

"FIFA, the international governing body of football, and the World Health Organization (WHO) have teamed up to combat the coronavirus (COVID-19) by launching a new awareness campaign led by world-renowned footballers, who are calling on all people around the world to follow five key steps to stop the spread of the disease" (WHO, 23 March 2020)

In keeping with Greimas and Courtés, "an agent is called collective when, starting from a collection of individual actors, it is endowed with a common modal competence and / or action shared by all the actors it subsumes" (Greimas & Courtés, 2007, p.59). Here the subjects of WHO and FIFA's statements are attributed to the same modal characterization in order

to invoke common action against the coronavirus. This synergy confers greater prestige and authoritativeness on the discourse of WHO-Enunciator.

To obtain the Enunciatee's adhesion, it does not suffice to provide information disguised as objective. It is also necessary to guarantee and engagingly present the truth. This means that the Enunciator can make use of another type of masking, which Greimas (1994) calls 'subjectifying masking' based on forms of *uttered enunciation*:[13]

"As we focus on the immediate response to the COVID-19 crisis, it is important to keep in mind the breadth and depth of consequences already being felt across the globe. We must learn the lessons of this pandemic now and, in so doing, ensure that our response, wherever possible, leaves a lasting positive legacy, and makes the world of the future a safer place" (WHO, 14 April 2020).

The subject of the enunciation is established in the inclusive pronouns *we* and *our* that eliminate the distance between the Enunciator and the Enunciatee, who now seem to share the same modal weight in terms of appearance: wanting to fight the Anti-subject, explicitly mentioned here (COVID-19). The cognitive asymmetry, referred to earlier is compensated based on the level of appearance or by sharing the same intention of defeating the Anti-subject. The official objectives of WHO are presented here as shared by the two communicative actants: that of finding a solution to the COVID-19 crisis and making the world of the future a safer place. This communion of intent strengthens the fiduciary pact as if the Enunciator did nothing except grasp, interpret, and make explicit the determination present in the Enunciatee. Thus, this is further emphasized by the use of the deontic modality (*We must*).

A combination of *disengagement* and *engagement* is the strategy most frequently used when it comes to suggesting approaches to adopt or efforts to make:

"To prevail against COVID-19, we need an approach that unites in common cause every individual and community, every business and non-profit, every department of every government, every non-governmental organization, every international organization, and every regional and global governance body to harness their collective capacity into collective action. Everyone has a crucial role to play in stopping COVID-19" (WHO, 14 April 2020).

Here the device of *engagement* (*we*) is employed to emphasize the involvement of the entire community to which both the Enunciator and the Enunciatee belong and in whose name the former is authorized to make requests that the latter will recognize as unavoidable (*Everyone has…*). There

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[13]By *uttered enunciation* (from the French expression *débrayage énonciatif*), we mean the projection into the utterance of simulacra of the subject of the enunciation.

is an instance of *uttered enunciation* that establishes a 'we-here-now' by using first-person plural *we*, a syncretism between Enunciator and Enunciatee, who appear to be at risk of contagion from COVID-19 just like all other social actors (*community*, *business*, *government*, etc.). Note the use of *disengagement* in the last sentence, when suggesting a certain mode of behavior. Perhaps the use of the personal pronoun *you* would appear overly coercive. Above all, we can grasp, in a single excerpt, how the Enunciatee receives his/her discursive figurativization at times as an integral unit (*everyone*), at other times as a partitive totality (*international organisation*), at times as an integral totality (*community*), and at others as a partitive unit (*individual*).

2   Isotopic Axes

According to Greimas, isotopies ensure the semantic coherence of a text through the reiteration and association of similar semantic elements or features. When perusing a text, readers normally seek and find coherence between certain thematic or figurative elements that have the function of bestowing credibility upon both the context and the content. In the texts issued by WHO, isotopies combine with other discursive strategies that unite to contribute to the construction of certain meaningful effects as shown in the following example:

"For more than 20 years, UNHCR and WHO have worked together worldwide to safeguard the health of some of the world's most vulnerable populations. They have collaborated to provide health services to refugees in every region - from the onset of an emergency and through protracted situations, consistently advocating for the inclusion of refugees and stateless people in the national public health plans of host countries. Today, the two organizations are working side by side to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure that forcibly displaced people can access the health services they need, to keep safe from COVID-19 and other health challenges" (WHO, 21 May 2020).

Here the Enunciator seeks to build up his/her own image based both on the use of the collective-dual agent which, as shown in the previous example, bestows greater authority upon the Enunciator's discourse and on the isotopic elements present. The ongoing commitment of WHO in the face of global health challenges with particular reference to the world's most fragile populations is underlined by the recurrence of terms and expressions traceable back to the aspectual isotopy of 'continuity'. Verbal expressions like *have worked*, *have collaborated*, *are working*, *keep* and temporal expressions such as *For more than 20 years…*, *From the onset...through* produce a visual image of the actions carried out by WHO and intended as durable, on-going, as they also include the present moment (*today*, *are*

working). As already noted, this reference to constant commitment is meant to confirm the reliability of the WHO-Enunciator, something in which the Enunciatee cannot but believe. The act of trust engendered here is also played at pathemic level, thanks to the iteration of the seme of 'fragility' resting upon isotopic terms and expressions like *refugees*, *vulnerable*, *stateless people*, *forcibly displaced people*, and *need*.

In the following excerpt, the Enunciator relies on a double isotopy to build up an ethos and trust:

"The goal of COVAX is by the end of 2021 to deliver two billion doses of safe, effective vaccines that have passed regulatory approval and/or WHO prequalification. These vaccines will be delivered equally to all participating countries, proportional to their populations, initially prioritising healthcare workers and then expanding to cover 20% of the population of participating countries" (WHO, 15 July 2020).

First, the ponderous weight of WHO's authority is conveyed through the isotopy of 'decision-making power' in the field of drugs, a notion binding words such as *passed* (undergone a test), *regulatory*, *approval*, and *pre-qualification*. Based on the strength of this authority, WHO is entitled, furthermore, to govern and monitor the distribution of the vaccine and ensure it is carried out by adhering to the criteria of fairness, or what is perceived as such. The Enunciator attributes this quality to his/her organization by peppering the text with semantic traits that can be traced back to the isotopy of 'fairness', which is present in words such as *equally*, *all*, *proportional*, and *prioritising*. The notion of fairness conveyed here is not absolute, but relative, meaning that the equity envisaged is only partial. This is because the recipients of the vaccine have already been chosen by WHO and are health-care providers first and then 20% of the population of participating countries. As the doses of COVAX medication envisaged by WHO for the year 2021 will suffice to cover only about two eighths of the world's population (two billion doses as against almost eight billion people), someone with recognized authority has to be accountable for a rational and health-promoting distribution of the drug. Thus, this is because answerability comes with authority. This, metaphorically speaking, is the flip-side of the coin, the down-side of privilege. This "someone" is WHO which, because it is acknowledged as having authority and conveyed by the isotopy of 'decision-making power', is obliged to assume responsibility. The Solomonic task of deciding who is to be vaccinated and who is not to falls to the lot of WHO.

In the next quotation, the Enunciator uses the performative verb *warn,* providing an eloquent instance of cognitive asymmetry: on the one hand, the Enunciator who claims to have knowledge and wishes to inform people; on the other, the Enunciatees are people who probably do not know

though they want to know (because they are reading the Enunciator's message):

"The World Health Organization and UNICEF have warned of an alarming decline in the number of children receiving life-saving vaccines around the world. This is due to disruptions in the delivery and uptake of immunization services caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to new data by WHO and UNICEF, these disruptions threaten to reverse hard-won progress to reach more children and adolescents with a wider range of vaccines, which has already been hampered by a decade of stalling coverage" (WHO, 15 July 2020).

The authoritative provider of advice or issuer of warnings uses the information in his/her possession not only to offer data but also to alert readers of danger and indicate courses of action they may pursue. The Enunciator uses argumentative and explanatory formulae (*this is due to* / *according to*) to achieve his/her goal and expects to be heeded because he/she occupies a position where he/she is authorised to put people on their guard concerning a hazard. To convince the reader of the gravity of the situation being narrated, the Enunciator uses the isotopy of 'danger' created by recourse to words like *warned*, *alarming*, *disruptions*, *threaten*, and *hampered*.

The next quotation is particularly interesting because of the meaning attributed to the verb *welcomes* which in this context seems to express WHO's appreciation and approval of the positive results achieved by research. Here too, the verb *shared* assumes a connotation we meet less often, that of informing, though it also implies that the information was willingly transmitted to the organization. The WHO-Enunciator shows that he/she belongs to the scientific community by assuming its style and presenting the fundamental assumptions of his/her message as emanating from the knowledge shared by that community. As the moral head of the worldwide medical community, WHO is entitled to observe and be informed of the results of scientific investigations. This assumption could be inferred from expressions like *initial trial results* and the verb *welcomes*. The former implies that WHO was aware from the beginning, while the latter states that WHO considers itself to be very authoritative to an extent of betraying a rather condescending attitude in the choice of the verb, like some virtuous paterfamilias:

"The World Health Organization (WHO) welcomes the initial clinical trial results from the United Kingdom (UK) that show dexamethasone, a corticosteroid, can be lifesaving for patients who are critically ill with COVID-19. For patients on ventilators, the treatment was shown to reduce mortality by about one-third; for patients requiring only oxygen, mortality was cut by about one-fifth according to preliminary findings shared with

WHO. The benefit was only seen in patients seriously ill with COVID-19 and was not observed in patients with milder disease" (WHO, 16 June 2020).

3   Delegated Enunciators

The Enunciator resorts to a polyphonic strategy of recruiting different voices within his/her proclamation. These voices are delegated Enunciators, often persons of a certain reputation or prestige, only apparently discontinuous with the main Enunciator's voice, though cited to confirm and validate the line followed by WHO:

"Well-designed laws can help build strong health systems; evaluate and approve safe and effective drugs and vaccines; and enforce actions to create healthier and safer public spaces and workplaces. Critically, they are key to effective implementation of the WHO International Health Regulations: surveillance, infection prevention and control, management of travel and trade, and implementation of measures to maintain essential health services." "Laws and policies that are grounded in science, evidence and human rights can enable people to access health services, protect themselves from COVID-19 and live free from stigma, discrimination and violence," says Achim Steiner, UNDP Administrator (WHO, 22 July 2020).

Here, the Enunciator uses the isotopy of argumentative discourse to affect a thesis configured as an enthymeme based on an elliptical syllogism as a kind of tacit premise accepted by all. The unspoken premise is that the laws countries implement in response to a pandemic need to be based on science and should adhere to international standards of human rights. The explanation of this premise is entrusted to another delegated Enunciator who reinforces the argumentative effect of the speech. The grip on the Enunciatee is also achieved on the side of pathos thanks to the 'dysphoric' isotopy established through terms like *stigma*, *discrimination*, and *violence* which qualify the COVID-19 Anti-subject.

The delegate that appears most often in the texts of the corpus is the director of WHO, whose authoritative voice assumes a decisive personal position regarding the topic presented in the *communiqué*:

"Strong legal frameworks are critical for national COVID-19 responses," said Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. "Laws that impact health often fall outside the health sector. As health is global, legal frameworks should be aligned with international commitments to respond to current and emerging public health risks. A strong foundation of law for health is more important now than ever before" (WHO, 23 July 2020).

The director's argumentative discourse strengthens the authoritative impact of the statement by assuming responsibility and conveying the notion of accountability.

A *logos* as such may not suffice to obtain the adhesion of the Enunciatee. In many cases, passionate speech may strike home more effectively than simple aseptic data. The voice of the director, which the text exploits, incorporates elements of pathos capable of reinforcing the value-conveying isotopy of the entire institution the director represents:

In his closing remarks, WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said "COVID-19 has robbed us of people we love. It is robbing us of lives and livelihoods; it is shaking the foundations of our world; it is threatening to tear the fabric of international cooperation. But it also reminded us that for all our differences, we are one human race, and we are stronger together" (WHO, 19 May 2020).

Here the cognitive discourse is modalized pathemically. The voice of the institution grows passionate. The Enunciator, through a delegate, speaks with feeling and about feelings. The pathemic dimension is lexicalized explicitly. Note the controversial structure of the narrative which features, on the one hand, a collective actor lexicalized using inclusive pronouns like *us*, *we*, *our* as protagonists while, on the other, the antagonist is *COVID-19*, *it*, with all the connotations of feeling these terms bear. On the one hand, we have a series of terms, such as *love*, *livelihoods*, *cooperation*, *stronger together*, setting up a 'euphoric' isotopy. On the other hand, a 'dysphoric' isotopy was realized through words like *robbed*, *shaken*, and *tear*. The passionate effect is further strengthened through the use of deliberate iteration and redundancy bestowing rhythm on the text seeking consensus through repetition, rhyme, and reason. The *mantra* effect, one might say.

Conclusion

As Philips *et al*. (2004, p.635) claimed, "Institutions are constituted through discourse". The purpose of the institutional discourse enunciated by WHO is both cognitive and pragmatic, where the latter presupposes the former. In semiotic terminology, this 'letting know' oriented towards 'getting done' represents a form of manipulation, a term which in semiotics implies no moral judgment, but designates a mechanism based on *phronesis* (from the Greek Φρόνησις meaning 'wisdom'), that is, that form of knowledge that is capable of directing choice and action. Therefore, the communicative efficacy of WHO's addresses is played out on the level of enunciation through the construction of semiotic images within the texts. On the one hand, the transmitter of the message constructs a strategic image of himself/herself or of the institution he/sherepresents (the Enunciator), on the other hand the recipient, (the Enunciatee) creates an image of the Enunciator,

and decides whether to accept or refuse the contents of the text and values related to the Enunciatee, especially those related to trust and authority. By explaining these simulacral presences, we are enabled to grasp the relations existing between the concrete authors of communication and the simulacral figures they project within their texts. The efficacy of WHO's institutional discourse is derived precisely from its "internal discursive *efficiency*, therefore from the oriented simulation of the communicative actors in the structure of the enunciation" (Marrone, 2007, p.160-161). The strategic use of isotopy is a part, too, of the communicative structure which, by means of intra-discursive coherence and semantic redundancy, creates the conditions that are vital to the construction and dissemination of reliable knowledge capable of moulding behavior within the socio-health-care sphere.

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