

## Presentation of IOW project

### *In Other Words.* A critical, creative, collaborative project

**Paola Giorgis**

Independent Scholar and Teacher of English, Literature and Visual Arts, Italy  
E-mail: [paola.giorgis@womaned.org](mailto:paola.giorgis@womaned.org)

**Ivanka Mavrodieva**

Institute of Rhetoric and Communications, Bulgaria  
E-mail: [mavrodieva@phls.uni-sofia.bg](mailto:mavrodieva@phls.uni-sofia.bg)

**Victoria Odeniyi**

University of the Arts, London; University of London, UK  
E-mail: [v.odenyi@arts.ac.uk](mailto:v.odenyi@arts.ac.uk)

**Olena Semenets**

Kyiv National University of Trade and Economics, Ukraine  
E-mail: [o.semenets@knute.edu.ua](mailto:o.semenets@knute.edu.ua)

**Bilyana Todorova**

South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria  
E-mail: [bilyanatodorova@swu.bg](mailto:bilyanatodorova@swu.bg)

**Andrea Valente**

York University, Canada  
E-mail: [valentac@yorku.ca](mailto:valentac@yorku.ca)

**Ioanna Vovou**

Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece  
Email: [vovou@panteion.gr](mailto:vovou@panteion.gr)

**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to present the collaborative, analytical and methodological premises of *In Other Words*, a research project consisting on the creation and development of an online dictionary of keywords which are shaping the narratives of different forms of Otherness. *In Other Words* is a critical, collective, creative and intercultural project, structured as an open, collaborative online resource. The project finds its meaning in a context of engaged research: the dissemination of ideas and the use of critical tools beyond the borders of the academia in order to reach the contexts where they are most needed, as for example, those which are marked by overt or hidden forms of discrimination. A sub-section of the online dictionary *In Other Words* is dedicated to the Words of COVID-19. It is particularly of

this section that we are discussing in this paper. The section “COVID-19” of the dictionary analyses critically how, in different countries and different contexts, words have been used and mobilized to create specific narratives of the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Otherness, COVID 19, On line dictionary, Critical analysis, transcultural environment, crossed methodologies.

As already presented in the *Rhetoric and Communications* e-journal, Issue 45, October 2020, the platform *In Other Words* consists of an online dictionary of keywords which have been shaping the narratives of different forms of Otherness. The main questions that underpin the project are: which are the most often recurring keywords that reproduce and disseminate various forms, manifestations, and representations of Otherness as part of a dynamic socio-historical context? In which contexts are they used? Who uses them, for what purposes? And, within such a framework, how can we develop a counter narrative in order to problematize and challenge such constructions?

*In Other Words* is a critical, collective, creative and intercultural project. It is critical because we offer a critique of current everyday words in context which reproduce and disseminate discriminatory discourses, foregrounding how issues of power and manipulation reproduce inequalities and prejudices. It is collective not only because it involves different contributors from different countries and cultures but also because it promotes the praxis of co-construction and of collaborative authorship. It is creative because we juxtapose the keywords analysed with discursive proposals able to reverse the perspective of the general narrative by using rhetorical visual elements, works of art, ads, poems, etc. Claiming both an original and effective [1] way of addressing the meaning of terms and expressions of Otherness, we rely on creativity, since we think it is very relevant to develop a critical and intercultural approach. Indeed, creativity involves perceiving and playing with the status quo from a different perspective which transcends whatever has been taken for granted. Therefore, the project is also intercultural according to Zhu Hua’s definition, as an “interaction and active engagement between different cultural groups and communities” [2], since its aim is to develop and share critical and intercultural awareness able to challenge the (re)production and the dissemination of dehumanizing, stigmatizing, and stereotyping language.

*In Other Words* is structured as an open, collaborative online resource to be used for free in different social and educational contexts by students, teachers, scholars, educators, and activists. The project is both a product and a process,

being conceived as a work-in-progress open to diverse contributions and which aims to bridge theoretical reflections and practical actions. We think that this should be the main goal of engaged [3] research: the dissemination of ideas and the use of critical tools beyond the borders of the academia in order to reach the contexts where they are most needed, as for example, those which are marked by overt or hidden forms of discrimination.

A sub-section of the online dictionary *In Other Words* is dedicated to the Words of COVID-19. It is particularly of this section that we are here discussing since it specifically responds to the Call of this Special Issue. The section “COVID-19” of the dictionary analyses critically how, in different countries and different contexts, words have been used and mobilized to create specific narratives of the pandemic – e.g., to make people accept severe limitations to their rights; to spread terror or hope; to deliver para-scientific terms and fake-news; to favour or contrast conservative and divisive views of communities and societies; etc. The main questions which define the purpose of this section are: a- how does this pandemic redefine the construct of Otherness? (e.g., who are the ‘new’ Others? which are the ‘new’ borders? which is the ‘new’ invasion?); b- which are the recurring words and narratives on/of Otherness which have been used to construe such changes?; c- how many usually invisible forms of Otherness has the pandemic revealed? (e.g., the elderly, the sick); d- which are the most recurrent words/metaphors used in different countries to define the pandemic?

Therefore, in the next paragraphs, we will discuss some of the keywords analysed in the specific session of COVID-19 and what has motivated our choices; in a few words, why we have decided to choose a specific keyword in particular and its use in specific contexts, as well as the methodological frameworks that have guided our analysis.

### **Ioanna, Greece**

One of the discussions on the COVID-19 section of the IOW project mainly focuses on the use of the term (*new*) *heroes*. By producing textual and contextual analyses on various media contents (television, social media, online news...) our aim is to examine a certain shift of values that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic in the mediation of the concept of heroism, strongly present in public discourse (e.g., political, media, medical). The highly repetitive occurrence of the term, in relation with a situation characterized as a ‘war’ against an ‘invisible’ and ‘insidious’ ‘enemy’ mobilizes a nexus of social representations of the pandemic and of the ‘legitimate’ social attitudes that evolve around it. In fact, these ‘new heroes’ find their meaning in a context of ‘war’ (against the virus). Thus, refer-

ring to doctors, health care personnel, food chain and cleaning workers, etc., that are in the ‘front line’ of combatting the virus in terms of the ‘heroes next door’ or the ‘silent people’ (see for instance the Greek Prime Minister’s televised address at the beginning of the gradual lifting of the first quarantine measures in Greece, on April 28, 2020: “... and the protagonists became the silent people” [4]) contributes to the understanding of the pandemic as a crisis situation that calls for a superior ethical attitude from each and every one of us. These ‘new heroes’ of the pandemic (scientists, doctors, health and medical workers, etc.) live between us, perform their duty, their heroic actions, every single day. The mediation of these archetypical hero constructions includes personal qualities and social behaviours such as ‘personal responsibility’, empathy, self-denial and sacrifice of their own comfort and well-being, jeopardy of their own health and life, elements which could be found in a more ‘improved version of ourselves’. The accessibility of these characteristics defining the heroic attitude during the COVID-19 pandemic, combining both achievement and morality [5], leading to a highly ethical social behaviour and, respectively, their discursive iteration invest on the idea of “the banality of heroism”, a concept suggesting “that we are *all* potential heroes waiting for a moment in life to perform a heroic deed” [6]. Thus, by mobilizing the rhetorical arsenal of ‘heroism’, and, consequently, that of ‘war’, a call for solidarity is addressed, followed by the proposal of a possible and desirable world and *modus vivendi* inside of it. Understanding the narrative structure and the social repercussions accompanying the concept of “new heroes” during the pandemic, as a major component of the era of the ‘new normality’ which calls for the admittance of heroism as the ‘norm’ [7], is the aim of this particular study.

### **Bilyana, Bulgaria**

Closely related to the keywords, ‘new heroism’ and ‘war’ [8], is the keyword ‘first line’, which in COVID-19 contexts refers to the ‘new heroes’ – doctors and other medical workers. As it is known, “spatial metaphors are conceptual metaphors that use the space domain SPACE to understand something that is in and of itself not spatial.” [9]. The imaginative ‘line’ where the people and the virus ‘meet’ is seen as the most dangerous ‘zone’. Such a metaphor represents the idea that the world is not a chaotic place as the lines are deliberately constructed spaces. The metaphor both honours the people who help others and implies the presence of control over the situation.

### **Ivanka and the Bulgarian Team of the Institute of Rhetoric and Communications, Bulgaria**

The project began with a team of scientists and researchers at a time when online communication was becoming dominant. The members of the team decided to work in a scientific virtual community and to discuss the achievements every month. On the one hand, the meetings looked like brainstorming sessions, and, on the other hand, they included business discussions, a decision-making process, text editing, and consultations about the methodology, the notions and the terminology applied. Creativity combines with critical review. Some posts include visual elements and it is a modern approach to present means and changes of means. Within that working context we have added the word ‘new normality’ and ‘hearth’ in the COVID-19 section and we plan to publish more words. The study of these key words is undertaken within a national context, and thus, the results of the current analysis are shared among all members. The work has been showing the opportunities for cooperation and contribution in interdisciplinary scientific fields for a year now. The project teaches us to work in compliance with deadlines and we try to cover high academic standards. The results of the project are available to users, which is a trend for open access to scientific resources. The virtual international network creates a code of ethics.

### **Paola, Italy**

One of the most recurring global metaphors which permeated most of media and public discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic has been that of ‘war’ [10]. “We are at war”, “We must fight this war”, “The enemy arrived in an unarmed country”, “We are fighting at the frontline”, “We will win this war”, are some of the expressions that have been repeatedly used to name the pandemic, and which bring along a series of corollaries connected to the semantic area of ‘war’ such as ‘front-line’, ‘kill the virus’, ‘counterattack the infection’, ‘our victims’ (the patients), and, as Ioanna widely discusses in this contribution, ‘our heroes’ (doctors and nurses). In late February 2020, Italy was the first western country to be suddenly and fiercely affected by the virus, and the daily report made by the Italian governmental task force sounded indeed like a war bulletin, particularly in some periods (mid-March/early April 2020) when the death rate was dramatically rising in the country.

According to WHO (World Health Organization), a pandemic is “the worldwide spread of a new disease”, while, according to OUD (Oxford University Dictionary), ‘war’ is “a state of armed conflict between two different countries or two

different groups within the same country”. So, how is it that a disease has been narrated as an armed conflict? And most of all, why? Which are the communicative and manipulative strategies behind the deliberate use of such a metaphor?

I tried to analyze similarities first. As a war, COVID-19 has been a tragic and ferocious event that rapidly expanded globally. As a war, it has impacted on social, economic, and political domains, as well as on individual liberties. As in a war, the randomness of the contagious spread recalls the randomness of the war casualties. As in a war, the constant appeal to ‘a state of emergency’ (‘a state of war’) was instrumentally and politically used to facilitate the people’s acceptance of several restrictive measures to their individual liberties. And yes, as in a war, the call upon national pride and resilience was intended to unify spirits and efforts against a common enemy.

But, precisely, there’s the rub. Here is the junction where all the similarities between a pandemic and a war crumble down as a house of cards. Indeed, in a pandemic we are all on the *same* side: there is no enemy and no invasion from the outside, since the ‘enemy’ (the virus) is within us, and the borders to defend are restricted to our bodies. But there is another very fundamental difference between a war and a pandemic. War is always a deliberate choice which is made for political and economic interests, while getting sick is never a choice. Therefore, the use of the metaphor ‘war’ to define a disease maliciously functions at a double level: implying that disease is like war, it also suggests that war is like disease, that is something which is not chosen but that it rather happens as one of the natural incidents of human condition. This is where the vicious circle closes: culturalize disease and naturalize war.

If the communicative and manipulative strategies of the use of the metaphor ‘war’ are clearly instrumentally functional at a collective level, they are highly dysfunctional when applied at an individual level. Indeed, which are the repercussions of such a metaphor on the person who ‘fights (or loses) her/his battle’ against such an ‘enemy’? In her illuminating essay *Illness as Metaphor* (1997), Susan Sontag [11] warns us against the use of the military metaphors when referring to such a private sphere as that of illness, revealing how improper mystifications are symptoms of our own incapability to deal with the structural problems of our societies as well as with our own frailties. But it is also the demonstration of how the more or less deliberate misuse of words and metaphors contribute, for good or bad, to shape our reality, and how it is therefore our responsibility to be aware of the substantial moral and ethical weight of the words and metaphors that we use.

### Andrea, Brazil

The entry #MascaraSalva contributes to the COVID-19 section in the IOW online dictionary. It deals with the question of (cloth) face masks in the Brazilian context more specifically during the months of April and May 2020. The objective is to show how such a hashtag #MascarasSalva is entangled with the country's politics amid the coronavirus pandemic and how it reinforces a new habit among the Brazilian population by praising the ones who conform with it and decide to retweet the hashtag. Furthermore, the entry attempts to show how the entanglement and conformity are sustained by collective emotions of stress, anxiety, and fear.

To start with, the entry offers an etymology of the words 'mask' (mascara) and 'save' (salva) which we can observe that both words share some folkloric and mystic origins. When the two words are agglutinated to form a hashtag, they convey ambivalent meanings: *mask* as an object that evokes 'fear' and *save* as an action to 'protect someone from danger'. Moreover, the hashtag is analyzed in its cultural context considering the agents involved in the social narrative such as the Brazilian President (Jair Bolsonaro), social media, artists, and opposition parties. Next, the hashtag is problematized in the sense that the ones that retweet it seem to conform with a new normal that includes the consumption of cloth face masks in public spaces without taking into account the pervasive economic inequalities in Brazilian society. The communicative strategies to circulate the hashtag is via social media, mainly Twitter, including not only verbal text but also audio-visual content under a rhetoric of self-care and care. Furthermore, a discussion section of #MascaraSalva attempts to show that the hashtag represents an object that can invoke emotions of fear and anxiety.

#MascaraSalva has been launched in conjunction with a broad national campaign called *Todos pela Saúde* (All for Health) which involves the efforts of public and private organizations and individuals to fight against the spread of the coronavirus. The campaign aims to raise sanitary awareness by wearing (cloth) face masks as a safety measure during COVID-19 pandemic. Parallel to it, #MascaraSalva has been articulated as a political tool against the Brazilian President's careless behaviour in respect to the pandemic. The launch of the #MascaraSalva across social media was marked by the presence of local celebrities that endorsed the use of cloth face masks to their following fans through their video clips. The #MascaraSalva messages are sent and replicated via Twitter in order to reinforce the new habit which has become mandatory in some municipalities. We can observe that the #MascaraSalva messages discursively construct the cloth face mask as an object that can save Brazilians from the coronavirus and it is associated to

The Redeemer Christ, a gigantic statue which is a famous national symbol located on the top of a hill (Corcovado) in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Apart from the rhetorical strategies (written and audio-visual) that involve the communication of the hashtag, the messages are used as political tools to convey counter-messages in response to Bolsonaro's careless speeches about the pandemic in Brazil.

The analysis of #MascaraSalva is grounded in a critical discourse approach to identify power inequalities and asymmetries that are masked in those messages through illocutionary forces that praise an audience who owns the masks (as a commodity) and who conforms with the new habit in contrast to the ones who do not and are, therefore, shamed for not caring about other human beings. The audience that identifies with those messages ends up retweeting them, which creates a dynamic process by reinforcing a relation between producer-consumer who complies with this new trend embedded in a discourse of 'self-care' and 'care'. Furthermore, the hashtag is discussed within a psychoanalytic framework as #MascaraSalva encapsulates the cloth face mask into a fetish with desiring effects to create a transitional object [12] that can offer emotional temporary safety to their users. By retweeting it, the audience may experience a level of consolation as they deal with their own fears and anxieties during the pandemic. In sum, the entry #MascaraSalva shows that the hashtag gained national momentum since it has been grounded in certain political agendas and in collective emotional reactions, meanwhile an online audience conforms with the new habit regardless of any scientific rationale.

### **Olena, Ukraine**

It is also important to analyze units of the metadiscursive level, namely those characterizing the quality of discursive practices that have formed around the topic of COVID-19. One of the most relevant metadiscursive units is a lexeme *infodemic*.

*Infodemic* is a portmanteau word that arose as a result of merging parts of two words: *information* and *epidemic*. For this reason, it is important to analyze the units of the metadiscursive level, namely those characterizing the quality of discursive practices that have formed around the topic of COVID-19. The word was used in the Report of the World Health Organization (WHO): "The 2019-nCoV outbreak and response has been accompanied by a massive '*infodemic*' – an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it".[13]

Speaking at the Munich Security Conference on February 15, 2020, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the World Health Organization, said: “We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an *infodemic*. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous” [14].

The phenomenon of infodemic is as real as the COVID-19 epidemic. And it threatens people’s lives and health in the same way. Like in the COVID-19 pandemic, there are no state borders for the infodemic. The phenomenon of infodemic has special patterns of spread. Together with nationally specific features, it reveals certain universal patterns of existence and dissemination.

This word denotes a phenomenon widely represented in various discourses. Representatives of very different segments of the population disinformed, misinformed or disseminated false information: politicians and journalists, popular bloggers and ordinary users of social networks, persons in the street and even medical professionals.

Forms of existence of infodemic discourses are various: from official statements of political leaders and their posts on social networks – to publications and speeches of famous people in the media, discussions on social networks (including ideologically biased or provoked), ordinary people’s everyday conversations, gossips, and rumors (which, however, are also quite technological).

The basis for the emergence of discursive practices that represent the phenomenon of infodemic is multi-layered. It is possible to identify such factors as:

- cognitive (lack of knowledge, influence of thinking stereotypes, uncritical thinking, vulnerability to manipulations, etc.);
- emotional (a whole range of emotions: from unconcern and carelessness – to fear and panic, from suspicion and despair – to stubbornness and overconfidence);
- technological (focus on achieving economic, propaganda, and political goals).

The semantic field with the dominant *infodemic* involves adjacent lexemes to denote persons: *covid dissidents*, *corona skeptics*, *anti-vaccinators*, *covidiot*. The last word is distinguished by enantiosemy, it is an auto-antonym because it is used to denote the opposite phenomena: *covidiot*s are called not only those people who underestimate the danger and demonstrate carelessness, but also those who behave abundantly carefully and exceed the recommended means of protection against infection.

Attempts to explain the sources, impulses, causes, mechanisms of the phenomenon of infodemic are presented in semantically related words: *misinforma-*

*tion, disinformation, conspiracy theory, etc.*

The active use of the lexeme *infodemic* has made easy forming a whole metaphorical field of figuratively used lexical units, especially in the professional discourse of specialists in media studies and fact-checking: *media infection, contagion, to clear information*, and so on.

The words *infodemic, covid dissidents, media infection* and the like are used to expose ignorance or deliberate disinformation, which form the cognitive basis of the phenomenon. However, could they possibly also be used as labels to stigmatize critics of the current government's actions in connection with COVID-19?

The approach from the standpoint of critical discourse analysis makes it possible to reveal the discursive mechanisms of contextual meanings formation in these lexical markers of the coronavirus era.

### **Conclusion**

As evident in the passages above, the methodological approaches of the different authors and contributions are very varied. All the authors involved in the project *In Other Words (IOW)* come from different theoretical backgrounds and formations. Though they all share a general common ground in the vast area of Critical Language Studies, each of the contributors adds her own share to the group - Critical Discourse Analysis, Critical Metaphor Analysis, Critical Rhetoric, Critical Literary Studies, Decolonial and Feminist Studies, Communicative and Media Studies. The result is that the collaborative project is highly interdisciplinary in both methods and contents. Yet, what also characterizes the *IOW* project in general, and its corollary *The Words of COVID-19* which is discussed here, are other two relevant elements.

The first, as also mentioned in Ivanka's passage, is the innovative way of co-working. Due to the widest range of geographical locations of the different authors (from Canada to Greece, from the UK to Bulgaria, etc.) and to the travelling restrictions caused by the pandemic, collaborative work has been enacted through virtual contacts via email, video meetings, online discussions. What is different from other groups of similar scholarly online collaborations is that most of the authors involved in the project had never met before the virtual cooperation began. Therefore, the authors have tried to envision the limitations connected with vis-à-vis encounters as a way to develop a new methodology of collaborative, non-hierarchical working, which, on the way, has also grown strong interpersonal bonds and mutual trust. The authors are critically aware of all the constraints derived by the global situation of the pandemic which has also affected scholarly conversations and exchanges, and will for sure welcome

the opportunity of meeting again and/or for the first time in person; yet, such an experience of creating together a brand-new group of collaborative working has opened new methodological perspectives also in the view of much more gratifying meetings in-presence.

As seen, *IOW* project has managed to develop a unity of critical contents and critical methodologies. Yet, there is another important element which characterizes the collaborative work of *IOW*, that is how contents and methodologies are connected with purpose. Indeed, *IOW* project has the ambition to speak not only from inside academia, but possibly mostly to outside of it, bringing critical discourse in those social and educational environments which mostly need them, offering to such contexts tools and resources to read critically public communications. There is consequently a strong ethical and political goal in *IOW* project, since it aims to help develop awareness on how words are used in public discourse, and how they can affect and frame people's ideas and their reading of reality, possibly orienting such representations towards transformation and change.

For all the reasons and the characteristics aforementioned, *IOW* project is a constant work-in-progress, and collaboration is open to further contributions. For more info, please contact: [info@iowdictionary.org](mailto:info@iowdictionary.org).

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*Manuscript was submitted: 19.12.2020.*

*Double Blind Peer Reviews: from 20.12.2020 till 30.12.2020.*

*Accepted: 04.01.2021.*

Брой 46 на сп. „Реторика и комуникации“, януари 2021 г. се издава с финансовата помощ на Фонд научни изследвания, договор № КП-06-НП2/41 от 07 декември 2020 г.

Issue 46 of the Rhetoric and Communications Journal (January 2021) is published with the financial support of the Scientific Research Fund, Contract No. KP-06-NP2/41 of December 07, 2020.