

Communication in times of permacrisis. Introduction to the special issue

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For a philologist, the term “permacrisis” might seem paradoxical, given that one of its components (“permanent”) implies ‘endurance’ or ‘lasting without change,’ while “crisis” denotes a turning point, suggesting something transient, something that unfolds in either a positive or negative direction. Despite this apparent contradiction, the term has emerged, and not without justification. It encapsulates the realities of the third decade of the 21st century, marked by the longstanding global climate crisis compounded by the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, and the eruption of a full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022, within Europe. Crises no longer pass fleetingly but rather, they follow one another, running in parallel. The accumulation of such crises prompted Collins Publishers to designate “permacrisis” as the word of the year¹, drawing attention to the profoundly altered reality surrounding us.

It is somewhat natural that, for the theme of the biannual Communication Styles conference in 2023, we selected the concept of permacrisis. We invited linguists, philologists, and humanists from various countries to explore, in their research, how people in different European nations have responded to crises, whether on a global or local scale. The conference took place in Krakow, Poland, on April 25-26, 2023, and attracted 34 scholars from Czechia, Estonia, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain, and Ukraine,

¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/collins-dictionary-2022-word-of-the-year-permacrisis/>

and this special issue of Tertium Linguistics Journal brings together the research presented during the conference.

The articles and research featured in this Special Issue delve into the humanistic perspective on crises that are currently pertinent, encompassing global-scale crises, like the climate crisis, health crisis, and war, as well as local crises such as the “language crisis” in Estonia or the “logging crisis” in Romania. In broad terms, the studies explore various strategies for dealing with crises at individual, social group, and broader societal levels. The range of analysed materials spans from associations in the mental lexicon to newspaper articles, opinion journalism, social media, personal blog posts, and even presidential speeches. Authors in this special issue have found interest in expressive, figurative, metaphorical, and humorous styles of communication. Methodologically and theoretically, the frameworks of analysis range from cognitive metaphor theory to discourse analysis, also encompassing rhetoric, narratology, and addressing pragmatic aspects. Original theoretical approaches are not lacking either, such as Alba-Juez’s treatment of irony as an inferred contradiction and Musolff’s blending of metaphoric scenarios and narratological analysis.

Crisis is depicted as a condition characterized by uncertainty, urgency, and a threat to core values². These attributes manifest in self-expression and communication styles. Uncertainty transforms into a spectrum of emotions, sparking doubts, suspicions, and even conspiracy theories. Urgency elicits assertive expression, perhaps even abruptly, and the jeopardy to foundational values requires active engagement instead of passive observation, compelling individuals to make choices and intervene. In the realm of communication styles, this translates to passionate self-expression rather than calm reflection on matters.

Andreas Musolff’s article (*Permacrisis, Conspiracy Stories and Metaphors*) focuses on the impact of health-crisis (Covid-19) on conspiracy stories, reflecting cognitive aspects with a strong communicative impact. The data used is based on online articles from newspapers and news sites, on research articles on conspiracy stories, and on presidential discourses or remarks during press conferences or briefings (D. Trump). Musolff examines the use of metaphors in conspiracy stories from the USA and Germany, selecting as analytical tools Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Narrative Theory.

Another article scrutinising the impact of the health crisis is *When Negative Turns out to Be Positive: Exploring Changes in Word Associations in the Aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic* by Mai Raet. The author focuses on the implications of this crisis on language

² See Huang & Holmgren (2020: 3) and the literature referenced there.

processing, highlighting cognitive aspects like the shifts in the mental lexicon. Using an online word association test (January-March 2023), the author explores changes in the Estonian mental lexicon. The article thus illustrates word association research.

Valeriia Nikolaienko's article (*'I Had a Dream Which Was not All a Dream'. Viewpoint Metaphors in Personal Experience Narratives on War*) takes up a corpus study of the personal narratives of war crisis (mainly caused by Russia's invasion in Ukraine). On the basis of the corpus, she carries out a fascinating analysis of the most frequent viewpoint metaphors used by the narrators, which happen to be dream and film-watching metaphors, thus expressing the need of the narrators to distance themselves from the disturbing reality they report on.

Another article on war crisis is *Pathos Configuration in the War Crisis Discourse. A Case Study* by Gabriela Stoica. The author highlights the way emotions are discursively used in a discourse delivered online by President Zelensky to the US Congress on March 16th, 2022. This war crisis discourse aims not only to gain the audience's adhesion to the viewpoint supported by the speaker, but also to activate a potential concrete (re)action. Using a rhetorical-argumentative framework, the author points to the way this political discourse appeals to several basic and sociomoral emotions with a persuasive goal, its pathemic configuration, and the reference to the endoxal profile of the audience, i.e. the audience's opinions and beliefs.

The impact of the two main crises (health and war) from recent years on online communicative forms is investigated by Laura Alba-Juez in *Contrasting Dimensions behind the Use of Irony and Humor in Times of Crisis: Covid and the Ukrainian War*. The author examines the functions of ironic humour (aggressiveness, affiliation, and amusement) in online communication (media and social networks), based on two sets of memes: a set consists of memes used by groups supporting conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 pandemic; the second set is formed by memes used by Ukrainians to engage and inform people, while also offering relief. Alba-Juez uses a discourse-pragmatic analytic method, and her own theory on irony, the Inferred Contradiction Theory.

In their article *Values behind Metaphors: Figurative Speech in the Discourse of a "Language Crisis,"* Ene Vainik and Geda Paulsen highlight how the modernisation of linguistic norms in Estonia triggered a debate labelled "language crisis." Language can be a sensitive aspect, as it is part of the national identity; any changes in the linguistic norms can be construed as targeting the national identity. The reflection on crisis thus entails both cognitive and cultural aspects. The data is provided by Estonian media (mostly opinion articles). The authors focus on the figures of speech used in the debate, mostly on metaphors. The analysis

relies mainly on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Figurative Framing, and Critical Discourse Analysis.

Jana Hallová focuses on a possible online freedom of speech crisis: *Censorship Crisis. Analysis of Memes on Twitter and Their Reception*. The author examines the online stances of users with regard to a potential censorship on a platform (Twitter) after it has been purchased by Elon Musk. Two posts by Musk (consisting of two memes) and (some of) the reactions they triggered are scrutinised in the article, using the tools provided by multimodal analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis.

Environmental crisis is targeted by Mihaela-Viorica Constantinescu in *Humorous Approaches to Environmental Issues. The Case of Illegal Logging in Romania*. The focus is on the role of online satirical publications to raise awareness to the crisis, and even offering coping solutions, not only on their entertaining function. The articles from two online satirical publications on the topic of illegal logging are analysed in a pragma-rhetorical approach in order to highlight the humorous strategies preferred by each publication. The analysis also includes the appraisal of two humorous articles, via an informal survey, by the readers.

During times of crisis, it becomes distinctly clear that people's core values are deeply woven into their speech and communication. The matters they prioritize, their ethical considerations, their capacity for empathy and compassion, and how they respond to challenges all offer glimpses into the fundamental values shaping their actions and attitudes in crisis situations. The study of humour, metaphors, internet memes, and other forms of expression provides valuable insights into the psychological, social, and cultural responses to ongoing challenges. This examination helps us gain a better understanding of how individuals and communities adapt, communicate, and derive meaning in a world marked by persistent crises.

References

Huang, M., & Holmgren, L. (Eds.). (2020). *The Language of Crisis: Metaphors, Frames and Discourses*. John Benjamins.