We, you and beyond: intersubjective relations on COVID-19 public signs from Tallinn and Berlin

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The signs communicating COVID-19 related restrictions around the world have become a new genre of public discourse (see, e.g., Hua 2021; Dancygier et al. to appear), allowing for the traditional linguistic landscape paradigm (Shohamy & Gorter 2009) to be broadened. Linguistic research on COVID-signs does not only give an insight into how pandemic discourse is dependent on different linguistic means, but also offers a crucial perspective on crisis communication (e.g., Piller, Zhang & Li 2020).

One of the many linguistic aspects that can be analysed on COVID-signs is the grammatical person (e.g., Tragel & Pikksaar 2023). As one of the most complex grammatical categories (see Siewierska 2004; Langacker 2007), the use of person reveals how the author of a sign conceptualises themselves and participants of the discourse. In this presentation, we are tackling the cognitive domain of the conception of a speaker-hearer interaction: how the author of a COVID-sign (speaker) chooses to use linguistic means to express grammatical person or waives that choice.

In our ongoing research, we are comparing 225 COVID-signs from Tallinn, Estonia and 225 signs from Berlin, Germany. All these signs from both cities involve the discourses of mask wearing, hand disinfection, and/or social distancing. The linguistic means for expressing person on Estonian signs were automatically analysed with the Python package ESTNLTK (Orasmaa et al. 2016), while the German signs were tagged manually.

By analysing the intersubjective relations (cf. Langacker 2007, see also social deixis (Siewierska 2004)) on those signs, we want to show how different dynamics like inclusion, authority, and politeness are created through the use of person. For example, the first person plural form can create both inclusion and authority, depending on whether the use is inclusive ('We are protecting each other') or exclusive ('We require you to wear a mask'). Although neither Estonian nor German makes a grammatical distinction between the inclusivity and exclusivity of the first person plural, the scope of the person reference can be determined from the context and/or the construction in almost all cases.

Likewise significant is the employment of the respectful singular reference form, which both Estonian and German use in similar contexts. However, while Estonian uses second person plural for politeness (similar to French or Russian), German uses third person plural. In Estonian, the second person plural form allows the author to leave ambiguous whether they have meant the polite form or simply plural, but in German that grammatical choice must always be made.

Furthermore, there are also COVID-signs in both Estonian and German that neglect the use of person on the signs: like nominalisation in Estonian (*Maski kandmine on kohustuslik* 'Wearing a mask is compulsory'), or using only the infinitive form of the verb with no person marker at all in German (*Maske tragen* 'To wear a mask') Such tendencies can be interpreted as avoiding the choice of person and the consequent responsibility of an intersubjective relation with the addressee.

Since the COVID-signs in Estonia and Germany have an essentially consistent message, we can assume that whatever differences there are in the use of person, they stem solely from the differences in linguistic means and cultural contexts (cf., Ogiermann & Bella 2021; Bella & Ogiermann 2022 for other international comparisons). Thus, the comparative analysis of these signs enables us to study how intersubjective relations in discourse differ in Estonian and German. Furthermore, the use of person also reveals how these two languages balance politeness, inclusion, and authority in the pandemic discourse.

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