

Constructing continuity: on the establishment of temporal legitimization in political discourse during the COVID-19 crisis

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Abstract

This article investigates how political discourse during the COVID-19 crisis discursively constructs temporalities as a means of legitimizing crisis management. Building on Critical Discourse Studies and the Discourse-Historical Approach (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017), it explores how continuity – often overlooked in crisis research – is not only maintained but actively constructed in discourse. Drawing on 28 Belgian governmental press conferences (2020 to 2022), the study identifies six discourses of continuity that were mobilized to justify measures, manage expectations, and synchronize collective action. Continuity unfolds in six discourses of the crisis: (1) maintaining the essentials, (2) the creation of habits in crisis, (3) the permanence of effort, (4) *waiting* as a tool, (5) projection in and out of the crisis and (6) predicting and progressing. These six discourses contrast with a view of continuity as inertia, as the absence of action or change. Instead, they articulate continuity at times as the maintaining force of a certain order, and at others as a creative force normalizing newness. The article argues that continuity, far from being inert, becomes a response to disruption, sustaining governance and order. Thereby, it contributes to the understanding of temporality as a central vector of legitimization in contemporary crises.

Key words: Continuity, temporality, COVID-19, political communication, crisis management, discourse, Discourse-Historical Approach, legitimization

6. Conclusion

Crisis management can thus be considered through the prism of continuity rather than one of change: at times as the maintaining force of a certain order, and at others as a creative force normalizing newness. The analysis of press conferences held by the authorities in Belgium during the two years of the COVID-19 pandemic articulates six discourses of continuity: 1) maintaining the essentials, 2) the permanence of effort, 3) waiting as a strategic tool, 4) creating the habits of the crisis, 5) projection in and out of the crisis and 6) predicting and progressing. Those discourses counteract perceived disruption and allow authorities to get a *grip* (as elaborated by Chateauraynaud & Debaz (2017: 606-607); Gaborit (2022)) bridging the perception of instability with possibilities of – or even a call to – action. It is by approaching crises as continuous processes that authorities legitimize their decisions and actions. Future research in CDS could help to systematize the link between continuity and processes of legitimization. The strategies outlined in the discussion would benefit from further refinement in order to develop a stabilized analytical framework that is transferable to the study of discourse in other crisis contexts.

Additionally, this paper reconsiders the opposition between change and continuity (Patterson, 2004; Driessens, 2023). To construct continuity is to create the known, to establish duration, to assert inertia, or to define what constitutes change and what does not. Continuity is therefore all-encompassing; it is not the opposite of change, since change takes place within it. When related to crises and crisis management, continuity is both a force of preservation and a creative force in a context of ongoing change. This duality appears particularly relevant for understanding how contemporary crises are addressed, as the results bring to the fore a site of legitimization where crisis and continuity are articulated as both the issue and the cure.

7. Bibliography

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