Who gets to decide? How does political discourse frame the role of politicians and scientific experts in times of pandemic?

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After the outbreak of the pandemic in Belgium in March 2020 and after a national lockdown was decided by the Belgian federal government, an important public controversy arose about the political measures that should have been taken and that should follow, in order to cope with this unprecedented situation. Amongst other issues, there was a heated debate about the role scientific experts and politicians should take in designing the appropriate strategy to face the crisis. Beyond their explicit arguments, stakeholders from both sides refer implicitly to a certain conception of the democratic process of decision-making in time of crisis and more generally in a democracy facing exceptional conditions (Farrelly 2015; Mey & Ladegaard 2015): some consider the experts should decide because they have knowledge about the pandemic, others think politicians should keep the high hand on decision-making process, because they are the legitimate representative of the people.

This paper aims at studying the discourse strategies politicians have used in order to justify (*i*) the way they have aligned or de-aligned with scientific experts and (*ii*) the role they have assigned to these experts in the decision-making process. Our corpus is made of all the instances of politicians' discourse (interviews or quotations) evoking the scientific experts (their role, the relevance of their advices, etc.) published during the first wave of the pandemic in Belgium (March-July 2020) either in two important French-speaking newspapers or on the Facebook pages of the 5 main political parties in French-speaking Belgium and of their president. Our analysis will study all the pragmatic means used to support, invoke, qualify, contest or reject experts' statements and recommendations and the way discourse constructs and legitimizes a particular vision of the roles of politicians and experts should take in democracies. We will focus on implicitness in discourse (Cap & Dynel 2017) and explore how implicatures and metaphors in particular contribute to conveying a particular image of the role each kind of actor is expected to play.

References

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