



Discursive News Values Analysis: The Case of COVID-19 Reports in South Korea*

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ABSTRACT

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The current project investigates the production of the COVID-19 epidemic into a crisis from the perspective of Discursive News Values Analysis. Based on a corpus of COVID-19 news reports in *The Korea Herald* from 2023 to 2024, the study explicates what aspects of the pandemic are foregrounded and backgrounded and how lexicogrammatical choices contribute to shaping the way the virus is framed as a threat or a non-issue. The findings reveal that Negativity/Positivity, Proximity/Timeliness and Superlativeness are emphasized, working in concert with other news values to create a never-ending narrative of a threatening pathogen in the coverage. It is argued that, emphasizing these values, the reports provide no helpful information for the reader to reduce health risks and potentially distort the risk perceptions of the virus.

KEYWORDS

news value, COVID-19, crisis communication, discourse analysis, newspaper report

1. Introduction

Increasingly, scholars have turned to accept the view that security issues and threats do not simply exist “out there” and are not essentially threatening in themselves, but rather must be articulated and framed as such by securitizing actors (Jarvis and Holland 2015, Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2021). According to Buzan et al. (1998), security is a “speech act,” performed by an agent who aims to persuade the audience that some valued referent object faces an existential threat. For example, designating a contagious disease as a “threat” shifts the illness from a low priority medico-political concern to a high priority one that requires coordinated actions and draconian measures, such as suspension of education or business operations, imposition of stay-at-home orders, or border closures. This practice ultimately leads to a “sphere of consensus” about how to manage or perceive the situation, where different responses or views are marginalized or excluded (Briggs and Hallin 2016).

The production of a non-issue into a threat (or vice versa) is achieved in part through the language of structurally privileged actors (Wæver 1995, p. 57), or in Van Dijk’s term the “symbolic elites” (1993), namely, those who have control over access to public discourse, including the press. Indeed, at the time of writing this article (September 2024), the COVID-19 situation is still described as “deadly (threat),” “alarming (increase)” and “public’s woes” in articles by *The Korea Herald*, the largest English-language daily in South Korea. This practice raises important questions for discourse analysts. First, in comparison to the time when the illness first emerged, its newsworthiness is not obvious at the current time. That is, the spread of the COVID-19 virus has followed a predictable pattern internationally, and it is treated like any other respiratory disease. Namely, a pandemic occurs in waves and state-imposed interventions are tightened as the numbers go up and relaxed as they decrease. This fluctuating trend is like seasonal upswing in unemployment and related policy adjustments, but also unlike it in that the changes in the unemployed fail to attract the COVID-19’s headlines, or indeed framing as security. Nor is the impact of the pathogen any more debilitating or lethal in comparison to the previous years. On the contrary, while COVID-19 remains common, hospitalizations and deaths have been on a decline since 2021, and public health risk has remained low at the global level (World Health Organization 2024). Thus, we should ask the fundamental question of how COVID-19 is still packaged as newsworthy. Second, in practical terms, the framing of the illness as an existential threat may be motivated by political interests. For instance, examining newspaper coverage of H1N1 influenza, Stephenson and Jamieson (2009) find that by presenting the infectious disease as continuously emerging, the stories in the report do not focus on protecting the population, but rather on positioning the government as successfully securing itself through a constant assertion of readiness in the face of a threat from Asia. Ultimately, when the audience agrees on the security speech act, a “risk society” is created, thereby mobilizing the governed to give consent to extraordinary measures, including increased policing, undemocratic control, and surveillance in the pretext of risk prevention (Altheide and Michalowski 1999, Ericson and Haggerty 1997, Staples 2000).

The current study explores the discursive securitization of the COVID-19 illness in newspaper discourse. Informed by the concept of “news value,” a discursive news value analysis (DNVA) was performed on a corpus of recent daily COVID-19 news reports in *The Korea Herald* from 2023 to 2024, a time when the majority of the population already has some form of immunity (through vaccination or natural infection), and medical measures and capacity to cope with the pathogen are available and accessible. Focusing on the headlines and sub-headlines, the research takes a critical stance and deconstructs these texts with respect to the way in which lexico-grammatical choices are orchestrated to foreground or background certain aspects of the virus, thereby representing it as a security issue or non-issue. The study is guided by two main questions: 1) What news values are emphasized in these reports, along with their linguistic manifestations? and 2) What, if any, are the roles that these constructed values play in shaping the way the virus is perceived as an emergency or a non-issue?

The contributions of this study are three-fold. First, responding to the call to investigate the discursive construction of news values in various sociocultural contexts (Bednarek and Caple 2017, p. 237), our findings based on the South Korean data add to the growing research on news value analysis in non-Western contexts, which have received little attention hitherto. Second, to crisis communication scholarship, this study provides a venue to reflect on the way in which a taken-for-granted crisis is in fact discursively constituted in everyday discourse. Finally, it puts under critical light the journalistic practice of healthcare reporters. The emphasis and recurring patterns of specific news values can influence, or even mislead, the reader to take either a positive or negative view towards risk perception and preventive practice.

The study begins by discussing relevant literature on DNVA and goes on to introduce the data and methodological approach before presenting the findings in detail. The article concludes with practical and critical insights and observations based on the findings.

2. Theoretical Framework

The notion of “news value” commonly refers to a set of factors that make a news item (including the reported event, social actors, and other details in it) worthy of coverage (Cotter 2010, p. 67). However, from a discourse-analytic perspective, news values are not simply inherent material attributes that an event possesses, or decision-making parameters by which journalists use to measure potential stories and limit the scope or order of reporting. Rather, they need to be discursively constructed (i.e., through various semiotic resources, such as language, images, or typography), so that certain aspects of the reported event are foregrounded, while others backgrounded or suppressed during news production. The central idea is that social actors, events, and actions are given meaning and endowed with newsworthiness by news organizations. News values are also context sensitive in that they can be affected by the socio-cultural system within which news stories are produced. This includes the target audience, geographical location, ideological position, and socio-cultural values (Bednarek and Caple 2017).

Although various typologies of news values have been proposed, the concept has been mostly discussed in non-linguistic terms by scholars of journalism and media studies and has remained in the background in the linguistic literature (see a thorough review of the treatment of news values in these disciplines in Caple and Bednarek 2013). More recent studies by Bednarek and her colleague (Bednarek and Caple 2017, Caple and Bednarek 2013) fill this gap in the linguistic literature by way of synthesizing the concept of news value and developing a linguistically-grounded framework for DNVA. Instead of figuring out the “why” question, which involves multifactorial external factors (i.e., why an event is selected as news), the approach aims to reveal the way in which an event is made into news by way of linguistic resources. Its strength lies in an operationalizable inventory of news values and commonly associated lexico-grammatical resources, shown in Table 1 below.

Two caveats are in order. First, in Bednarek and Caple (2017), the news value of Esthetic appeal is listed as one of the news values as well. However, for the purposes of this study, where visual resources are not within the scope, the Esthetic value will not be pursued. Second, the linguistic resources exemplified above are not exhaustive, and they are highly contextual. However, recognizing these key resources is a useful starting point from which to explore how news values are established as well as how they may be indicative of the ideological positionings of the reporters. Many of these lexico-grammatical cues fall under “evaluation” (Hunston and Thompson 2000), which broadly covers the expression of the writer’s stance toward or feelings about the entities he or she is talking about. Other resources include cause-effect constructions, deictics, or comparative and superlative expressions, and quantifiers.

Table 1: News Values, Definitions, Common Lexico-Grammatical Cues, and Examples from the Corpus (modified based on Bednarek and Caple 2017)

News value	Definition: The pandemic is construed as	Linguistic resource and example
Consonance	typical with respect to news actors, social groups, organizations, or countries	comparison with past behavior and tendency (<i>once again, yet another</i>); general knowledge or customs (<i>well-known</i>)
Eliteness	involving high-status participants	titles and names (<i>the President, experts</i>); high-position descriptors (<i>top officer</i>)
Impact	striking significant impacts or highly consequential	reference to consequences or damage (<i>suicide, fears, financial loss</i>)
Negativity/ Positivity	negative or positive	references to negative/positive emotions, actions, or situations (<i>rise, fall</i>)
Personalization	having personal elements or “human face,” involving non-elite actors	mentions of ordinary people (proper names or non-elite titles); descriptions of their experiences (quotations)
Proximity	geographically or culturally near the target audience	references to places geographically or culturally close to the target reader (<i>Seoul</i>)
Superlativeness	being of high intensity or large in scope	intensifiers, quantifiers, metaphor, comparison (<i>significantly, highest</i>)
Timeliness	timely and sensitive in relation to the reporting situation (current, seasonal, recent, ongoing, or about to happen)	temporal reference (<i>latest, last week, next week</i>)
Unexpectedness	unexpected, unusual, strange, and rare	emphasis on unusuality (<i>unprecedented; despite resurgence</i>)

Previous discourse studies approaching news texts with DNVA are limited, and fewer are studies that examine health crises. Exceptions include Liu and Yu (2023) and Yu and Liu (2023), which compare the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic is represented in *The New York Times* and *China Daily*. It was found that, for domestic situations, both sources tend to adopt positive self-representation. However, *China Daily* specifically highlights Proximity, Positivity, and Personalization, while *The New York Times* gives more prominence to Eliteness and Personalization. When representing overseas situations, both sources foreground Negativity and Impact, thereby achieving negative other-presentation. Based on specially compiled corpora of Chinese language news articles and images, Chen and Liu (2022) find that in the early period of the pandemic (from 2019 to early 2020), the Chinese media dominantly constructs political Eliteness to give the public psychological support and cultivate positive attitudes toward the government’s policy. In the subsequent period (from mid 2020 to the end of 2020), the strategy was shifted to medical Eliteness to foreground advanced medical technology and treatment as well as the reliability in the medical system. An insight from this study is that news value patterns are not intrinsic to an event but are dynamic and sensitive to socio-political factors. Specifically, the same news value (in this case, Eliteness) shows different manifestations in the two periods.

While insightful, these studies do not cover the period when the epidemic has become an endemic to investigate whether such patterns still hold, and because news worthiness is dynamic, research on recent COVID-19 coverage merits attention. More importantly, none of these studies is oriented to disclosing ideologically-laden lexico-grammatical choices and scrutinizing the discourse constitutive role of crisis construction, which are what we propose to do in the current paper.

3. Data and Method

The data set for this study was drawn from a specially compiled corpus of COVID-19 news articles, collected from *The Korea Herald* from January 2023 to August 2024. Appearing in the “Social Affairs” section (with a domestic focus), these articles provide daily updates on the domestic situation. The total number of the articles examined is 180 articles, consisting of 156 articles from 2023 and 24 articles from 2024. The analysis focuses on the headlines and sub-headlines, which constitute the most prominent features of a report, known as the relevance optimizers, as they help readers create the best context to interpret the issue (Dor 2003). The news values presented therein are thus “the most emphasized” (Bednarek and Caple 2017, p. 198). However, where relevant, we will refer to linguistic manifestations in the content as supporting evidence.

Contextually, the major evolution of the pandemic and its coverage during the period study can be summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Background for COVID-19 Pandemic Development in South Korea

Date	Description
January 2022	Omicron variant detected; in-person education resumed at all levels; phased “return to normalcy” started
January 2023	Travelers from China required to submit a PCR test result upon arrival after China relaxed its travel rules, leading to speculation of high level of infections among Chinese citizens
March 2023	PCR test requirement for Chinese travelers lifted
June 2023	Mandatory isolation for COVID-19 patients reduced from 7 to 5 days; COVID-19 crisis level downgraded from “serious” to “alert”; indoor mask mandate lifted in all locations except in healthcare facilities
May 2024	Indoor mask mandate in healthcare facilities lifted; COVID-19 crisis level downgraded from “alert” to “concern” (the lowest in the system); no state support for testing or hospitalization, and antiviral pills are the patient’s expense

Methodologically, the analysis involves manual coding of the news values in the headlines and sub-headlines using the inventory outlined in Table 1. Each lexico-grammatical unit was examined for its role in constructing a particular news value. As exemplified in Table 1, the basic unit of analysis can range from a lexical item to phrases and clauses. Priority was given to the discourse function (i.e., what value a particular linguistic form is used to construct in its sentential context), rather than the surface features (i.e., linguistic forms). We first independently focused on one news value at a time and looked for relevant lexico-grammatical manifestations in all the articles, prior to proceeding to another value. An initial analysis was performed on a sample set of execution reports to gauge the range of diversity and characteristics of news values as well as challenges in the coding process in the corpus. Subsequently, the results were compared, and inconsistencies relating to the coding were resolved to ensure reliability. In addition, it should be expected that a number of news values may cluster in a headline. However, a particular value typically stands out in comparison to the others, and this is what we set out to do in the discussion: we select a notable value and discuss the way it functions to construct or neutralize a crisis.

4. Findings

4.1 Negativity/Positivity

Negativity and Positivity in the daily reports are overwhelmingly constructed through references to daily confirmed cases. The majority of the headlines foreground Negativity and Positivity by explicitly describing the

dynamics of the situation as involving an increase or a decrease. The former seems to suggest that more people are getting sick, which is unfavorable (Negativity), while the latter that fewer people are getting sick, hence Positivity. These descriptions are often provided with numbers, obtained from state authorities, as shown in (1) and (2):

- (1) S. Korea's new COVID-19 cases rise to over 20,000 amid eased virus curbs (3 May 23)
- (2) S. Korea's new COVID-19 cases fall below 4,500 on fewer tests (3 Apr 23)

A few interesting observations are in order. First, journalists round up the numbers and qualify them further with indefinite determiners. As Billig (2021) points out, round numbers rhetorically simultaneously a sense of quantity and quality. For example, in (1), the use of "over 20,000" in the headline instead of the precise number 20,420 (as indicated in the body of the report) depicts the situation as starkly different from the previous day's number reported at 19,629, when in fact, there is no significant change in the situation. On the contrary, these numbers could be interpreted positively as a rise immunity among the population, considering that very few vaccinated individuals become critically ill. At the same time, the number also conveys quality in the sense that the transmission, being over 20,000, increases the perceived magnitude of the transmission. Second, the verb "rise" or similar expressions such as "fall," or "inch up" are essentially the journalist's interpretation of the situation, and yet they are presented as self-evident, without any indication of the deictic center or the basis that indicates the baseline for the interpretation of the upward or downward movement. They seem to be based on the previous day's number. However, few, if any, readers would be able to recall such information. Thus, these deictic verbs serve to prime their perceptions of the situation. Third, in many cases, Positivity is partially neutralized. In (2), for instance, the circumstantial adverbial "on fewer tests" implicates that the decrease is not as low as reported, as "fewer tests" were conducted.

This trend of presenting statistic counts continued on a daily basis until June 2023, which corresponded with the government's official downgrading of the disease to the same level as that of influenza and to the WHO's declaration of the end to COVID-19 as a global health crisis, as shown in (3) and (4):

- (3) WHO declares end to COVID-19 global health emergency (6 May 23)
- (4) At last, an end to COVID-19 emergency in South Korea (11 May 23)

In (3) and (4), the expression "end" can be taken to convey Positivity in the context of the pandemic, and this positivity is emphasized further in (4) by the adverbial "at last," which suggests that the author has been hoping for the event for a long time. Other Positivity-constructed headlines deal with government-initiated responses, such as "stacking up" and "to supply treatment," which represent the government as prepared for and committed to the well-being of the people.

- (5) Korea stacks up 15 m. doses of COVID-19 for winter (18 Sept 23)
- (6) Health authorities to supply treatment for 260,000 COVID-19 patients (16 Aug 24)

In (5) and (6), it is not clear whether the numbers are rounded up by the journalist or are presented as received from state authorities. In either case, in the absence of any negative evaluation (such as "insufficient"), the numbers seem to imply adequacy, thereby likely contributing to Positivity. This is also evidenced in the body section of the report: the government "strongly recommend[s]" the citizens to get this annual vaccination in the case of (5) and the treatment is said to be "available nationwide" in the case of (6).

4.2 Eliteness

Eliteness in the data is constructed by featuring three groups of actors: government authorities, health experts, and research-based sources. When these individuals appear in the headlines, their voices are quoted in direct or indirect format. Virtually all of these agents (except for the WHO in Example (3) above) are domestically sought.

- (7) Yoon announces end to nearly all COVID-19 restrictions (11 May 23)
- (8) “No major difficulties in lifting mask rule on public transport,” says top COVID official (13 Mar 23)
- (9) Korea vows stern punishment against Chinese tourist who escaped COVID quarantine (6 Jan 23)
- (10) S. Korea’s suicide rate up in 2021 amid pandemic: data (6 March 23)

Via the attribution practice to elite speakers, the headline appears as if it is not the journalist author who calls for action or performs it verbally via a speech act as in (7) and (8), passes judgment as in (9), speculates about consequences as in (10), but rather the quoted sources whose (mediated) words are apparently being passed on to the reader. While journalists seem to take the role of the “animator” (Goffman 1981) as they merely reproduce the wording from these sources, it must be stressed that they determine and control whose voice and what messages to be represented. Thus, the represented speech in (7) and (8) turns the crisis into a non-issue, as the felicity conditions of declaration are satisfied with respect to the appropriate participants and circumstances (Austin 1962). In (9), state authorities, represented as the place metonym “Korea,” are depicted as showing a solemn, uncompromising intention to trace and take legal action against a COVID-19 restriction violator, thereby bringing order and safety back to the society. In (10), the suicide rate is foregrounded in the headline. However, what matters here is other statistics could have been chosen for display in the headline. For instance, in one of the body paragraphs, the journalist also cites from the same source that “Koreans, however, were better off in terms of employment and income over recent year.” Rather, the obviously negative aspect is chosen to be foregrounded in the headline.

4.3 Personalization

In contrast to Eliteness, Personalization involves foregrounding ordinary people’s actions, feelings, or verbal acts to provoke the reader’s emotional responses such as empathy or nationalism. In our data, this value is rare. This is attributable to the fact that contact tracing and other control measures have mostly been lifted during the period under study, and thus the value pales in comparison to Eliteness, Impact, or Superlative. Two examples below should suffice as illustrations.

- (11) Bereaved family files damaged suit over prisoner’s death amid mass COVID-19 infections (4 Jan 24)
- (12) Chinese runaway on wanted list after fleeing COVID isolation.
He was confirmed to have virus and was sent to a hotel near Incheon Airport, but fled while waiting to be assigned a room (4 Jan 23)

In (11), the family is depicted using an emotional term: “bereaved,” which purportedly gives access to the inner and subjective feeling of the sensors and construing them as suffering humans. In this way, the journalist not only brings to the attention of the reader the issue of “mass COVID-19 infections” but also holds the government responsible for the problems of the prison being overcrowded and mismanagement. In (12), amid an alleged rise

in viral transmissions in China, a single individual who violates the quarantine measure upon entering South Korea is construed as a newsworthy subject. While, by legal definition, this individual has committed a crime, hence being “on wanted list” and subject to punishment, he is also unwittingly exposed to the virus, as are others. However, he is not referred to sympathetically (e.g., patient), and instead, he is Otherized, not only through the national identification “Chinese” and action description “runaway,” but also via the predicate choices: “was confirmed to have virus...but fled while waiting.” These choices serve to frame a looming danger: the individual is now at large and potentially put Korean people at risk.

4.4 Proximity and Timeliness

Proximity occurs as frequently as, and alongside Negativity/Positivity. Ninety-eight per cent of the headlines reporting case numbers are prefaced with “South Korea” or “S. Korea”. While this may come as no surprise because the data set consists of only domestic news, this self-reference is precisely a strategy that helps articulate Negativity/Positivity and Impact on the community. Compare (13), (14), and (15) below:

- (13) S. Korea's COVID-19 cases fall to lowest Friday tally in 11 weeks (13 Jan 23)
- (14) COVID-19 cases fall to lowest Saturday tally in 3 months. (14 Jan 23)
- (15) S. Korea's COVID-19 cases fall to lowest Sunday tally in nearly three months. (15 Jan 23)

As successive reports, Examples (13) and (15) emphasize Proximity via self-reference: “S. Korea,” whereas Example (14) does not. What this means is that the self-reference is not referentially indispensable, and if need be, the reader can obtain such spatial information from the lead paragraph, which elaborates on the headline further: “South Korea’s new coronavirus cases declined to the lowest....” (14 Jan 23). In this sense, “S. Korea” can be argued to be a case of overlexicalization, pointing to an area of intense preoccupation and ideological value of the language use (Fowler and Kress 1979).

In much the same way as Proximity, Timeliness constructs an aspect of the reported event as currently relevant to the reader. In the corpus, they are expressed most often through prepositional phrases as well as adverbials. To use the same examples, “in 11 weeks,” “in 3 months,” and “in nearly three months” in (13) to (15) all situate and restrict the case numbers within a particular span of interest, which lasts up to the time of the publication. However, it is not clear what significance the periods, such as “three months” or “11 weeks,” carry. Rather, they appear to be arbitrarily presented as if they are important milestones (together with the superlative form, to be discussed under Superlativeness below). In (13), reported a day before (14), the temporal span is “11 weeks,” and in (14), the span becomes “3 months,” which is possible, if (13) was reported on the last day of the eleventh week. However, in (15), the span of interest somehow becomes “in nearly three months,” although it was reported after the day that was supposed to be a 3-month mark. In reality, this discrepancy may not be observed by the reader, but they constitute evidence of crisis construction.

In addition, Timeliness is also emphasized for impending changes in measures and policies, as in:

- (16) S. Korea to determine when to lift indoor mask mandate this week (18 Jan 23; 9.57 a.m.)
- (17) S. Korea to decide on lifting indoor masking Friday (18 Jan 23; 15.29 p.m.)
S. Korean health authorities will decide on Friday whether to lift the indoor mask mandate as early as the end of this month.

Reported on the same day, the two headlines appear similar in terms of the content. The morning column situates the discussion about a policy change within “this week,” which is less definite in comparison to “Friday” in the afternoon column. Presumably, the afternoon column was published after the government’s daily press briefing. In both cases, the pragmatic presupposition is that the indoor mask mandate will be lifted, triggered by “when” in (16) and “decide on” in (17), which suggests that one choice will be chosen from a number of possibilities, including “as early as the end of this month.”

4.5 Impact

During the pandemic, Impact is constructed by making the effects of the virus appear far-reaching. In this way, this value is related to Negativity/Positivity. Notably, most of the Impact-oriented headlines convey Negativity by presenting unfavorable outcomes of the pandemic. Among these headlines, the following consequences are presented during the period under study: health impact (82%), mental impact (16%), financial impact (2%). However, it is worth pointing out that they are indirect impact of the virus, as exemplified in (18) and (19):

- (18) COVID-19 surge fuels fears of hidden spread, with less data, fewer tests (15 Aug 24)
 (19) Mask manufacturers face bankruptcy amid eased masking rules (2 Feb 23)

Example (18) shows that the rise in number in the year 2024 is still presented as a newsworthy issue through its emotional toll. The metaphorical lexico-grammatical choices, including “fuel” and “hidden spread,” intensify the event in question. “Surge” is represented as an agent of a transitive verb that acts on a feeling (“fuels fears”). The nominalized verbal processes, including “fears” and “hidden spread” mystify the original participants: who is the sensor of the fears in question, and from whose sight the spread is “hidden.” These questions become more intriguing when considering the content of the article: “Health authorities no longer collect data as they used to, making tracking infected patients and their contact history more challenging,” “Also, people test less, even if they feel the symptoms. Some mistake the virus for a cold,” and “cooperate workers are often told to commute to work wearing facial covers when infected, rather than allowing them to work from home.” Given such information, it is certainly not the government or the citizens that fear the virus, as they seem to treat the virus just as they would with the common cold virus: no contact tracing needed and showing up for work when infected. Similarly, Example (20) presents an economic impact. Like the previous two examples, this is an indirect impact, triggered by a change in the mask mandate that prompts a decrease in the demand.

Interestingly, a few articles juxtapose the lethal impact of COVID-19 against that of suicide:

- (20) Suicide caused more deaths than COVID-19 during pandemic (11 Nov 23)

If Impact was about protecting the welfare of the citizens, the issue of suicide would merit more coverage and would be represented in the headlines more often or, at least, alongside the COVID-19 headlines. In turn, this example supports our claim that the COVID-19 virus has been discursively securitized.

4.6 Superlativeness

Superlativeness tends to co-occur with Negativity/Positivity and serves to dramatize the progress of the virus situation. The prime means of indicating Superlativeness is various forms of comparison:

- (21) S. Korea's new COVID-19 cases fall to lowest tally in 224 days (6 Feb 23)
- (22) Number of COVID-19 inpatients surges sixfold in four weeks (9 Aug 24)
- (23) Number of COVID-19 pediatric patients jumps as summer wave spread (14 Aug 24)
- (24) Critically ill patients hit 8-month high (1 Jan 23)

In (21), the prepositional phrase “to the lowest tally” marks the event of falling as reaching the lower limit, while in (22), the number and the suffix -fold denote multiplication. In (23), the verb “jump” conveys a sudden increase by a large amount, and in (24), the number of critical patients is said to reach the highest point in the period of 8 months. These superlative markers do not necessarily function to provide factual information. Instead, they evaluatively intensify the event. The fact-centered reporting could easily be conveyed through a precise number, although in doing so, the intensifying effect would certainly be lost. It is also worth pointing out that Superlativeness also helps to emphasize Timeliness by situating the magnitude of the infection within the time of reporting, although this connection is constructed in an arbitrary manner (e.g., “in 224 days,” or in “four weeks”).

4.7 Consonance

This news value is constructed mainly by way of establishing a link between the present situation with a comparable one in the past, thereby creating a stereotypical impression of the event. This can be achieved through a range of lexico-grammatical resources, as exemplified below.

- (25) N. Korea again on virus alert as cases rise in S. Korea, China (9 Jan 23)
- (26) S. Korea's new COVID-19 cases fall below 20,000 after apparent endemic (12 May 23)
- (27) COVID-19 cases surge for 4 weeks in a row amid eased restrictions (30 Jul 23)
- (28) New COVID-19 cases over 10,000 for 5th day amid eased restriction (25 Mar 23)

For example, in (25), the iterative marker “again” constructs North Korea as iteratively reacting perhaps too sensitively toward South Korea and China. In the body of the report, the country is quoted as saying “the virus situations in these regions are the most serious in the world,” which to the South Korean reader is an overstatement and runs contrary to the fact. Note also that Proximity is at work here: North Korea is geographically and culturally close to the reader. In (26), the adjective “apparent (endemic)” enhances the representation of the fall in the number of cases as clearly visible and obvious to the reader, thereby neutralizing the crisis, while in (27), the opposite effect is achieved with “in a row,” which suggests that the surge is non-stop. Finally, similarly in (28), the duration prepositional phrase “for 5th day” implicates a continuity of the situation of “over 10,000,” hence implying Negativity. That is, there situation has not improved, as there has been no decrease in the number.

4.8 Unexpectedness

Unexpectedness is constructed in a few instances in the corpus, when there a radical, newly introduced event or change that takes a long time to materialize, or in reverse, materialize sooner than usual in the context of Korean society. The following examples illustrate this point well.

- (29) No more emergency text alerts for COVID-19 cases. (3 Feb 23)

- (30) New omicron subvariant XBB.1.5 detected in Korea (3 Jan 23)
 (31) PM hints at earlier lifting of visa restrictions on China (31 Jan 23)
 (32) Experts downplay COVID-19 threat despite resurgence (19 Aug 24)

In (29), “no more” suggests the end of the government’s sending text alerts that feature contact tracing for infected patients, while in (30), “new omicron subvariant” suggests that this discovery may portend another crisis (although mutation is a well-known nature of an RNA virus, and not every mutation is a variant of concern). In (31), “hints at earlier” implicates that South Korea’s restrictions will be adjusted sooner than once planned, although this is not a confirmed position. Finally, in (32), together with Eliteness introduced by “experts,” the “downplaying of the COVID-19 threat” socio-normatively contrasts sharply with the perspective of an expert: as experts, they should be more cautious. The journalist’s evaluation of the unexpected stance of the expert is intensified further by the concessive prepositional phrase “despite resurgence,” which implicates that they disregard the looming danger (and here “resurgence,” with its iterative nuance, also triggers Consonance)

5. Conclusion

This study has applied the method of DNVA to a corpus of recent COVID-19 news coverage, drawn from an English-language newspaper in South Korea. The analysis not only identifies what news values are emphasized and what linguistic resources are employed in the construction of such values, but also elucidates how these news values are instrumental for creating a crisis for the perspective reader.

The findings reveal that Negativity/Positivity, Proximity/Timeliness, and Superlativeness appear to be highlighted, while the other values, including Eliteness, Personalization, Consonant and Unexpectedness, work to enhance the effects of the afore-mentioned core news values. As discussed above, these news values and the lexicogrammatical resources are vital to the framing of the virus itself, its effects, as well as the changes in the situation or policy. Throughout the period examined, the patterns are persistent, predictable and, at times, self-contradictory, as evidenced in Examples (14) and (15). Indeed, these daily reports facilitate the storytelling of the virus’ progress as a dynamic of increasing and decreasing seriousness and impacts on the reader.

In a critical vein, we offer the following remarks. First, many of these discursive resources are found in the context where they are not, ideationally speaking, “necessary” in the sense that they represent a conscious stylistic choice on the part of the journalist. A report without these strategic features would, just as well, serve the informative function of these daily updates. Second, considering that these are recent reports, written at the time when the virus has certainly become endemic and when is widely acknowledged, in one of the articles in the corpus, that “the fatality rate of the virus is comparable to that of the seasonal flu,” and “the country’s health care has learned lessons from the past, meaning it now knows how to treat those affected adequately” (Park 2024), it is clear that a never-ending narrative of the pandemic has been perpetuated in covering the COVID-19 virus, for example, whenever there is a seasonal increase or when a foreign person breaks the quarantine rule amid high population immunity. More importantly, the reports under study are neither helpful nor investigative. They do not offer information on how the reader should deal with the situation, and most of the content rely on the information provided by the authorities. Nor do the daily updates provide any meaningful means by which the reader can use to calculate their personal risks in order to adjust their behavior accordingly.

Given that that the reporting under study fails to fulfill its roles in informing and educating the public, and serving as a system of check and balances, we venture to further argue that such crisis reporting collaborates,

intentionally or not, with the government to “control” the public mind with respect to the beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes about the pandemic (Van Dijk 2011). This discursive control likely works against the public’s best interests (e.g., securing consent with draconian measures that shatter people’s livelihood, widen education gaps, or worsen household debts) and in the best interest of those in power (e.g., boosting trustworthiness in the state’s ability to control the pandemic, or to attract readership). Put differently, in a democratic society such as South Korea, authorities cannot simply coerce the citizens to convince them, for example, that certain measures are good for them and are keeping them safe. Instead, they rely *inter alia* on the news values highlighted in these articles to implicitly establish control and imposition.

A limitation of this study is that the quantitative analysis, which would reveal the percentage counts of the news values examined, was not attempted. However, as a first effort to apply the DNVA analysis to deconstruct how a crisis is constructed via lexico-grammatical resources, this study provides sufficient evidence for the claim that a crisis is discursively made, rather than given, and proffers what discourse analysts can look for in health crisis reporting, thereby paving the way for the application and applicability of DNVA and a detailed quantitative analysis can be accomplished. In addition, with data from one source, the patterns observed and explicated herein may be specific to this news agency, and thus there is obvious scope for comparative analysis with other news agencies. A historically-oriented project, which compares news values employed in early COVID-19 reports with more recent reports, can yield insights to whether journalists shift or retain their strategies over the years. Needless to say, this study does not intend to dismiss the devastating impact of COVID-19 on people’s livelihoods, their health, or economy. However, at the same time, we also wish to disclose discursive strategies that serve to mediate the risks and add to citizens fears and misconceptions of the risks of the virus.

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Examples in: English
Applicable Languages: English
Applicable Level: Tertiary