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Active Voicing in COVID-19 New Reports*

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ABSTRACT

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The present study critically scrutinizes the practice of intertextual attribution in COVID-19 news reports. Based on a corpus of 135 news articles from 2020 to 2022 in The Korea Herald, it examines 1) the distribution of sources, 2) the way in which the reporters ideologically position the sources, and 3) the pragmatic effects of such attitudinal positioning. The findings reveal that the sourcing patterns are dynamic, initially relying on state authorities but subsequently shifting towards biomedical experts as the pandemic progresses. This shift toward biomedical experts also witnesses the journalist's construing them as epistemically superior to other sources, particularly state authorities. Such linguistic manipulation in effect potentially misleads the reader and, at times, constitutes clear cases of intentional misrepresentation. It is argued that such discursive practices not only compromise public health but also indicate the press's evasion of the responsibility to question and check the powerful in times of crises.

KEYWORDS
COVID-19 news report, evaluation, newspaper discourse, intertextuality, sourcing

1. Introduction

It is now common knowledge that journalism is a source-driven practice: journalists depend on others for much of the information in their stories—an important feature discussed in detail in a systematic review by Hertzum (2022). As Bell (1991) observes, news reports are more about talk, rather than actions. Because sourcing lies at the heart of journalism (Fisher 2023), some scholar goes so far as to claim that "to understand the news, we have to understand who the someones who act as sources are, and how journalists deal with them" (Schudson 2003, p.134). In linguistic terms, this practice is referred to as intertextual attribution (Fairclough 1995, White 2012), whereby the journalistic author presents a version of the reported event as derived from outside sources via direct and indirect speech reporting. The incorporation of voices brings polyvocality to a news text and makes it essentially dialogic (Bakhtin 1981). Practically, journalists rely on these voices for a number of reasons: knowledge and information (e.g., reporters' lack of expertise or first-hand experience on the issue), topical focus (i.e., what sources say constitutes the core story), and balanced representation of a gamut of viewpoints (Scollon 1998). However, these sources are oftentimes strategically deployed to advance the reporter's (or the press's) ideological position (Fairclough 1988, Teo 2000, White 2012). Jullian (2011) convincingly shows that, although attribution appears to be an objective practice in that the source is explicitly credited for what is said, it is in fact never neutral, as the reporters choose who to (not) include in the text, and through the words of these selected sources, they can appraise the reported event accordingly. What is more, journalists can subtly signal their stance toward, and position themselves in agreement or opposition with, the source and quoted material (Cope 2020, White 2012). This attribution practice is also accurately termed "active voicing" (Wooffitt 1992), which highlights the fact that the words being reproduced are designed to background "reporter voice" and be heard as if they were originally said (White 2012).

In the case of COVID-19 coverage, a number of journalism studies have revealed that alleged experts and government officials come to enjoy higher visibility in the media at an unprecedented scale (Ioannidis et al. 2021), and they are overwhelmingly represented at the expense of other voices, and this seems to be the sourcing pattern in the Western context (Hart et al. 2020, Morani et al. 2022, Spyridou et al. 2023). Thus, given the unprecedented source uses in the dissemination of information on such a monumental crisis, the findings have yet to be confirmed in non-Western contexts and an inquiry should be made into the patterns of sourcing in relation to the advancement of the ideological positions of the reporters in other contexts.

Underpinned by the assumption that from the choice of sources is merely the first indication of journalistic subjectivity, the current study takes into account not only *what* sources are used but also *how* journalists convey the voice of those sources, as well as the pragmatic effects of such practices. It also examines a less-studied context in the literature: South Korea, which has been argued to share common journalistic standards as its Anglo-American counterparts with respect to media ethics, freedom, and culture (Chen and Koo 2022, Rohrhofer 2014). Spanning a three-year period (from 2020 to 2022), the data consists of 135 news articles from *The Korea Herald*, a daily quality English-language newspaper with the largest circulation the country (Carpenter 2020, p. 8, Choi 2022). Specifically, the study pursues the following research questions: 1) What sources are incorporated in the reports?, 2) How do the reporters attitudinally position the sources?, and 3) What are the pragmatic effects of such evaluative positioning?

The contributions of this study are three-fold. First, to scholarship on journalism and discourse studies, it synthesizes related linguistic concepts and demonstrates how they can be used as tools to for locating reporter voice. Relatedly, the analysis of the extended period of coverage in a non-Western context provides empirical evidence and adds depth and nuances to previous findings. Finally, scrutinizing the journalistic practice of

attribution in challenging times, the study critically questions journalists' (mis)use of sources and the (cl)aim to deliver relevant, helpful, and credible information in the service of public health.

2. Literature Review

Given the research questions above, this section seeks to review previous studies that concern sourcing and attribution practices. As this scholarship is vast and diverse, not all studies can be surveyed here. To synthesize existing knowledge of the topic, relevant studies are grouped into two research strands, with a focus on health crisis reports. The two research strands differ in terms of the analytical approach but share the view that having a voice in the media represents the power to comment, define, protest or agree, as well as the authority to view and interpret reality. The incorporated sources effectively serve as definers of reality, thereby shaping the public's understanding of the world (Franklin and Carlson 2011).

The first research strand includes journalism studies, which approach news texts by way of content analysis and quantitatively identify the incorporated sources. An insightful finding that emerges from these studies is that journalists rely on elite sources: politicians, public figures, decision makers, and experts, and this tendency is confirmed in several countries (Briggs and Hallin 2016, Deprez and van Leuven 2018, Mellado et al. 2021, Spyridou et al. 2023). However, a limitation is that they focus on crises that are small in magnitude and do not last for an extended period, that is, health crises that are "bounded in time" (Mellado et al. 2021, p. 1262). This, in turn, may not yield a full view of the use of sources. What is more, these studies were done mostly in the Western context, and less is known about sourcing practice in other parts of the world (Matthews et al. 2024). An exception is a study by Logan et al. (2004), which examines sourcing patterns in the coverage of a public health crisis in two Korean-language newspapers. The findings support the observations in the international literature. An interesting question that remains at this point is whether the sourcing practice is adopted during a health crisis with a longer span, and in view of this, the investigation of sourcing patterns in COVID-19 pandemic coverage seems particularly pertinent, allowing us to test the claims previously made as well as to observe the use of sources over time.

The other research strand, a linguistically-oriented one, goes beyond sourcing patterns to pay close attention to the way a quote is presented in the new context and the way reporters may ideologically position the sources in the course of attribution by signaling their own attitudes toward the sources or what the sources say. To illustrate, Calsamiglia and Ferrero's work (2003) examines a month's worth of news reports on the mad cow disease in Spanish newspapers. The researchers find that journalists scarcely represent "scientific voices," and more attributions are made to political actors. In addition, the scientific voices are assigned controversial and tentative position through reporting verbs, as compared to positive, and interaction-oriented position attributed to other social agents (e.g., "assure" or "announce"). Consequently, the journalists represent scientific voices as indecisive and incapable of mitigating a crisis. While the study focuses on a small-scale, short-spanned health crisis, an insight relevant to the current study is that authoritative sources, such as experts, are subject to manipulation, and more importantly, the evaluation practices changed in relation to the situational context of the disease.

Another example of this linguistically-oriented study is a recent work by Li et al. (2023), which compares reporting verbs in Chinese and American COVID-19 news articles. An interesting finding is that mental reporting verbs (such as "believe" or "thought") are found much more frequently in the American sources, portraying the authorities as uncertain, while speech act verbs that convey decisiveness and commitment (such as "confirmed" or "announced") are assigned to the sources in the Chinese texts. The difference is attributed to the level of press

freedom and the control of the Chinese Communist Party to shape the narratives for public diplomacy. Another work in this context is the study by Gong et al. (2023), which finds that in the reports of COVID-19 from *The China Daily*, a "mouthpiece" of the Chinese government, names most of the actors as being affiliated with various organizations with certain positions, thereby empowering these actors and convincing its readers of the important role of these actors in helping to contain the virus.

While these linguistic studies have done much to qualitatively reveal traces of reporter voice in health crisis reports, they also come with certain limitations. First, the analysis exclusively concentrates on reporting verbs, and consequently other important stance-signaling mechanisms remain backgrounded, including descriptions or naming choices of the sources, as well as implicit evaluation (White 2012, 2015). For example, a source with the explicitly-positive description "leading" (as in "leading scientists hold that…") can command authority from the reader, while "only a few scientists believe that…" can signal doubt, as the quantifier "only" depicts the attributed proposition as limited in scope and validity. Another example of implicit evaluation can be illustrated with one of the headlines from our corpus, "Delta variant's impact on recent surge 'minor', says health ministry," there appears to be no explicitly attitudinal trace of the reporter's involvement. However, when we consider the co-text of this headline (its sub-headline): "Korea delays stronger COVID-19 countermeasures despite record rise in cases," it becomes clear that the reporter takes issue with the directly attributed statement "minor," as it contrasts starkly with "record rise in cases." That is, with a record rise in cases, the impact cannot logically be said to be "minor." Another limitation is that the identification of traces of reporter voice addresses the way news discourse is created (i.e., the production dimension), but the pragmatic effects of reporter voice, with respect to the way in which the original speech act and intended meaning (i.e., sufficiently faithful to the original) may be altered in the course of attribution. This is also an important issue, as it addresses the reception dimension of the intertextual practices (i.e., how the voices may mislead the audience). The current study sets out to address these limitations, going beyond sourcing patterns and reporting verbs to consider source naming choices and the faithfulness issue in the attributed material.

3. Data and Methodology

The data set is drawn from a specially-compiled corpus of COVID-19 news articles that appeared in *The Korea Herald* from the first few reports in February 2020 to those reported in December 2022, when the virus situation was taken to stabilize (as indicated by the successive decline in infections and the government's initiation of the return to normalcy). Geared toward English language news consumers and expats living in South Korea, and an international audience interested in reading about South Korea, this publication is a fertile ground for the study of how active voicing affects health crisis reporting in this geographical context. The articles selected for this project belong to the same genre: they are exclusively domestic reports of the pandemic (i.e., international, opinion, political or economic reports excluded). From this corpus, we randomly selected 4 articles from each month (hence, 48 articles per year, and 144 articles in total). The articles vary in length (the shortest article consisting of 257 words and the longest 842 words), and they were written by different reporters. This diversity helps eliminate selection bias to a large extent. Also note that there is no intention that the observation of the sample will be used to make generalizations about newspaper discourse in general. While what is quoted in these articles involves translation from Korean to English (as the majority of the sources likely made the statements in Korean), the translation does not affect the findings, as it is what the reporters intend to present to the English-reading audience.

Methodologically, the analysis consists of three steps. In the first step, we examined the distribution patterns of

the sources, that is, whose voices are included. Instances of attributed utterances were collected, and the frequency counts were performed. The sources were also grouped into broad categories. In the second step, we attended to evaluative positioning cues. In addition to reporting verbs, which is discussed earlier in the literature review, source naming was taken into consideration. Following van Leeuwen (2008) and White (2012), if the source is described as a collectivized source, the author can be argued to generalize or universalize the quoted statement. On the other hand, when the source is individualized and personalized in different capacities, including their names (nomination), who they are and their identities (i.e., sex, race, physical attributes, or religious practice, hence identification), and what they do (such as their role and their career, hence functionalization), the journalist can be said to authorize the source and their statement. Alternatively, impersonalization, which represents human actors in non-human terms, involves the removal of personal attributes from the sources, which may serve to highlight objectivity and professionality, as when the name of an organization is referenced in lieu of the staff in it. These naming choices may co-occur with explicit evaluative expressions (such as *top* or *leading*), through which journalists further modulate the degree of trustworthiness and value of the source and quoted statement. In addition, we also looked for cases of implicit evaluation, where there is no word or wording which indicates a positive or negative assessment but where the seemingly neutral statement may run counter to the socio-cultural norm shared among the reader (White 2012). Of course, evaluative positioning is highly contextual and needs to be considered on a case-by-case basis.

In the last step, which deals with the pragmatic effects of evaluative positioning, to the extent that it is possible, we compared the quoted source and the material quoted with the original and discussed the implications the attribution practice may have on the reader. In particular, we considered whether the quoted material alters (or has the potential to alter) the original speech acts and implicates unwarranted meaning to the reader.
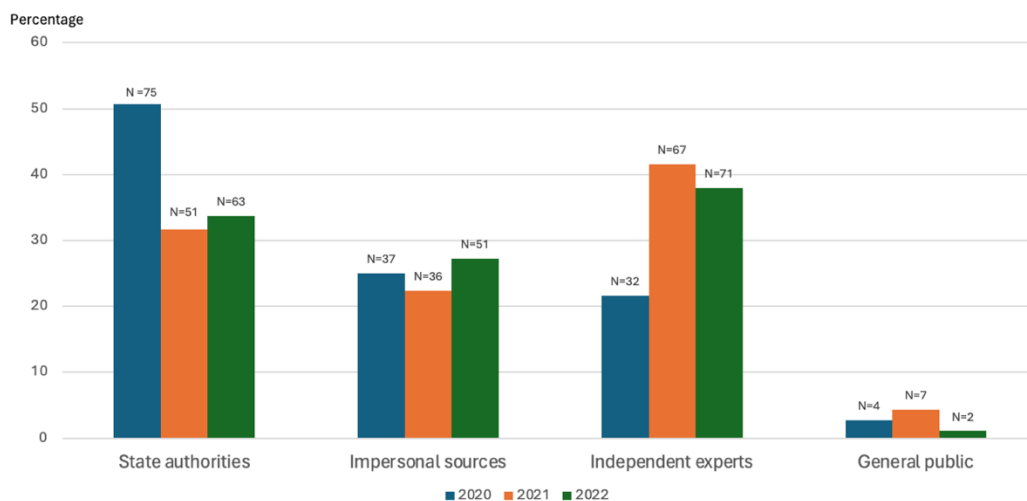
4. Findings

4.1 Sourcing Patterns

Based on the data, external voices are integral to the COVID-19 news reports, appearing in all the articles. These voices can be grouped into four categories: state authorities, impersonal sources, independent experts, and general public (N = 496 quoted sources). The distribution is exhibited in Figure 1. Viewed chronologically, the use of voices is not stable but dynamic. In the early stage of the pandemic (year 2020), reporters relied most on the voices of state authorities (50.67%), incorporating the voices of government advisors, many of whom are public health physicians (although not necessarily clinicians) and of politicians holding health- and security-related positions. As the pandemic persisted, the frequency counts of this category of voices significantly dropped and appeared to stabilize in 2021 and 2022 (31.68% and 33.69%, respectively).

Interestingly, the voices of domestic independent experts started off somewhat lower than the aforementioned two groups (21.62%) before exponentially rising in the second and third years (41.61% and 37.97%, respectively). These voices were mostly biomedical professionals, including physicians, nurses, or scientists. Only a handful of these experts (about 2%) are from other disciplines, such as psychology or sociology, and even lower (about 0.3%) are international experts. Along with state authorities, impersonal sources (organizations, agencies, research studies, or surveys) were consistently incorporated throughout the three-year period (25%, 22.36%, and 27.27%, respectively). The last group, and the fewest of all, includes laymen's voices, which may be business owners, protestors on the street, or any individuals the journalists deem worth interviewing. The frequency counts range

from 1.07 per cent (in 2022) to 2.70 per cent (in 2020), with a peak at 4.35 per cent (in 2021).

The dynamic distribution patterns are most likely attributable to domestic epidemiological factors (such as case numbers, deaths, or disease management, etc.) (Hart et al. 2020). When the pandemic first emerged in 2020, reporters focused mostly upon information received from the government, including transmission tracing, presenting symptoms, and recommendations for avoiding and treating the virus. Thus, state authorities were cited most frequently. However, as the pandemic persisted through 2021 and 2022, various controversies ensued, which were topicalized in the news reports, including new variants, vaccination plans, mass infection, and patient management. All of these factors prompted the reporters to turn to other voices whose perspectives differ from the government's, as evidenced by the significant increase in the use of independent experts as sources in 2021 and 2022. Impersonal sources, on the other hand, are fairly stable because they provide mostly statistic data (such as daily case numbers, available beds, etc.). It is also clear that the reporters do not deem the public to be appropriate sources for the afore-mentioned issues. Their voices are reanimated when there is a controversy about social distancing rules or when they express fear, concerns, or confusion about the state's recommendations.

Figure 1. Distribution of Voices by Year

4.2 Positioning of Sources

The findings reveal three major representational strategies that attitudinally position the quoted sources, in descending order of frequency: Collectivization, Personalization, Impersonalization. Each strategy is discussed in detail below.

4.2.1 Collectivization

This strategy is exclusively found in the headlines. By presenting these sources in bare plurals, the reporters implicate a quasi-universal interpretation, rather than the existential meaning of *some* (Cohen 2005). In doing so, the reporters strengthen the viewpoint attributed, as it is a group of people who think and perform a speech act as a unified entity, rather than an individual's stance. Consider the headlines presented in (1) to (4).

(1) *Authorities* urge renewed virus vigilance (11 June 2020)
(2) *Experts* warn of impending "twindemic" in S. Korea (12 September 2022)

(3) *ICU doctors* say "return to normal was a mistake" (1 December 2021)
(4) "Don't panic," *health officials* say as new variant rages (27 January 2022)

In these examples, the pluralization of the quoted speakers does not simply indicate that there exist some speakers who perform the respective speech acts. Rather, it suggests that all (or almost all) of members of such sources are involved in such speech acts. In (1), at the initial phase of the pandemic, the authorities are represented as doing the speech acts of "urging," while in (2), experts perform the speech act of "warning" in the endemic phase. As a result, the virus is (re)constructed as an immediate threat. While the reporting verb in (3) and (4) is neutral ("say"), the reporter's stance is not: it is implicitly evaluative. In the former, the reporter assigns blame to the government for re-opening the country through the homogeneous voice of ICU doctors, while in (4), the quoted material "don't panic" is positioned to contrast sharply with the author's averred statement "as new variant rages," which entails that the situation is uncontrollable (and yet, people are told not to panic). Some may argue that the quoted speakers in these headlines can be read existentially (e.g., "some/a few authorities urge renewed virus vigilance."), and this is theoretically true. However, from a discourse-pragmatic perspective, such a reading is not the intended meaning because, according to the Maxim of Quantity (Grice 1975), the reporter is bound to make the strongest, most informative claim that he or she can make. Thus, when "some" or "a few" is not explicitly used, a stronger reading is what is implicated.

In quite a few cases, the reporters clearly take advantage of the quasi-universal implicature. A case in point is Example (5), where "doctors" are represented as voicing criticisms against the government's policy.

(5) "It will be patients who take the hardest fall": *Doctors* slam across the board COVID-19 home care. (30 November 2021)

As in the previous examples, the set of "doctors" implicates all, or almost all, of the doctors, who are then attributed a strongly critical verb ("slam"). Positioned after a direct quotation by way of a colon, the source is directly associated with the quoted statement, when in fact, the statement is uttered by a particular doctor. The reporter could use a single voice, and there are examples of such attribution, as exemplified in (6):

(6) *Doctor* says those without COVID-19 have no friends. (22 March 2022)

The headline above is a hypothesis made by a Korean doctor as to why a person has not contracted the disease after three years. As compared to the plural form, the singular choice produces quite the opposite effect, which is to differentiate the person and suggest that this viewpoint is not commonly shared. This is clear when the reporter goes on to quote the speaker in more detail:

(7) Unlike *other virus experts*, *Ma has been asserting* that the government should focus on treatment rather than strengthening social distancing measures as the spread of the omicron COVID-19 variant runs rampant throughout the country.

Here we see how the reporter depicts this particular expert as not only differing from the majority of the experts

("unlike other…experts") but also as stating his belief confidently ("assert"). What this example testifies to is that the representational choice (a collective or an individual voice) is within the reporter's control. More importantly, the reporter's manipulation of a singular or plural morpheme constitutes an implicit stancetaking mechanism that has a bearing on the validity of the quoted material.

Collective or institutionalized voices may be quantified with indefinite, such as "several," or definite determiners (i.e., Aggregation). For instance, in (8), despite there being one quoted institutional source, the reporter goes so far as to represent the members with a round (rather than exact) number, which conveys not only the quantity, but as Billig (2021) argues, quality of the cited source. The effect is intensified with the metaphorized preposition "over," which inherits the spatial sense of extending beyond a certain point. That is, the group, being beyond the point of 105,000 physicians, possesses the quality of being a large and influential group.

(8) Still, the Korean Medical Association (KMA), which represents *over 105,000 physicians across the country*, has continued its opposition [of at-home treatment], citing safety concerns and other potential problems. "There will be huge repercussions if something goes wrong with even one out of 100 patients after the approval of telemedicine," Park Jong-hyuk, a KMA spokesperson, said. (13 March 2020)

At times, reporters can deauthorize the source through aggregated collectivization as well. In (9), for instance, the statement about the impact of the virus variants is attributed as belonging to "some."

(9) A blessing in disguise?: *Some scientists* say omicron not so ominous…Let's keep our fingers crossed. (2 December 2021)

Together with the conventional use of a question mark, the implicature of "some" is that the group is a minority and what they say is to be taken cautiously.

4.2.2 Personalization

This strategy is found in the body of news reports. Describing people in terms of attributes or qualifications can highlight certain aspects and conceal others, thus effectively (de)authorizing the referents. We observed that there are qualitative differences when government officials and biomedical sources are described in personal terms. In the case of state authorities, only high-ranked office holders (as indicated by modifiers such as "top") are nominated, often represented with a professional position or role, to show that they are speaking in an official capacity, as shown in (10). What is interesting in this case is that the state official is also a physician (specialized in public health), but this identity aspect is eclipsed, and instead his comment is represented as coming from the point of view of an executive, who has a stake in that belief, rather than from a healthcare provider. Consequently, the scientific merits of the quote are diminished.

(10) *South Korea's top health official* said Monday the surge the country is experiencing now is necessary to move toward an endemic phase from the pandemic, and omicron's milder severity aids the transition.

Son Young-rae, the Ministry of Health and Welfare's spokesperson, said the recent uptick in hospitalizations and deaths driven by the omicron variant "does not warrant the same level of alarm as with the delta wave," and the government will continue to focus on dealing with serious cases and vulnerable groups. (21 February 2022)

Also notable in this example is implicit evaluation. The statements that a surge in transmission and death is natural and that a virus variant is helpful to achieve an endemic status run counter to the general audience's expectation. In addition, the purportedly verbatim quote also depicts the government as not carrying out its duties to protect people against the infection and let the virus spread freely.

In contrast, when reporters personally reference individual experts, more diverse representational choices are utilized to construct epistemic and legitimacy for such voices. These discursive resources are presented in Table 1:

Table 1. Discursive Resources for Constructing Epistemic Identity for Independent Experts

Strategy	N (total = 816)	Percentage	Example
Social title	53	6.49	Dr., Prof.
First and Last name	179	21.94	Kim Woo-joo
Professional label (specialization, position, or role)	219	26.84	pulmonologist, director of X; advisor board to the government
Affiliation	143	17.52	Seoul's Ehwa University Medical Center; International Vaccine Institute
Status-indicating modifier	42	5.15	chief, top
Post-nominal modifier	27	3.31	who offers counseling services free of charge

Interestingly, the above choices never occur in isolation. Note, for example, that the expert in (11) is referenced through a cluster of referential choices, including the field of expertise ("pulmonologist"), social title ("Dr."), nomination, as well as affiliation. In (12), the referent is not simply an "infectious disease expert" but is also someone who reaches a "top" status. In (13), a post-nominal relative clause supplies detailed information about the quoted voice. An important effect is that these labels position the independent expert sources as epistemically superior to government officials, and what they say about COVID-19 by extension bears more weight.

(11) "We don't have a COVID-19 vaccine but we have one for the flu. Getting vaccinated is the best way to protect yourself as well as the community," said *pulmonologist Dr. Chun Eun-mi of Seoul's Ewha University Medical Center*. (1 June 2020)

(12) The vaccine-assisted return to normalcy is still far off for Korea, according to *top infectious disease expert Dr. Kim Woo-joo of Korea University Medical Center*. He said until vaccines reach people at risk of severe COVID-19, mitigation measures of higher intensity will be inevitable. (27 April 2021)

(13) "Even after 70 percent of Koreans are vaccinated, there might not be herd immunity as we know it," *Dr. Oh Myoung-don*, *who is leading the state hospital's clinical committee for emerging infectious diseases*, told a news conference. (27 February 21)

The discursive legitimation of biomedical sources through Personalization is extended to subsequent references where a third-person pronoun could be used as in (14), and to cases where the personal identity needs to be concealed as in (15).

(14) "COVID-19 won't be the last pandemic of our lifetime"

Yet another "disease X" -- a currently unknown pathogen with the potential to cause a serious international epidemic -- could be just around the corner, according to *epidemiology professor Dr. Chun Byung-chul of Korea University in Seoul.*

"The next pandemic might come along even before COVID-19 wanes, we don't know. What we do know is that that there is going to be another one," *he* said in a phone interview with *The Korea Herald.*

"Luckily, scientists quickly came up with vaccines and treatments this time. But that is not always going to be possible." *The epidemiologist of over 20 years* said COVID-19 has laid bare the shortcomings in the country's pandemic preparedness. (10 March 2021)

(15) *An epidemic expert at one of Korea's largest hospitals*, who asked to be quoted anonymously, said transparent communication and open information sharing regarding a potential problem in the initial stages were necessary in an effective global response. (10 March 2021)

It is worth pointing out that, in the above case, reporters do not offer counter-evaluation in the surrounding text that suggests reservation about these voices. Instead, representing the original speakers as having such traits as working at one of the largest hospitals in Korea) authorizes the speakers and what they say.

4.2.3 Impersonalization

Found in both the headline and content, this strategy names the quoted voice as an institution or a place which is anthropomorphized as being able to perform a verbal process. Through this choice of naming, by obfuscating the human sayer, journalists make the attributed viewpoint appear objective and official, as opposed to subjective decisions by individuated human agents. An example is shown in (16), where in the headline, the indirect quote is attributed to "Seoul" by way of a semicolon, thereby framing its significance as a state-issued one.

(16a) Next 10 days crucial for containment of coronavirus: *Seoul*

In the body text, the same strategy is deployed, but with a different institutional naming this time:

(16b) *South Korea* said Sunday that the next seven or 10 days will be the most crucial juncture in the fight against the new coronavirus, vowing to take all possible measures to prevent further spread of the potentially fatal illness. (23 February 2020)

A question can be asked as to who "Seoul" in the headline refers to (for example, the President, the panel advising the government, or others) and whether the identity of the referent is the same as "South Korea" in the leading paragraph. While this naming strategy is no stranger in news discourse (e.g., "the White House" for the president of the United States), it not only hides human agency behind the impersonalized sayer but also effectively exaggerates impressions of unity and homogeneity. From a critical perspective, Examples (16a) and (16b) show ideology in disguise (Lewin-Jones and Webb 2013): they do not actually specify who made the decision (to contain the spread with harsh restrictions that affect people's livelihood). At the same time, by way of impersonalization, it represents an anodyne view of the nation state and of sciences, when in fact, in a democracy and sciences,

dissenting opinions and public debate are valued. A question can be asked, for instance, why a claim is made for 10 days, rather than 14 days, which is the incubation period for the virus and new cases.

As with Collectivization, journalists can exploit Impersonalization to create an aura of consensus and homogeneity of the quoted viewpoints, as exemplified in (17):

(17) *Medical societies* attributed the recent spike to the new coronavirus rules that came into effect earlier this month. "The social distancing guidance has been revised in a way that makes relaxing restrictions easier but restoring them harder, inevitably magnifying the risks of spread," *it* said. (22 November 2020)

Note the mismatch between the noun "medical societies" and the pronoun "it." Syntactically, the pronoun has no grammatical antecedent but, pragmatically, the purpose is to associate the direct quote with institutional voices. Not only are the medical societies represented as consensual in terms of their assumptions, but they are also positioned as assigning blame and responsibility to the government for the decision to relax harsh measures that allegedly brings with it the magnified risks of spread.

Now that we have examined the ways in which the representational choices are manipulated to support the reporter's ideological position, let us now turn to the effects that such choices may have from a reception dimension.

4.3 Pragmatic Effects of Active Voicing on Sources

Based on the examples shown in Section 4.2, where the focus is on various mechanisms to represent the reporter voice, we have shown that in signaling their stances in the text, reporters misattribute the source and the content (for example, in Example 5), so that the quoted message appears as issued from a collective source. In other cases, we also show that the original material has been transformed, so that the intended meaning becomes different or invalidated, such as in (16a, b). In this section, we examine more in depth the pragmatic effects. We will focus on evaluative positioning can have potentially misleading effects. In addition, we are able to identify clear instances of intentional manipulation that results in misrepresentation. These two effects are illustrated with more examples from the corpus below.

4.3.1 Potentially misleading voicing

One case of potential misleading effects involves the removal of the quoted sources, as exemplified in (18).

(18) Daily COVID-19 cases fall below 170,000 amid *concerns over critical cases* (25 February 2022)

The headline consists of thought representation: "concerns," originally a mental verb that needs an experiencer, is nominalized. Hence, this is a case of impersonalization. With this transformation, the experiencer is removed, and the noun can be pluralized and collectivized. The question that remains is, therefore, whose concerns these are, or who voices these concerns. Close examination of the content reveals two possible sources: that of the Korean Disease Control Agency (KDCA) and of the government, both of which are indirectly quoted. The former reads: "The country added 94 more deaths from COVID-19 in the day, more than doubling in a. week. The death toll came to 7,783, and the fatality rate was 0.29 percent, according to the KDCA." The latter reads: "The government has said it will continue to focus on dealing with serious cases and preventing deaths to effectively handle the omicron wave under the current medical system, citing milder severity of the variant." The issue is that neither of

these deals with "concerns over critical cases," although they address death and serious cases. Thus, the unwary audience may take it that "concerns" originate from one of these sources, when in fact they are likely the reporter's stance on the case numbers.

Even when the source is represented, morpho-syntactic modifications by the reporter can alter the intended meaning and the illocutionary force of the original speech act, thereby mediating the audience's understanding and perception of the epidemic. To illustrate, consider (19):

(19) *"COVID-19 will stay for a long period, regardless of season"*: KCDC

"Until a vaccine or treatment is here, we expect COVID-19 to stay for a long period, irrelevant to changes in temperature," Jung Eun-kyeong, director of the Korean Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said at a daily afternoon briefing. (17 June 2020)

In the headline, the source is depicted as an institutional voice. However, in the content, the source specified with a nomination and position. While the metonymic representation arguably does not count as misrepresentation *per se*, there is a considerable degree of syntactic and semantic transformation that is potentially misleading. To begin with, the conditional clause "until a vaccine or treatment is here" is omitted, which qualifies or hedges the following main clause. Also removed is the subjective epistemic evidential "we expect," which also hedges the proposition. Third, the infinitive "to stay for a long period" is transformed into a tensed clause "will stay," which gives a strong sense of time. Finally, "irrelevant to changes in temperature" is represented as "regardless of the season," which may not affect the locutionary force drastically, but they are not entailments. Consequently, with the removal of the conditional clause and the subjective epistemic evidential, the headline becomes a strong assertion, which in turn creates an unexpected sensation for the reader.

4.3.2 Clear misrepresentation of voices

There is evidence that reporters, capitalizing on the epistemic strength of direct reporting, (mis)represent their own statement, also termed "averral" (Sinclair 1986) as if it were an attributed statement. Consider the coverage in (20), where criticisms of the introduction of self-test kits are reported.

(20) *"Korea may be expanding testing the wrong way"*
Experts voice accuracy concerns over new types of tests (24 December 2020)

Here the direct report format of the headline makes it appear as an attributed statement, taken from a collective source ("experts"). This impression is also intensified by the indirect report in the subheading that echoes the negative message in the headline. However, upon examining the content, we do not find the source from whom the direct quote originates. We find a gamut of expert sources who voice accuracy concerns over self-test kits, but there is none that talks about the use of self-test kits as heading in the wrong direction, shown in (21):

(21) "How a clinical specimen is collected and handled can sway test results. Which is why
tests meant for self-collection and testing at home are fraught with the potential to go wrong in so many ways," said *Sung of Asan Medical Center.*

Thus, while the subheading does retain the illocutionary force and propositional content, the headline is clearly a statement by the reporter disguised as if uttered by the expert in order to (falsely) attribute blame to the government for such a policy.

Another clear case of misrepresentation is exemplified in (22), where we present the headline, subheading, and part of the content together.

(22) "*Worst yet to come*" for virus outbreak in South Korea
Doctors say *cancel plans, stay home*. (23 February 2020)

[text omitted]

"*We are looking at only the beginning of a nationwide spread*. But these are some of the things we can do to lower our risks," Kim said, stressing that personal precautions are more effective than what the government can do at this point [text omitted]

The medical societies advised practicing hand hygiene and coughing etiquette; disinfecting frequently touched surfaces and objects; keeping rooms well-ventilated; <u>avoiding meetings or gatherings</u>; and <u>limiting outings for elderly and people with compromised immune system</u>.

In the headline, while not credited to any source, "worst yet to come" is represented as a direct quote, suggesting that it is not the reporter's statement. The sub-headline adopts a mixed reporting format: indirect and free direct reporting (i.e., without the use of quotation marks), attributing "cancel plans, stay home" to "doctors." However, the examination of the content reveals that both the headlines and the subheading are averred statements by the reporter. Particularly, the illocutionary force of the original speech act is also distorted. Most relevant to the headline is "we are looking at only the beginning of a nationwide spread," which suggests that the spread will continue and likely expand, but this is by no means the illocutionary force of "worst is yet to come." What is more, the sayer is rendered as "doctors" (as opposed to "the medical societies") in the subheading, which elevates (partially) quoted content to medical advice (rather than medical information). While the term "cancel" may entail "avoid meetings/gatherings" and "limiting outings," the reporter takes liberty to introduce his or her own material and represents it out of the original context (which is for specific groups, including the elderly and the immune-compromised). Both instances of misrepresentation effectively call immediate attention to the situation: "worst" is the superlative degree adjective, while "cancel," which conveys the indefinite postponement of a pre-arranged event, adds to the severity of the situation.

5. Conclusion

This study explores news media sourcing practices during the COVID-19 pandemic in a quality English newspaper in South Korea from 2020 to 2022, focusing on the sources used, authorial evaluation strategies, and the pragmatic effects of such manipulation.

The findings reveal that external voices are integral to the news reports under study, appearing in all the articles. However, unlike the findings in a context where press freedom is limited (i.e., in *The China Daily* by Gong et al. 2023), but largely consistent with the patterns found in the Western context (Hart et al. 2020, Morani et al. 2022,

Spyridou et al. 2023), our analysis reveals that reporters draw on a limited pool of sources: those of state authorities and independent experts. However, the three-year span additionally shows that the reliance on these sources is not static but dynamic. That is, not only is there a shift from one preferred source to another, but the reporters' attitudes toward these sources also change as well. As the pandemic persisted and, some might say, continued to worsen, with more accumulative case counts and deaths, the coverage seems to become increasingly polarized, turning to biomedical experts and relying on their voices to evaluate the government's management of the pandemic.

With respect to reporter voice, this study reveals that the reporters position the sources not only through reporting verbs but also naming choices. In the headlines, for instance, expert voices are collectivized to create an impression of homogeneity and resoluteness. In addition, compared to state sources, which are described through nomination and functionalization, biomedical sources are more variably constructed by a cluster of Personalization in the body of new reports, including Nomination, Functionalization, and Identification, thereby enhancing their epistemic superiority. From a critical perspective, it is unclear what standard is used in providing the quoted speaker with certain representational labels, including "top." The relevance of other descriptors is not any less questionable, such as "expert at one of Korea's largest hospitals." The assumption seems to be that the prestige of a hospital is indexical of expertise and epistemological nature of the quoted material.

As for the pragmatic effects, our analysis unequivocally presents evidence that the intertextual practices in COVID-19 news reports in South Korea are not so straightforward. The reporters exploit the authorship power to maneuver the quoted material in varying degrees. Namely, using a direct quote, the reporter can lead the reader to believe that the quotation is a faithful reproduction of the original discourse both in terms of the form and content, when in fact it is the reporter's own statement. Indirect reporting does not help reader distinguish between the reporting speaker's and the reported speaker's voice and is, thus, not "fair paraphrase" (Capone 2010). It is worrisome that authorial modifications result in ambiguous voicing, potentially misleading information, and even misrepresentation of the original material. As a result, a new speech act or implicature is created such that it frames the virus and the situation as an alarming threat. Not only does the press under study fail to offer useful reporting and solutions to the audience, but this is a marked departure from the civic role of journalism to question and scrutinize the sources for critical and constructive coverage.

Several factors may explain such manipulation practices. For example, institutional pressures may drive the news agency to adopt a seemingly objective reporting style by drawing upon authoritative sources, while at the same time pushing its own stance. In addition, government and media relations may also present a challenge for the news agency: although the agency under study is not a state-owned source, it may need to align with state narratives so that their operation is not impeded by the government's influence on subsidies or advertising (Seo 2020). While catering to readers who favor authoritative expert opinions is also possible in principle, scholars also contend that it is the journalists who construct the public perception of risk in the first place (Oh et al. 2012). Further non-linguistic research is needed to confirm the influence of these factors. Whatever the explanation is, it remains important to continue to develop analytical tools to uncover subtle ideological positioning in these texts, and this paper has been an attempt in that direction.

The findings of this study boast theoretical and social implications. Theoretically, to scholarship on news discourse, the study synthesizes and applies the widely accepted pragmatic concepts of evaluation and speech act to the practice of attribution. This toolkit allows us to distinguish multiple voices in health crisis reports (and, hopefully other reports) and reveal how reporters position themselves relative to the sources and how the embodied ideologies can be discovered in the texts. Laying bare such an ideological process, this study socially raises awareness among the general population in a way that promotes media literacy. Needless to say, we are fully aware that news reporting is not neutral or objective. However, showing that the pandemic is constructed by and large

through attribution, our research has the potential to help audiences make rational choices dealing with risk perception and calculation when consuming such news. This issue is all the more important, if we consider the fact that journalists should act in the public interest by scrutinizing authority, but as we show, it seems that, as the pandemic progresses, the journalists portray state authorities and biomedical experts, the two major sources, in an adversarial way. This, we argue, is a marked departure from their role as democratic watchdog. To journalism students as well, this study can teach them to be accountable and ethical in creating crisis reports, offering a discourse-pragmatic perspective on how reporter voice may adversely transform the original speech act and the intended meaning.

As an initial study of this kind, further research is needed into different ways in which attribution is accomplished in other English-language newspapers, as it is interesting to see whether they exhibit different sourcing patterns and active voicing strategies. Whatever the answer may be, this study serves as a background for and leads the interested reader in that direction.

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