

# The legitimating effects of proximization in discourses of public health crisis: An experimental study

Yanmin Zhang<sup>1</sup>, Hui Zhang<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Nanjing Normal University, <sup>2</sup>Nanjing Normal University, coglinger2011@126.com

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In Critical Cognitive Linguistics (CCL), also known as Cognitive Linguistic Critical Discourse Studies (CL-CDS) (Hart 2018; Zhang & Yang 2019), proximization is identified as a dynamic positioning discursive strategy in creating fear and an important tool in the legitimation of intended social action (Chilton 2004; Cap 2008). Drawing on the insights of Mental Space Theory (Fauconnier & Turner 2002) and Discourse Space Theory (Chilton 2004), Proximization Theory (Cap 2008, 2013) addresses how discourse producers conceptually position different entities and represent US vs THEM clash through mental coordinates of three axes: space, time and axiology. However, the current body of literature has been focused on the qualitative analysis of the anticipated effects, and there is a paucity of experimental forms of analysis in this area to triangulate the conception (Hart 2016, 2018; Hart & Fuoli 2020).

Utilizing triangulation as the methodology, this article reports an experiment investigating the legitimizing framing effects of the proximization strategy in public health crisis discourse. The material was designed on the basis of a corpus linguistic analysis of 180,000 words from Chinese news coverage of COVID-19. This stage of research was to figure out the recurring patterns of proximization strategies. For the experiment, 230 participants were recruited via the online survey platform 'Credamo'. After taking an emotional affect test using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Magyar-Moe, 2009), they were presented with two versions of proximization strategy, one strong and the other weak, and then responded to four questions for the dependent variable on a 7-point semantic differential scale. Data of 14 participants were removed for failing to pass the attention check. The data of 216 participants were used for analysis. The results showed that strong discursive proximization strategy facilitates support for restrictive anti-epidemic policies by increasing perception of threat and fear, despite participants' prior emotional affect. The study not only justifies the scholarly attention to conceptual positioning, which is closely related to mental space and cognition (Fauconnier & Turner 2002; Chilton 2014), but it also interprets the effects as evidential in the conceptual import of language forms deployed for restrictive health crisis management (Cap 2017).

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