FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF COVID-19 HEALTH MESSAGING

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Abstract

The research investigates COVID-19 public health messaging uses of figurative language in three culturally different nations: The United Kingdom, India, and China. Using a qualitative discourse analysis model based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the study isolates and compares idioms and metaphors within official government announcements released during the pandemic. Findings indicate culturally differentiated framing of each nation's message strategy. Chinese rhetoric promoted collectivism and ideological allegiance, frequently using fear-driven and discipline-centered metaphors. Indian messages underlined unity, spiritual reassurance, and family responsibility, while UK messages emphasized personal responsibility and institutional trust. Figurative language was also discovered to play important functions in communication, such as increasing emotional appeal, facilitating instruction, and stimulating public compliance. This research contributes to sociolinguistics, crisis communication, and intercultural pragmatics and provides practical implications for linguists, health authorities, and policy makers who intend to design culturally appropriate and effective health communication strategies during global crises.

Keywords:
COVID-19 communication, figurative language, metaphors, idioms, cross-cultural pragmatics, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, discourse analysis, health messaging, crisis communication, sociolinguistics.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background:

The COVID-19 pandemic, which first broke out at the end of 2019, rapidly evolved into a worldwide health emergency, reorganizing the fabric of societies and the means of communication of governments. When the virus rapidly spread across national borders, countries had the pressing job of informing, educating, and persuading their populations to adopt preventive behaviors. Under such high-stakes situations, the success of public health communication was of utmost importance both to communicate accurately and to induce behavior change, creating public confidence.

Thus, language emerged as an essential instrument in crisis management. Governments and health authorities across the globe used media campaigns, speeches, websites, press conferences, and social media sites to provide timely information and advice. Yet, simply providing factual information was not always enough to shape public attitudes and behaviors. This resulted in the strategic employment of figurative language, a very effective linguistic device that evokes emotions, makes abstract concepts more accessible, and encourages collective action and understanding (Chakrabarty et al., 2022).

Figurative language, such as metaphors, idioms, slogans, symbolic statements, and emotionally evocative messages, is instrumental in determining how people think about a crisis. Terms like "flatten the curve," "battle the invisible enemy," or "guard the vulnerable" are not real but are repeatedly used to provoke solidarity, speed, and obligation. These

statements condense advanced scientific or medical directives into culturally familiar, convenient forms that have appeal to broad audiences. During crises, figurative language can rally communities, lower panic, and describe the situation in more understandable and inspiring terms. Therefore, it is important to understand the kinds and roles of figurative language employed during COVID-19 to assess the effectiveness of crisis communication efforts. This research examines how this kind of language was employed in COVID-19 health messages in various cultures to uncover its rhetorical, cultural, and pragmatic value (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2021).

1.2 Research Questions:

- To determine and classify forms of figurative language employed in COVID-19 public health messaging.
- To contrast figurative language strategies in the UK, India, and China.
- To examine the communicative functions and cultural appropriateness of these expressions.

1.3 Research Objectives:

- What forms of figurative language were employed in COVID-19 public health messages in the UK, India, and China?
- How do the figurative expressions differ across these nations in structure and cultural meaning?
- What are the communicative roles of these figurative devices in shaping public behavior and emotion?

1.4 Significance of Study:

During times of crisis, the framing of messages can profoundly affect public attitude, emotional reaction, and compliance with prescribed conduct. Figurative language is different from literal language because the former tends to convey richer symbolic meanings that engage common values, feelings, and cultural narratives and thus become more relatable and memorable. During the COVID-19 pandemic, figurative language was essential in determining how people perceived and responded to the emerging crisis. Metaphors such as "waging a war against the virus" were not only rhetorical options but strategic instruments to organize public behavior. These metaphors served to make complicated medical guidance easy to understand and provided the public with a feeling of control and agency. Slogans like "Stay Home, Save Lives" or "Break the Chain" became strong social signals, echoing the necessity for collective discipline and solidarity.

Figurative language draws its roots strongly from cultural, linguistic, and socio-political origins. The origins of cultural, linguistic, and socio-political factors are deeply embedded in the employment of figurative language. For example, war metaphors can attract the notion of power and urgency in a particular culture but fear or resistance in another. Likewise, religious, family, and patriotic metaphors will be interpreted differently across societies. This study is significant since it brings to the fore the variations in figurative language use in the UK, India, and China, and the driving cultural values and norms of communication. This research provides new insights into the use of figurative language in crisis communication through the examination of health messages from various cultural traditions. The outcomes can be utilized towards creating more culturally sensitive and potent public health responses during international crises.

Literature Review

1.5 Definitions and theories of figurative language

Previously, until recent times, it was believed that figurative language was merely an ornamentation of speech or a disguise for its literal meaning. However, Colston and Gibbs

(2021) believe otherwise. According to them, it communicates meaning with accuracy and speed and even exceeds literal phrasing in effectiveness. Emotions and states of knowledge of listeners are figuratively conveyed and in a meaningful manner that is necessary in social interactions and communications. The authors note that the language is not rhetorical, but it is basic to clarify the complexities of human experience, and the work of figurative forms in natural communication (Colston & Gibbs, 2021).

Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2018) analyze idiom motivation in the frame of work of the Conventional Figurative Language Theory and explain that idioms are, to some degree, transparent to the semantics underlying them. They offer a typology of idiom motivation based on image constituents and inner form, which relates idiomatic meaning to cognitive and structural aspects. The research supports Cognitive Metaphor Theory and underlines the importance of context-sensitive analysis given idiomatic heterogeneity. This framework provides a handy lens through which to view culturally embedded expressions in public health messaging in times of global crisis (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2018).

Riyuda and Oktoviandry (2024) studied the application of figurative language and language varieties in Friends Season 8 script and identified 54 uses falling into eight categories, with the most common being simile and informal style. Based on Perrine's, Lyons', and Joos' theories, the research underscored the way non-literal speech expresses deeper contextual meaning. Their qualitative method demonstrates the interaction between communicative intent and linguistic form, providing insights into how cultural and conversational norms are reflected in figurative expressions, useful for examining public communication in multicultural contexts (Riyuda & Oktoviandry, 2024).

Chahboun et al. (2021) surveyed literature on figurative language processing in people with neurodevelopmental disorders like ASD, ADHD, and DLD. They discovered that such groups have difficulty with nonliteral language such as irony and idioms, although the underlying causes are still unknown. The review summarized available intervention programs and highlighted the one-sided attention in present research, especially to metaphors. It also pointed out significant research gaps, advocating for wider and more expansive ways of understanding and enabling the use of figurative language (Chahboun et al., 2021).

1.6 Figurative Language in Crisis Communication

Rezeki (2021) analyzed figurative language in five COVID-19-themed poems using Leech's and Nurgiyantoro's frameworks, identifying eight types of figurative expressions. Metonymy emerged as the most dominant, followed by simile, metaphor, and personification. The study also revealed two primary message categories, social and moral, by emphasizing the emotional and ethical dimensions conveyed through poetic language. By applying a descriptive qualitative method, the research highlights how figurative language can effectively communicate complex realities and shared experiences during health crises, especially in culturally expressive forms like poetry (Rezeki, 2021).

Cuenca and Romano (2022) investigated the usage of similes in English and Spanish media to think about COVID-19 during the initial wave of the pandemic. Through a close analysis of 200 examples, they were looking at structural patterns, discourse features, and cultural mappings of similes with the virus as either source or target. Their socio-cognitive and discursive perspective uncovered both cross-linguistic convergences and culturally varying tendencies. This research highlights the communicative and cognitive strength of similes in putting public comprehension of health emergencies within culturally rich settings (Cuenca & Romano, 2022).

Bogetić (2024) analyzes the convergence of war metaphors and collective memory in COVID-19 crisis communication in post-Yugoslav society. The analysis shows how political rhetoric mobilized militarized vocabulary, evoking historical connotations with previous

conflicts. Citizen response, however, exhibited resistance and opposition, illustrating complex interactions among metaphor use and war experiences. This discussion underscores how metaphors are negotiated in sociopolitical memory systems, revealing their affective charge and ideological agendas, particularly in conflict legacy societies, with a critical analysis of figurative language's communicative value in crisis narratives (Bogetić, 2024).

Da'as et al. (2023) examine Israeli school principals' metaphorical construction of leadership as they navigated the COVID-19 crisis. The interview-based study of 42 Arab and Jewish middle school principals demonstrates how metaphors shed light on the emotionally charged, highly disordered, and professionally uncertain challenges that characterized the pandemic experience. This type of figurative language reveals the leaders' coping strategies and the deepening sense of responsibility in times of ambiguity. This research has shown how metaphor serves as a powerful tool to explain the changes made by the leadership to their systems during disruptive periods (Da'as et al., 2023).

1.7   Language and cultural framing in health communication

Stanulewicz-Buckley and Cartwright (2024) study the impact of message framing, an individual's emotional response, and credibility of the information source on public compliance with COVID-19 measures in the United Kingdom. Their findings suggest that loss-framed messages evoke stronger negative emotional responses. However, behavioral compliance appears to hinge more on trust and satisfaction citizens hold toward institutions. This focus on affective response is paramount for health communication as trust, rather than framing, yields better outcomes. Such framing relies on strategic word choice, which emphasizes the need for studying persuasive crisis communication (Stanulewicz-Buckley & Cartwright, 2024).

Ogbodo et al (2020) conducted a content analysis of how the globe's media narrated the COVID-19 crisis, pointing out that stories laden with fear as well as those of human interest became quite frequent. The study reveals that through the constructionist frame approach, pervasive media frames shape public comprehension and heighten emotional arousal. Citing this knowledge gap, the authors argue that messages designed with the intent to serve during crises are capable of ramping up fear and disempowering at the same time. This is the driving insight on how public perception and engagement with authoritative messages are influenced by linguistic framing during a crisis (Ogbodo et al., 2020).

Guenther et al. (2020) analyzed the use of framing in health communication through a systematic review of 316 peer-reviewed articles. As with other areas of focus in their work, such as cancer, nutrition, and vaccination, psychological framing was the predominant approach employed with quantitative methods. Competitive and visual frames are understudied while gain-loss framing is widely practiced. This review offers a synthesis of prevalent gaps and emerging trends, revealing opportunities to shape future responses by strategically tailored communication techniques that effectively address particular health issues and audiences.

Flusberg et al. (2024) have crafted a comprehensive review examining the effects of linguistic framing on health, social, political, and interpersonal behavior. They offer framing as a core feature of human exchange that arises from a blend of cognition and emotion. Their taxonomy covers various framing elements by identifying gaps, as well as moderating and framing factors. Those findings stress socio-practical importance in determination through choice of how one frames the language presented, sensitive situations communication enhances audience engagement and effectiveness, as well as the usefulness of the message (Flusberg et al. 2024).

1.8 Cross-Cultural Pragmatics and Health Messaging

Smith (2024) identifies the critical function of pragmatics in cross-cultural communication through a desk-based study of literature. Through exploring theories including Speech Act, Politeness, and Relevance, the study highlights how pragmatic competence improves inter-subjectivity across cultures. It indicates areas lacking pragmatic awareness and recommends embedding training within educational and organizational routines. The study adds theoretically and practically to intercultural communication by promoting cultural sensitivity, providing fundamental knowledge transferable to media framing in linguistically diverse and globalized health communication settings.

McConachy and Spencer-Oatey (2021) discuss the developing discipline of socio-pragmatics, focusing on how language constructs meaning, social relations, and identity in cultures. They write about theoretical and methodological variation in cross-cultural and intercultural pragmatics, focusing on competing perspectives regarding the roles of context and culture in language use. The chapter encourages interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation in research methodology. These findings are necessary to reveal how language use and pragmatics shape public discourse and audience reception, especially in complicated communicative contexts like global health communication (McConachy & Spencer-Oatey, 2021).

El-Dakhs (2021) conducted a comparative pragmatic analysis of health advisory tweets regarding COVID-19 from Saudi Arabia and Australia. Using the models proposed by Martínez-Flor and Trosborg, the study examined the application of overarching linguistic strategies and the use of modifiers in government tweets. The results indicated that direct strategies were predominant for both countries, although there was a greater preference for directness, externally graded modifiers for Saudis, and conventionally indirect, internally graded modifiers for Australians. These results broaden knowledge about health-related discourse within online communication by presenting the cultural gap and its effects on the usage of language, context, and audience (El-Dakhs 2021).

Usmani and ALMASHHAM (2024) examined the impact of an individual's culture on the construction and comprehension of speech acts across cultures. Using qualitative methods, they studied participants through a series of communicative scenarios. Their findings indicated that diverse cultures, especially their norms, values, and traditions, greatly impact how speech acts are performed and interpreted. The study emphasizes the need for sensitivity to pragmatic differences in intercultural interactions and supports the general claim that linguistic behavior is culturally situated, while offering perspectives on pragmatic variability across cultures (Usmani & ALMASHHAM, 2024).

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Design:

The study adopts a qualitative comparative discourse analysis method with secondary sources to investigate the use of metaphor and idiomatic language in the official COVID-19 health communications of the UK, India, and China. A qualitative approach is best suited to capture sophisticated verbal features and cultural nuances where meanings are implied rather than expressed, and which are vital in analyzing public discourse. Through a comparative discourse approach, it is possible to identify how each country organizes health communication, especially in times of emergency. Such an approach is appropriate in an interpretive design that examines the extent to which a culture influences decision making and how metaphor and idiomatic expressions depict the underlying values. Secondary data allows the use of official documents containing actual messages created during public health emergencies, which enhances ecological validity (McLeod, 2024).

2.2 Corpus/Data Collection:

The corpus of data used in this study comprises around 20 written messages per nation (UK, India, China), manually extracted from official COVID-19 messaging. They comprise slogans, FAQs, health campaign copy, public service announcements, and press briefings retrieved from government websites, new channels, and health department portals. Written communication is strictly focused on maintaining consistency in analysis and obtaining formal, policy-level language. The choice criteria prefer texts with metaphorical or idiomatic language, which are important for representing abstractions such as risk, responsibility, and population health in compelling ways. This focused sampling approach facilitates the qualitative nature of the research and provides for the representativeness of major communication approaches in all three nations (Mello, 2021).

2.3 Coding and Categorization:

Idioms and metaphors are hand-coded from the gathered health communication texts. A coding table will be created in Excel or Word with six columns: (1) Country, (2) Idiom/Metaphor, (3) Literal Meaning, (4) Implied Message, (5) Theme Category, and (6) Cultural Notes. This format enables systematic analysis and cross-cultural comparison. Literal and implied meanings facilitate the decoding of both surface and deeper communicative intent. Theme categories (such as WAR, JOURNEY, FAMILY) assist in the clustering of figurative expressions around dominant conceptual structures (Wills, 2023). Cultural notes allow for context-specific observations, for instance, religious, historical, or linguistic influences. This manual method ensures interpretive richness, particularly critical in examining culturally situated language. Trends emerging from the table will inform thematic and functional contrasts between the UK, India, and China and demonstrate how each culture leverages figurative language to shape public perceptions and drive behavior change (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

2.4 Analytical Framework:

The research uses CMT to examine COVID-19 figurative language. CMT suggests that thought is structured by metaphors, not language alone; hence, metaphor use expresses how various cultures think about health crises. Idioms and metaphors extracted are thematically categorized in groups such as WAR ("fight the virus"), JOURNEY ("road to healing"), FAMILY, or RELIGION, based on conceptual framing. Besides thematic clustering, a functional analysis will also consider the persuasive, affective, or pedagogical intentions of each figurative expression. By this multi-pronged perspective, strategic communicative options for each nation's health discourse may be identified. Lastly, the patterns of usage are analyzed across nations and compared to conclude cultural commonalities and differences between metaphor preference, frequency, and function. This combined approach enables depth and breadth in investigating how figurative language functions in pandemic government communication in a range of sociolinguistic contexts (Kövecses, 2017).

2.5 Procedure for Data Analysis:

Manual coding and classification of instances of figurative language is the starting point for data analysis, employing a pre-structured coding sheet that records country, idiom/metaphor, literal meaning, implied message, and thematic category. Comparative tables will then be produced to establish similarities and differences in metaphor use within the three nations. These tables facilitate the identification of the salient themes and conceptual metaphors in each cultural environment. Lastly, thematic analysis is used to reveal the communicative intentions, persuasive, emotive, or didactic, behind the deployment of each expression. This multi-layered analysis guarantees not only linguistic meaning but also the socio-pragmatic role of each idiom or metaphor in influencing public reaction and obedience (Vinogradov et al., 2019).

3   Findings and Discussion

3.1   COVID-19 Messaging Categorization:

3.1.1   China:

Country	Idiom/Metaphor	Literal Meaning	Implied Message	Theme Category	Cultural Notes
China	The more knowledge you have, the more counter-revolutionary you are	Educated people are dangerous	Critique or irony about anti-science sentiment	POLITICAL IRONY	Reflects state suspicion or satire in social critique
China	Even during the spring festival, staying at home is the best deal	Home is better than tradition	Safety over celebration	TRADITIONAL SACRIFICE	Prioritizing public health over cultural rituals
China	If you want fewer diseases, the toilet revolution is the answer	Hygiene reform prevents illness	Promote sanitation for disease control	HEALTH & MODERNIZATION	References China's sanitation campaign
China	Better to wear a mask than a ventilator	Masks are preventive, ventilators are for emergencies	Prevention is easier than treatment	PREVENTION	Memorable and metaphorical health warning
China	Those who gather together are shameless	Assembling is disgraceful	Shame people into isolation	SOCIAL SHAMING	Strong social pressure strategy
China	Have a bite of wild animal dish today, see you in hell tomorrow	Eating wildlife leads to death	Stop consuming wild animals	CAUSE & CONSEQUENCE	Moral lesson and pandemic origin belief
China	Never go to grocery stores as long as you have a scallion	Use what you have at home	Limit movement and stay indoors	MINIMALISM / ISOLATION	Humorous yet strict lockdown encouragement
China	Stay in and don't wander. You have AC, TV, and WiFi	Home comforts replace social outings	Appreciate indoor conveniences	TECHNO-COMFORT	Framing isolation as enjoyable
China	Those with fever who stay silent are class enemies	Sick people not report are traitors	Urge transparency and cooperation	CLASS POLITICS	Echoes Maoist rhetoric
China	This year, a house visit, next year a grave visit	Social visits now may cause death later	Avoid visiting others during an outbreak	MORTAL CONSEQUENCE	Guilt-based fear appeal

China	No country is safe until the virus is contained globally	Collective safety depends on all nations	Global cooperation is essential	GLOBAL UNITY	Emphasizes internationalism
China	Persistence means victory, and unity means victory	With endurance and unity, success is assured	Stay united and compliant	MORAL PERSEVERANCE	Socialist collectivism language
China	China stands on the right side of history	China's actions are morally just	Political legitimacy during the crisis	NATIONAL IMAGE	Reinforces the moral high ground
China	Save pennies on masks, spend thousands on treatment	Skimping on masks leads to high medical bills	Prevention is cheaper than a cure	ECONOMIC REASONING	Cost-based persuasion
China	The policy was destroying more lives than saving	The policy had negative consequences	Criticism of strict lockdown measures	POLICY CRITIQUE	A rare oppositional view
China	It was a living nightmare	The situation was extremely difficult	Emotional reflection on pandemic suffering	PERSONAL TRAUMA	Deep emotive tone
China	Until the last onion is used, don't go out	Use all home resources first	Minimize exposure, delay shopping	SURVIVALISM	Rural/frugal tone, colloquial advice
China	Take a walk today, and grass will soon cover your grave	Going out could lead to death	Extreme warning against exposure	MORTALITY WARNING	Harsh fear-based messaging
China	People outside with no masks on are trash	Unmasked individuals are irresponsible	Socially condemn unsafe behavior	SOCIAL DEHUMANIZATION	Strong moral punishment language
China	Getting together with friends is murder-suicide	Social gathering = mutual destruction	Warning against socializing during an outbreak	DEADLY CONSEQUENCE	Severe metaphor to induce fear

3.1.2 United Kingdom:

Country	Idiom/Metaphor	Literal Meaning	Implied Message	Theme Category	Cultural Notes
UK	Stay home,	Don't leave	National	FAMILY /	Strong appeal

				DUTY	to collective responsibility and service
	protect the NHS, save lives	home to reduce virus spread	duty to protect healthcare and others		
UK	Stay alert, control the virus, save lives	Be vigilant to manage the outbreak	Continuous awareness prevents further spread	WAR / DEFENSE	Emphasis on vigilance and individual agency
UK	Eat Out to Help Out	Dining out contributes to economic recovery	Supporting businesses is a patriotic act	ECONOMIC SOLIDARITY	Combining public morale with economic encouragement
UK	Hands, face, space	Sanitize hands, wear masks, and keep a distance	Follow basic hygiene rules to stay safe	HEALTH PRACTICES	Rhythmic, memorable instruction format
UK	You must stay at home	Remain in your house	Government-enforced lockdown rules	COMMAND	Strong authoritative tone
UK	Say No to meeting friends	Reject social gatherings	Social distancing is mandatory	MORAL CHOICE	Personal responsibility emphasized
UK	Police will enforce with fines	Law enforcement will penalize violators	Fear-based compliance messaging	LEGAL / FEAR	Establishes authority consequences
UK	Beat the virus	Fight and win against the virus	Encourage unity in overcoming the pandemic	WAR	Heroic framing, collective struggle
UK	Stay at home, protect our NHS and save lives.	a time of crisis and safety	High-level seriousness requiring urgent action	CRISIS	Invokes national unity
UK	The health service is understaffed and under-resourced	Worst medical situation	Ineffective precautions	CRITICISM	Failure to manage health
UK	Too little, too late	Delayed action	Critique of ineffective or slow government response	FAILURE / CRITICISM	Common idiom used in political critique
UK	Callous and reckless attitude	Cold and irresponsible	Criticism of leadership	EMOTIVE CRITIQUE	Emotional judgment in

		behavior			public discourse
UK	With devastating consequences	Extremely harmful outcomes	Warning about economic and human losses	FEAR / WARNING	Emotive impact and gravity
UK	Roadmap out of lockdown	Plan to exit restrictions	Structured plan for returning to normality	JOURNEY	Hopeful, step-by-step narrative
UK	Report a lateral flow test result	Submit the COVID test outcome	Encourage personal responsibility in public health	PROCEDURAL	Practical instruction
UK	Clinically extremely vulnerable	Persons at highest health risk	Identifying and protecting the most at-risk	HEALTH RISK	Sensitivity in official categorization
UK	Postcode checker	Tool to check local restrictions	Personalize rules to local contexts	LOCALIZATION	Tech-based, accessible guidance
UK	Stay Alert	Remain cautious	Continue taking precautions	VIGILANCE	Short, clear, consistent phrasing
UK	Business support	Aid for struggling companies	Government intervention to support the economy	ECONOMIC RELIEF	Policy-based reassurance
UK	Masses of people almost certainly died	Many fatalities occurred	Accusation linked to government decisions	EMOTIVE CHARGE	Shock-based narrative for public accountability

3.1.3 India:

Country	Idiom/Metaphor	Literal Meaning	Implied Message	Theme Category	Cultural Notes
India	Lockdown last resort; follow Covid protocols	Use lockdown only if nothing else works	Prioritize alternative containment strategies	STRATEGIC POLICY	Emphasis on balancing the economy and public health
India	Fight the pandemic	Engage in battle against the	Unity and determination in overcoming	WAR	Militarized metaphor is common in

		virus	the crisis		Indian media
India	World's largest vaccination program	India's scale of vaccine rollout	National pride and global leadership in health	NATIONAL IDENTITY	Appeals to nationalism and global image
India	Remain where you are	Stay at the current location	Reassurance to migrant workers during lockdown	MIGRANT SUPPORT	Socioeconomic sensitivity
India	walk together hand in hand, win this war	Cooperate and support each other	Collective responsibility to fight the virus	UNITY / FAMILY	Cultural collectivism and unity symbolism
India	Corona se daro na (Don't be scared of corona)	Don't fear the virus	Calm the public, reduce panic	EMOTIONAL STRENGTH	Spoken-style reassurance in Hindi
India	Peace will definitely be there	Peace will eventually arrive	Endurance will lead to stability	HOPE / OPTIMISM	Spiritual and cultural tone
India	Stop, Stay Home, Stay Safe	Don't go out, keep safe at home	Follow lockdown rules strictly	SLOGAN / PROTECTION	Repetition is used for memorability
India	We are all responsible	Everyone is to blame	Collective accountability for outbreaks	MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY	Reflects the Indian collectivist moral framework
India	Immediately facilitate a lot of vaccines	Speed up the approval process	Government urgency in policy response	POLICY URGENCY	Bureaucratic push communicated clearly
India	Light the lamp initiative	Light lamps as a symbolic gesture	Show unity and hope in the face of darkness	SYMBOLIC UNITY	Deeply rooted in Hindu ritual practice
India	Took us time to convince	Delayed public acceptance	Messaging had to overcome community mistrust	COMMUNICATION CHALLENGE	Reflects health communication hurdles
India	Has nothing to do with NRC	Not connected to citizenship documents	De-link public fear from political policies	TRUST / REASSURANCE	Politically sensitive narrative management
India	Such an irresponsible event	Action that should not have	Criticism of gatherings or mismanagement	PUBLIC BLAME / CRITICISM	Government distancing from public

			happened		backlash
India	You are being targeted	Someone is aiming at you	Perceived discrimination or marginalization	VICTIM NARRATIVE	Political sensitivity and identity dynamics
India	Weakens the all-out effort	Undermines total effort	Certain actions hinder the national fight against the virus	DISCOURAGEMENT	Urging unity by naming setbacks
India	Stay home for 21 days, play your part	Contribute by staying indoors	Individual action matters in collective safety	DUTY / PARTICIPATION	Framed as national service
India	Devastating for us and the world	Great global harm	India's COVID impact has international consequences	GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY	Shows India's global self-awareness
India	5 million a day is the lower bound	That's the minimum target	Push for ambitious national goals	TARGET / SCALE	Ambitious tone in public messaging
India	We will win this war	Victory in a battle	Optimism in the national pandemic response	WAR	Repetition of militarized positive framing

3.2   Types of Figurative Language Identified:

A contrastive examination of COVID-19 health messages between the UK, India, and China demonstrates copious use of figurative devices. Idioms, metaphors, slogans, and symbolic speech were used methodically to encourage, teach, and emotionally interact with the citizens. These kinds of figurative language occur in return thematic themes that include war, journey, family, religion, fear, and national responsibility, corresponding to each nation's political, cultural, and communicative habits.

3.2.1   United Kingdom:

In the UK corpus, the most prevalent category is war metaphor. Slogans like "*fight the virus*," "battle COVID-19," and "*on the frontline*" show how the pandemic was constructed as a national war effort. This war-like language is used to express urgency and shared responsibility. The slogan "*Stay Home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives*" is not metaphorical in form but is emotionally loaded and imperative, resonating with family and moral obligation themes. Furthermore, travel metaphors like "*roadmap out of lockdown*" imply a staged, step-by-step recovery to normal. This metaphor offers order and a perception of forward movement to what otherwise would be an uncertain time. Idiomatic phrases like "*too little, too late*" and "*flatten the curve*" also became popular catchphrases to judge or advise public action.

3.2.2   India:

India's COVID-19 messaging used war metaphors (e.g., "we will win this war" extensively, but also used familial and collectivist metaphors. Expressions like "*walk together hand in hand*" and "*we are all responsible*" resonate with India's cultural values of unity,

shared responsibility, and moral responsibility. Symbolic language was also dominant. The "*light the lamp initiative*" was symbolically a representation of hope and shared resilience anchored deeply within religious and spiritual symbolism. Reassuring statements such as "*peace will be there*" and "*don't be afraid of corona*" are indicative of an emotionally supportive tone, resonating with the emotive and spiritual aspects of public life. India also deployed teaching idioms in terms of slogans, i.e., "*Stop, Stay Home, Stay Safe*" and "*play your part*", to reinforce behavioral compliance alongside each individual making their contribution towards the national endeavor.

3.2.3   China:

China's figurative language was most varied and culturally unique, sometimes combining social shaming, appeal to fear, and national symbolism (Athanasiadou, 2017). Blunt metaphors such as "*Walk today, and grass will soon grow over your grave*" and "*fever patients who keep quiet are class enemies*" reflect the employment of strong fear-appeal and Maoist political metaphors. These metaphors served not only as health notices but as devices of social control and mass discipline. Metaphors of war, like "*perseverance is victory*" and "China is on the right side of history," also supported nationalist construction and political legitimacy. The culturally embedded saying "*spend all your onions before venturing out,*" alongside other frugal phrases, rang true to rural blue-collar life. Socially inflected pejoratives like "*people who have no masks are trash*" uncivilized norm enforcement exposes sociopathy at its peak.

3.3   Cross-Cultural Variation:

3.3.1   UK: Institutional Individualism and Moral Responsibility

The UK's messaging was framed within the context of a public service institution and therefore combines moral appeal with simple guidance. The NHS slogans like "*Protect the NHS*" and "*Stay Home. Save Lives*" represent personal responsibility as the primary means of contribution towards the public good. While war metaphors such as "*battle the virus*" were used, they were more often delivered in a tone of pragmatic rationality rather than emotional intensification. Individually focused language is used to denote moral leadership, calling individuals to act strongly based on personal conscience rather than collectivist motives. The use of science phrases such as "*flatten the curve*" signifies the intention of the narrative of rationale to be regarded logically.

3.3.2   India: Cultural Collectivism with Spiritual and Familial Appeals

On the other hand, India's tone of messaging drew heavily on cultural collectivism, the mark of unity, spirituality, and emotional resilience. "*Fight the Pandemic*" and "*Light the lamp*" evoke the most powerful emotions as cultural symbols. The *"war against corona"* appeals were accompanied by fatherly duty calls such as *"Stay home, play your part."* Health practices were framed not as public responsibilities, but as acts of communal family survival. In addition, Indian communications applied moral comfort and spiritual duty that addressed public anxieties through the comfort "*Peace will be there*," and "*Don't fear corona."* These words demonstrate an empathy mixed with patriotic mobilization, which is persistently viable in India's socio-religious environment and emphasizes interpersonal interdependence.

3.3.3   China: Authoritarian Collectivism and Disciplinary Fear

The COVID-19 symptom discourse in China displayed authoritarian collectivism, evoking both fear- and discipline-oriented metaphors. Compliance was metaphorically called for. *"Those who are together are shameless,"* and "*Hanging out with friends is murder-suicide*" depict public noncompliance as morally reprehensible, worthy of being shamed and guilt's punishment. Social policing is called upon by the lines "*Those who do not wear masks are rubbish,*" while *"Save pennies on masks, spend thousands on treatment"* calls upon social

reason. Whatever the line *"Never visit grocery shops as long as you have a scallion"* implies reinforces absolute self-sufficiency and hardy, sacrificial self-reliance. According to Hadidi & Behshad, (2021), metaphors born of social myths combined with nationalist ideology made public health adherence a question of patriotism. That vocabulary aimed to control behavior by inspiring fear in shame in symbols, ideological, which is indeed in line with China's bottom-up messaging style, combined with state overreach criticism as the civilian dominator (Athanasiadou, 2017).

3.3.4 Comparison and Interpretation:

As we move further into what this section is about, it is clear that individualistic and collectivistic, as well as democratic and authoritarian, societies influence figurative messages differently. The UK upheld the freedom of the individual within the bounds of trust in institutions, India's mix of emotion and morality depended on a shared spiritual context, and China used authoritative metaphors to achieve public obedience. These trends shed light on the interaction between cultural principles and language strategies and reveal that figurative language is not merely rhetorical but quite possibly entangled with a continuum of a nation's identity, power relations, and historical consciousness (Silva, 2021).

3.4 Communicative Functions:

In the social behavior, relations, and perceptions of the UK, India, and China, trust was among the main concerns, along with message urgency, emotional appeal, clarity, and public perception in general. Trust as a socially reasonable concern, and the others, were achieved differently because socio-political status in each country, language etiquette, and audience assumptions varied (Hanks, 2018).

3.4.1 Emotional Appeal:

In the case of India, much use of metaphors was made to console individuals on a cultural plane and invoke unity. Phrases like *"Light the lamp"* and *"We will win this war"* presented spirituality-imbued symbols in a way that invoked patriotism as well as communal fortitude. Claiming the intensified emotional engagement of the metaphors, especially in the mosaic socio-religious constituents, concerning the intangible threat COVID-19 posed to render it collectively salient. Likewise, in the United Kingdom, *"Save lives"* and *"Protect the NHS"* are stretched connections as emotionally participatory slogans. From flaws, moral duty arose, and empathy was created with guilt in the effort to spur action.

3.4.2 Urgency:

For all three nations, war metaphor framing by way of emphasis was the frame of reference. *"Fight the virus"* (UK/India) and *"perseverance is victory"* (China) placed the pandemic in the context of an immediate threat that needed to be met with quick and forceful action. This framing invited citizens to frame health guidelines as anything other than optional, but rather wartime directives that had to be followed right away.

3.4.3 Clarity:

Slogans like *"Hands, Face, Space"* (UK) and "*Stop, Stay Home, Stay Safe*" (India) show the extent to which figurative language can simplify intricate public health messages. According to Hanks (2018), governments used metaphorical, concise phrasing to communicate multi-level health habits in an accessible and memorable format. This made it easily understood across all levels of literacy and language backgrounds, especially critical in multilingual countries (Bonvillain, 2019).

3.4.4 Trust-Building:

Figurative language was also used to build public trust, but with varying degrees of success. The UK's emphasis on protecting the NHS, a treasured institution, reinforced institutional trustworthiness. India's use of kinship and cultural metaphors built trust through

emotional comfort. China's authoritarian and fear-based ones were effective in controlling behavior but perhaps less effective at building voluntary trust, relying instead on duty and discipline (Bonvillain, 2019).

3.5   Application of Conceptual Metaphor Theory:

The originators of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, CMT for short, Lakoff and Johnson in 1980, write that metaphor is not just a linguistic ornament applied to language, but rather a cognitive tool that structures discourse on the thinking processes and on reality. It is due to CMT that we can analyze intricate and intangible phenomena such as a pandemic in relation to much simpler and concrete ideas such as war, movement, and kinship. Through this theory, it is possible to conduct a robust exploration of the way various nations metaphorically conceptualized the COVID-19 emergency and created public opinion as well as behaviour (Bundgaard, 2019).

3.5.1   WAR Metaphor: "COVID-19 IS AN ENEMY"

Each of the three countries employed war metaphors, yet each varied in terms of intensity and tone. In China, wartime metaphors were typically combined with intense militarized and historical imagery like*, "class enemies,"* and *"victory through unity."* These invoked state-directed ideological discipline and stimulated authoritarian legitimacy. In India, metaphors of war like *"Fight the pandemic"* (war against COVID) were less harsh and often included emotional pleas for unity and involvement more similar to the democratic culture and family-centred values of India. The UK employed war metaphors, but procedurally and rationally, regarding public service language ("frontline workers"), where duty was stressed over aggression (Wen & Taylor, 2021).

3.5.2   JOURNEY Metaphor: "PANDEMIC RESPONSE IS A JOURNEY"

This was notable in the communications of both the UK and India. The UK used phrases like "*roadmap out of lockdown*", where recovery is depicted as chronologically ordered. This aligns with CMT's source-path-goal schema, where stage progress is translated into physical travel. This is consistent with CMT's source-path-goal schema, where getting through stages is mapped onto physical travel. India likewise constructed public engagement with metaphors such as "*play your part*" or "*join the path to recovery*," promoting a sense of progress and common endeavor. China, on the other hand, used fewer journey metaphors, opting for static discipline-focused frames rather than dynamic movement (Holyoak & Stamenković, 2018).

3.5.3   FAMILY Metaphor: "THE NATION IS A FAMILY"

In Indian rhetoric, the metaphor of the family was dominant. Narratives such as "*walk hand in hand*" presented the public as members of a tight-knit family where every member has to defend the other. This is in line with CMT's conceptualization of moral obligation being organized in terms of family roles. The UK also suggested this metaphor in such phrases as "*Beat the virus*," "*crona sa daro na (Don't be afraid of Covid)*", although less so emotionally and culturally. China replaced the family metaphor with a collective-national one, however, wherein loyalty to the politics was more important than personal attachment (Holyoak & Stamenković, 2018).

3.5.4   Religion and Symbolism: "HOPE AND UNITY ARE SACRED"

India specifically utilized metaphors based on spiritual and symbolic traditions, including "*light the lamp*" and "*peace will come*". These are consistent with the CMT principle that abstract emotions (hope, perseverance) are projected onto religious and cultural symbols. China also utilized symbolic metaphors, although more state-oriented than spiritual. For instance, "*China stands on the right side of history*" is symbolic, proclaiming moral high ground and national virtue. The UK did not heavily use religious metaphors but relied on

institutional symbols such as the NHS to communicate moral alignment (Wen & Taylor, 2021).

4　Conclusion

4.1　Summary of Key Findings:

This research analyzed official COVID-19 health messaging in the use of figurative language in the United Kingdom, India, and China. Using qualitative discourse analysis complemented by Conceptual Metaphor Theory, it established how metaphors, idioms, slogans, and symbolic expressions were used to shape public perception, behavior, and emotional reaction in the pandemic. The study found that figurative language was an important communicative function in simplifying intricate information, triggering emotional responses, and making public compliance consistent with national values. All three nations showed unique patterns in the thematic and functional deployment of figurative language. Although all three employed figurative language to prompt compliance in behavior, tone, communication strategy, and types of metaphors differed remarkably.

These differences were influenced by diverse cultural values, political systems, and societal norms, thus proving that figurative language in crisis communication is strongly context-dependent. The research highlights the claim that figurative language serves a purpose other than decoration. It highlights mobilization. It sets the stage, so to speak, for change and manipulates action, in this case, shifting actions to be focused around institutional frameworks. The results affirm the value of culturally grounded messaging in public health communication during situations that require intervention, proving the need for communicational strategies tailored to specific socio-cultural and political contexts during international emergencies.

4.2　Contribution and Implications:

In metaphor and other forms of figurative language, scholars consider them to be literary elements. This research has leaped by showing how indirectness using metaphor, as well as idioms, affects public understanding and actions. It also validates Conceptual Metaphor Theory's effectiveness as a discourse analytic tool for examining world discourse in emotionally high-stakes instances such as pandemics. The findings affirm the importance of incorporating culturally relevant frameworks into global health communications. Public messaging, in this case, needs to balance the locals' emotional frame as well as symbols that carry profound meaning. Governments and international organizations (ie, WHO) during the next health emergencies should build adaptable communication frameworks underpinned by cultural pragmatics, metaphorical straightforwardness, and emotional ease to prompt trust and active engagement from the fractured public across many societies.

4.3　Limitations and Future Research Suggestions:

The scope of this study is limited to written public health messages from official sources in three countries. It does not include audience reception nor any non-verbal forms of communication, including images and videos. Also, limiting itself to secondary data did not allow for more probing into actual interpretation in real time or the emotional influence of figurative language by different demographic segments. Future studies can investigate audience reaction to figurative health messages via surveys, interviews, or corpus-based sentiment analysis. Extending the study to more countries, particularly from Africa, Latin America, or the Middle East, would also yield a deeper understanding of international metaphorical strategies in crisis communication. In addition, synthesizing visual metaphors and multimodal discourse would also enable a better understanding of the multi-layered manner by which figurative language impacts public health behavior.

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