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## COVID-19 and Media Discourse An Ideological Representation of COVID-19 Pandemic in The Guardian Newspaper Selected Reports

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### Summary:

By the late of 2019, a global viral pandemic caused by coronavirus (commonly known as Covid-19) started to pervade the world. It brought forth differing reactions in different countries. These reactions mediated by media, which brought the ideological underpinnings into report. This study examines the ideological discourse structures used to represent covid-19 in The Guardian online newspaper reports in the light of Van Dijk's ideological square framework. The samples of nine news reports are chosen over a period started from January 17, 2020 to August 13, 2020. The analysis of these reports shows a negative representation for COVID-19 discourse. Seven of Van Dijk ideological discourse structures like Number Game, Evidentiality, Lexicalization, Exemplification, Burden, Comparison and Actor Description are identified in the study.

### 1. Introduction

Towards the end of December 2019, a health crisis represented by the spread of a novel virus commonly known as Covid-19 was first appeared in wuhan, Hubie Province, China. From a single city of Wuhan, the virus has rapidly spread to other parts of China and has become a global pandemic within a short time (Osisanwo, 2021). On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) declared the Covid-19 outbreak as "a Public Health Emergency of International Concern

(PHEIC) “(“Statement of the second meeting”, para.1) and as a pandemic on 11 March 2020 (“WHO Director-General’s opening remarks”).

To fight against the pandemic, countries around the globe have adopted various measures and reactions, which are clearly observed in the media (Yu, Lu, &Hu, 2021). No doubt, through media discourse the virus has given a wide publicity and reportage across the world (Osisanwo, 2021). Media discourse as Van Dijk (1993) explains is the main source of knowledge, attitudes, and ideology. The news media are the main source of information and beliefs used to form the interpretation framework for event:

*What information appears in headlines, what is emphasized in a conclusion, or what event*

*descriptions count as complication or a resolution of a story, depends on the ways events are*

*interpreted, and hence on ideologically variable positions.* (Van Dijk, 1998b, p.207)

Media’s ideological effects are undeniable. The range of acceptable social ideologies is more or less identical with those that have preferential access to the mass media. The selection of issues and topics of interest and attention, the selective knowledge about the world, and many other elements or conditions of ideological control, are presently largely due to the mass media (Van Dijk, 1998b). In fact, existing work on the discourse of COVID-19 are studies from the sciences. The scientific studies have focused on medicine, health, causes, diagnoses and prevention of the virus. However, studies on COVID-19 in relation to ideology, rhetoric and media representation are limited (e.g. Osisanwo, 2021; Al-Ghamdi, 2021; Dezhkameh et al., 2021). Few studies like (Al-Asfoor, 2021; Abbas, 2021) demonstrate that COVID-19 has been used for ideological and political purposes.

The present study, then, tries to shed light on the sort of representations the aforementioned newspaper has used to form the readers’ opinions. It displays how

the ideologies of the writer affect the image of China and coronavirus condition. For this purpose, Van Dijk's ideological square framework is used.

## 2. Research Questions

The research attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the ideological structures used in The Guardian news reports to represent Covid-19 epidemic?
2. How *COVID-19* news reports are ideologically represented in The Guardian?
3. News Representations

During COVID-19, crisis people's behavioral patterns are affected by news contents. By news text, then, what people know about the pandemic is largely dictated and linguistically redesigned or foregrounded (Al-Ghamdi, 2021). Like media genres, news has the major role as a source of information for people in society. The discourse the media produces shapes people's knowledge, beliefs, values, opinions, social relations and identities. It is the strategic control of the readers' knowledge of events and opinions that influence their evaluations of events. This means that all linguistic choices in media discourse are socially and ideologically determined, but they also contribute to creating and maintaining ideology in society (Busa, 2014).

The analysis of news discourse will not be purely structural. Van Dijk (1983) stresses that the actual understanding of news discourse not only depends on its manifest structures. It, also, depends on already presupposed cognitive information and strategies of interpretation and representation. Van Dijk explains, "An important cognitive aspect of news discourse interpretation is the set of expectations the reader brings to bear even before reading the discourse itself" (p. 29). Generally, media power is "symbolic and persuasive"; primarily the media have the potential to control the minds of readers or viewers to certain extent. Such a control of intentions, plans, knowledge, beliefs, or opinions is presupposed (Van Dijk, 1996, p.10).

#### 4- Ideology and Discourse

As a major concept for media discourse is that of ideology. Van Dijk (2011) observes that ideologies are “the beliefs shared by and distributed over the minds of group members”, that is, they are a form of social cognition (p.382). When a group and its members are confronted with new events and situations, group members allow new social opinions to be easily inferred, acquired and distributed in the group (Van Dijk, 2000). Hence, as a basic system of beliefs, Van Dijk (2021) confirms, ideologies are not about the specifics of whether or not we should respect the restrictions of the current COVID epidemic, but they are about the fundamentals of the structure of society, about the political power, about gender relations, about the environment, sexuality, life and death.

Ideologies influence the various levels of discourse structures, like intonation, images, syntax and many aspects of meaning (Van Dijk, 2000). Thus, it is largely through discourse and other semantic messages that the contents of ideologies can be articulated, justified or explained (Van Dijk, 2011). However, Van Dijk, (2011) stresses that ideologies are not always directly visible or detectable in discourse, so, an analysis of a context may be necessary to show that the use of specific expressions in specific situations should be interpreted as ideological. Moreover, discourse is adapted to the social, political, cultural or communicative context and not a direct expression of our beliefs. In other words, discourse is context controlled and this context is cognitively represented as “a filter that makes sure our discourse is appropriate in the current communicative situation ... it depends on whom, when, where, about what and why they are saying the things they do” (Van Dijk, 2021, p. 150).

Ideological discourse analysis, then, must take into account the textual, cognitive and social (contextual) constraints on all discourse (Van Dijk, 2011).

## 5. Van Dijk's Ideological Square

Ideological discourse analysis is about ideological discourse structures that can be shown to be expressions of the underlying socio-cognitive representations. In discourse, the ideological structures should be "focused on that express or reproduce the identity, actions, goals, norms and values, group relations and resources of a group" (Van Dijk, 2011, p. 394). One of the main categories of ideology structure in discourse is that of *group relations* that shows polarized underlying ideological structures (Van Dijk, 2011).

Accordingly, the ideological discourse exhibits a structure that typically emphasizes positive properties of Us, the in-group, and negative properties of Them, the out-group (Van Dijk, 2013). Under the influence of ideological in-group-out-group polarization, we may expect an emphasis on positive self-descriptions (our negative properties will tend to be mitigated or ignored) and an emphasis of negative other-descriptions (Their positive properties will tend to be mitigated or ignored). This rhetorical combination is called the Ideological Square (Van Dijk, 2015) because of its four complementary overall principles:

Emphasize positive things about Us.

Emphasize negative things about Them.

De-emphasize negative things about Us.

De-emphasize positive things about them.

These four principles can be applied to the analysis of all levels of discourse structures like meaning, propositional structures, formal structures, sentence syntax, discourse forms, argumentation, rhetoric and action and interaction (Van Dijk, 2000, pp. 44-59). The main point of the analysis is to show how various ideologies are expressed in various structures (Van Dijk, 2006). Van Dijk (2000) lists many categories of ideological analysis. The following are the categories or the ideological discourse structures identified in the current study:

1. Number Game: Numbers and statistics are oriented to enhance credibility and emphasis objectivity.
2. Evidentiality: By referring to authority figures or institutions, claims and opinions are more plausible. Evidentiality convey objectivity, reliability and credibility.
3. Lexicalization: lexical items can be used to express underlying concepts and beliefs. The choice of words has a positive, a neutral or a negative connotation depending on the role, goals, point of view or opinion of the speaker or the writer.
4. Burden: Arguments in discourse are taken for granted as self-evident and as sufficient reasons to accept the conclusions.
5. Exemplification\ Illustration: Concrete examples have the power to be easily imagined, memorized, and considered as forms of empirical proof.
6. Actor Description: the descriptions of actors in discourse are "never neutral". It depends on the writers/ speakers ideologies.
7. Comparison: A comparative move in which the current situation is compared to situations in the past.

#### 6. Methods

For data, nine selected newspaper reports are taken from an influential newspaper in the UK (The Guardian). The selection of these reports covers the period between January 17, 2020 and August 13, 2020. These items are analyzed according to seven of Van Dijk ideological discourse structures namely, Number Game, Evidentiality, Lexicalization, Exemplification, Burden, Comparison and Actor Description. Van Dijk's microstructures are construed to uncover the hidden ideologies in COVID-19 discourse.

#### 7. Findings

Table 1 and table 2 present the type of the ideological discourse structures displayed by The Guardian and analysed in this research. Seven microstructures are identified in the sampled newspaper reports (Number Game, Evidentiality,

Lexicalization, Exemplification, Burden, Comparison and Actor Description).

Table 1 maps out the microstructures used for the negative representation of COVID-19 condition whereas table 2 reveals the kind of structures used for positive representation.

Table (1)

*Frequency and Percentage of the Ideological Discourse Structures Used for the Negative Representation of Covid-19*

No.	Type of Discourse Structure	Frequency	Percentage
1	Number Game	18	39.13%
2	Evidentiality	11	23.91%
3	Burden	6	13.04%
4	Exemplification	5	10.87%
5	Lexicalization	4	8.70%
6	Actor Description	1	2.17%
7	Comparison	1	2.17%
	Total	46	100%

Table (2)

*Frequency and Percentage of the Ideological Discourse Structures Used for the Positive Representation of Covid-19*

No.	Type of Discourse Structure	Frequency	Percentage
1	Evidentiality	2	66.67%
2	Actor Description	1	33.33%
	Total	3	100%

## 8. Discussion

China as the source of the virus is more highlighted in The Guardian reports about coronavirus situation. To manufacture a public consent and convince people

about the credibility of the information provided, many ideological discourse structures are applied. Starting with Evidentially, *Prof Neil Ferguson and colleagues, from the MRC Center for Global Infectious Disease Analysis at Imperial*, have calculated that the number of cases caused by "Wuhan outbreak of a novel coronavirus" may be more than 1,700.

1. *"It is likely that the Wuhan outbreak of a novel coronavirus has caused substantially more cases of moderate or severe respiratory illness than currently reported"* (*"Coronavirus: More cases and second death"*, 2020, para.6).

The expression "outbreak of a novel coronavirus" is premodified by "Wuhan" to confirm possession and implicate that China is the agent behind that outbreak. Thus, in addition to Evidentiality, text (1) deploys Lexicalization and Burden to assure China as the source of the virus.

2. *Japan and Thailand both reported new cases of the mystery strain of coronavirus this week and experts say it might spread further as a result of the Chinese Lunar new year holiday starting next week, which sees millions of people travel across the country.* (para. 12)
3. *On Friday, Thailand confirmed a second case. "A 74- year- old Chinese woman from Wuhan had been quarantined since her arrival on Monday and was found to be infected with the newly identified coronavirus", said Sukhum Karnchanapimia, permanent secretary of the Public Health Ministry.* (para. 14)
4. *Chinese authorities are to step up efforts to contain the outbreak of a new virus before the Lunar new year holidays amid fears of the bug spreading to other countries* (*"Coronavirus: China reports 17 new cases"*, 2020, para. 1).
5. *Let's say it was kicking off fairly substantially in Wuhan and people weren't being informed: could there have been people travelling to and from China at that point who may have been infected by coronavirus? That is completely possible. Is it then possible that they transmitted the virus to other people when they were in the UK? Yes, of course. Said Dr. Stephen Baker at Cambridge University's*



*Infectious Disease Institute. ("Could COVID-19 have reached the UK", 2020, para. 9)*

In texts (2-5), the editorials of the sampled newspapers utilize such discourse structures as Evidentiality and Burden to hold China the responsibility of spreading coronavirus to other countries. Texts (2-4) deploy evidences by experts to convince people with the accuracy of the information provided. The Chinese Lunar New Year celebration increases the possibility for the virus to spread further afield. The second infected case in Thailand belongs to a Chinese woman. In addition, China lets its citizen go into the world so "they transmitted the virus to other people when they were in the UK". Text (5) shows Evidence and Burden to incriminate Chinese authorities of not doing enough to control the outbreak of the new virus to other countries.

6. *Two people have died from the virus in Wuhan, the largest city in central China. Three cases have been confirmed abroad – two in Thailand and one in Japan, involving people either from Wuhan or who had recently visited the city ("Coronavirus: China reports 17 new cases", 2020, para. 7).*
7. *Adding to those concerns is the imminent movement of hundreds of millions of Chinese who will be travelling to visit family during the holidays that starts next week, increasing the potential for the virus to spread further afield (para.4).*
8. *In the UK, the first confirmed cases of coronavirus came on 31 January when two Chinese nationals staying in a hotel in York tested positive ("Could COVID-19 have reached the UK", 2020, para. 6).*
9. *As images started rolling in of wards in China and then Italy overwhelmed with Covid -19 patients (para. 3).*

China, then, is responsible for spreading coronavirus across the rest of the world. Text (6) displays Number Game and Burden structures while texts (7-9) make use of Burden to confirm a fact that the virus has transmitted from China to other countries. Thus, China has been accused in increasing people's panic and

anxiety. These emotions are enhanced lexically with the expression "overwhelmed" in text (9) to imply such a strong event that affects Italy to the extent it cannot deal with it.

10. *Genetic analyses of the new coronavirus suggest that the virus emerged in humans in China in late November to early December 2019. While China's official submission to the World Health Organization (WHO) states the first infection was recorded on 8 December, government data seen by the South China Morning Post suggests the first known case was observed on 17 November. ("Could COVID-19 have reached the UK", 2020, para.5)*

11. *However, without clear information about what was happening in China in the final months of last year, it is hard to know how likely it is to have arrived in the UK earlier than the first confirmed case, said Dr. Stephen Baker at Cambridge University's Infectious Diseases Institute. (para.8)*

12. *...The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) show that in January that the group felt unable to plan for "the worst case scenario" because of the uncertainty around the data coming out of China (para 11).*

The Guardian represents China negatively. It is the source of the virus and responsible for its spread. Moreover, China is accused of not providing accurate data about the virus. Texts (1) and (10-12) employ Evidentiality to convey that China is hiding information about the virus and trying to mislead the world. Prof Neil Ferguson and colleagues (in text 1 above) implicate that the official numbers about the infections are misleading. Text (10) is an evidence that the China's official reports to WHO are unreliable. Within texts, (11-12) experts describe the information and data provided by China as unclear and uncertain.

13. *The death toll from the virus in China has reached 2, 835, up 47 from the previous day. The total accumulated number of confirmed cases in mainland*

*China since the outbreak began is 79,251 ("Italy COVID-19 death toll", 2020, para. 1).*

14. *South Korea, which has the second-highest number of confirmed cases outside of mainland China, reported 594 new cases on Saturday-the biggest daily increase to date-with three new deaths. It brings its total accumulated number of cases to 2,931. (para. 2)*

15. *The number of coronavirus deaths reached 3,080 on Monday, while the death toll in Iran rose to 66-the highest outside China. In Italy, 52 people have died, while three have died in France. (Coronavirus 2 March: at a glance, 2020, para. 5)*

16. *The number of cases in Iran has risen to 32,332, while the number of deaths hits 2,378, according to the country's health ministry ("Coronavirus Latest", 2020, para. 4).*

17. *Covid-19 continues its spread across the African continent with 3,243 cases and 83 deaths now recorded (para. 6).*

18. *Lunelli estimated that as many as 10,000 of Italy's over 35,000 deaths may have been attributed to the lack of sufficient anti-pandemic protocols ("Italy's Pandemic Plan", 2020, para. 3).*

To make a strong impact and display facts against mere opinions, the discourse structure Number Game is used. Texts (13-18) depict the number of people who died affected by the virus. Number Game is substantial in convincing people with the high risk of covid-19. By backing its news with numbers, the Guardian attempts to be more objective and tries to convince its readers about the seriousness and contagiousness of the virus. Therefore, people may take more precautionary measures to reduce its spread. For more samples about the Number Game strategy, see appendix (A).

19. *The new strain has caused alarm because of its connection to severe acute respiratory syndrome, which killed more than 750 people globally in 2002-03 ("Coronavirus: China reports 17 new cases", 2020, para. 3).*

20. Johnson (the British prime minister), 55, said he was now self-isolating and working from home and would continue to lead the national fight back against the virus ("Coronavirus Latest", 2020, para. 1).

21. An escalation in the coronavirus outbreak could cut global economic growth in half and plunge several countries into recession this year, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has warned (Coronavirus 2 March: at a glance, 2020, para. 3).

22. One caller to a domestic violence hotline reported that her husband threatened to throw her out into the street if she cough. Another reported they had been strangled by their partner, but feared going to the hospital because of the threat of coronavirus. An immunocompromised man from Pennsylvania called in after his emotionally abusive girlfriend began hiding cleaning supplies and hand sanitizer from him. ("In quarantine with an abuser", 2020, para. 1)

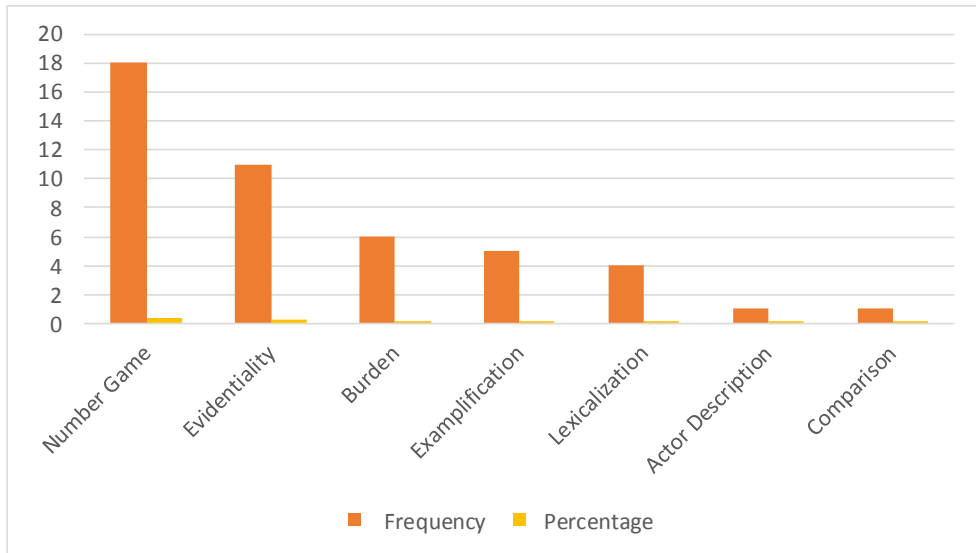
23. One caller, from New York, reported being awakened from bed because she had a fever and wasn't feeling well. Her abuser threw her out of the front door and kept their child. Another told the hotline she was being kept home against her will after being threatened by her abuser with a hammer and an unregistered gun. He was using the pandemic as an excuse to stop her from leaving him. (para. 4)

The newspaper coverage to paint covid-19 as a threat to the existence of man. Just like SARS, which severely attacks the world in 2002-03, the present virus is a deadly respiratory disease. Text (19), then, deploys Comparison to canvass that the new virus needs more cautions. Text (20) employs Lexicalization within the expression 'national fight back' to convey that the virus is an enemy that have to be fought. Text (21), also, shows Lexicalization through which coronavirus is represented as an 'outbreak' to mean a violent start of a disease. Coronavirus is further given an Actor Description in text (21) to reflect its danger to the world. It is capable of throwing the world economy into a crisis. Above all, Evidentiality is

used to support the news. Furthermore, texts (22) and (23) depict stories of violence to exemplify how coronavirus causes an alarming rise in domestic violence.

Figure (1)

*Ideological Discourse Structures Used for the Negative Representation of Covid-19*



Notably, through all the above-mentioned texts, The Guardian newspaper negatively portrays coronavirus situation. However, texts (24) and (25) implicate a positive effect for the pandemic:

24. *The coronavirus pandemic is shutting down industrial and temporarily slashing air pollution levels around the world, satellite imagery from the European Space Agency shows ("Coronavirus Pandemic"2020, para. 1).*

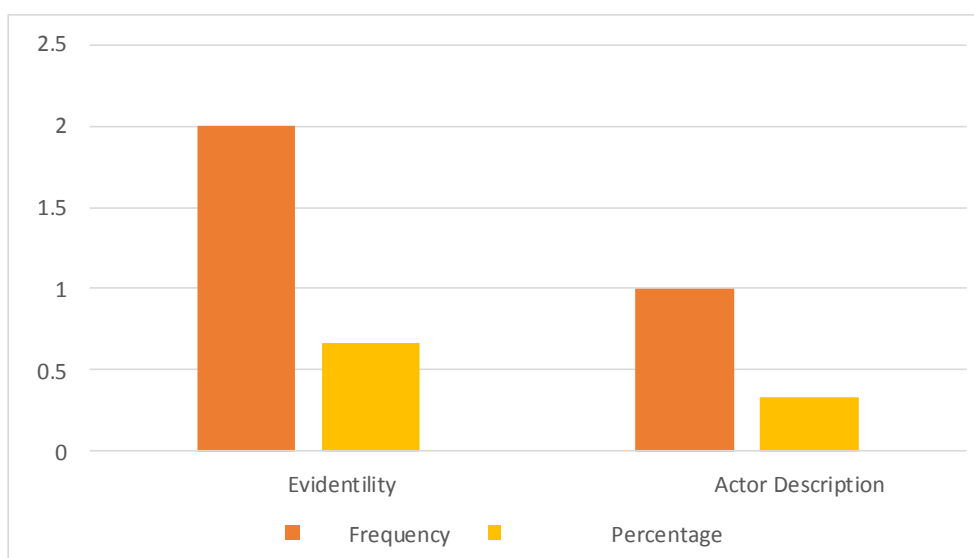
25. *Readings from ESA's Sentinel-5P satellite show that over the past six weeks, levels of nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) over cities and industrial clusters in Asia and Europe were markedly lower than in the same period last year (para.3).*

Since the countries went into lockdown due to the virus, the industrial emissions have been reduced and resulting in low levels of NO<sub>2</sub>. Thus, Actor Description is employed in text (24) to reflect coronavirus role in reducing air pollution. While

Evidentiality is provided in both of the texts (24-25) to proof that, the pandemic has led to a huge drop in air pollution. Consequently, Actor Description and Evidentiality add a positive representation for COVID-19 discourse.

Figure (2)

*Ideological Discourse Structures Used for the Positive Representation of Covid-19*



## 9. Conclusion

This study sets a qualitative and discourse analyses guided by seven of Van Dijk's ideological discourse structures: Number Game, Evidentiality, Lexicalization, Exemplification, Burden, comparison and Actor Description. These discourse structures are utilized to shape and form the COVID-19 discourse. They created an out-group picture of China through which it is negatively depicted. China is the source of coronavirus and holds the responsibility of spreading it across the world. It doesn't care about the health of people in the world and allows its citizen to move out of China. Moreover, China hides the real number of infected cases in the virus. A clear negative representation of China is mostly deployed by Evidentiality. By depending on opinions, evidences or proofs that belong to authority figures or

experts, The Guardian attempts to gain objectivity and make people trust the news. To enhance objectivity, Number Game is the most strategy used in the sampled news reports. It is a persuasive tool to show the extent of risk that the virus imposes.

Actually, the negative image of China and the virus is reinforced through the employment of all the above-mentioned ideological structures. However, the only positive representation of the virus is portrayed by emphasizing its role in reducing air pollution after freezing the social and economic activities across the world. With Evidentiality and Actor Description, The Guardian attempts to adopt a neutral manner.

Through the analysis of The Guardian's seven selected newspaper reports during 2020, this study hopefully reveals how the ideologies of the writers portray the image of China and COVID-19.

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## Appendix A

### Samples about the ideological discourse structure Number Game

1. *Spain recorded a new record single- day death toll. There have been 769 deaths in the past 24 hours, bringing the death toll to 4,858. The previous record was 738, between Tuesday and Wednesday this week. The country now has 64,059 confirmed cases, up from 56,188 yesterday. ("Coronavirus Latest", 2020, para.3)*

2. Covid-19 has now infected at least 90,294 people globally ... (Coronavirus 2 March: at a glance, 2020, para. 1).
3. The outbreak has reached more than 60 countries, with Portugal, Ireland, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Jorden, Russia, and Tunisia... (para.2).
4. The number of confirmed US cases rose to 91, while New York reported its first case (para.5).
5. Three new coronavirus infections were detected in England, bringing the total number of confirmed cases in the UK to 39 (para.6).
6. The Scottish government has forecast that up to 250,000 people could be admitted to hospital if the coronavirus outbreak turns into a full-scale epidemic (para.7).
7. In Hubie itself, 423 new cases were reported, of which 420 were in Wuhan. So a total of 427 in mainland China ("Italy COVID-19 death toll", 2020, para.29).
8. South Korea reported 571 new cases on Friday, taking its total- the highest in the world outside China- to 2,337, the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) said (para.30).
9. Mainland China had 427 new confirmed cases of coronavirus infection on Friday, the country's National Health Commission said on Saturday, up from 327 cases a day earlier (para. 36).
10. The death toll from the outbreak in mainland China had reached 2,835 as of the end of Friday, up by 47 from the previous day (para.38).
11. The central province of Hubie, the epicenter of the outbreak, reported 45 new deaths, while in the provincial capital of Wuhan, 37 people died (para. 39).

## كوفيد 19 والخطاب الاعلامي

(تمثيل أيديولوجي لمجائحة كوفيد-19 في تقارير محتاترة لصحيفة الغارديان)

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الكلمات المفتاحية: الغارديان. كوفيد-19. تراكيب الخطاب. التمثيل الإخباري

## الملخص:

بحلول أواخر عام 2019، بدأ جائحة فيروس عالمي يسببه فيروس كورونا (المعروف باسم كوفيد-19) في الانتشار حول العالم. وأثارت ردود فعل متباينة في مختلف البلدان. ردود الفعل هذه توسطت فيها وسائل الإعلام، والتي جلبت الأسس الأيديولوجية إلى التقرير. تبحث هذه الدراسة في هياكل الخطاب الأيديولوجي المستخدمة لتمثيل كوفيد-19 في تقارير صحيفة الغارديان الإلكترونية في ضوء الإطار المربع الأيديولوجي لفان دايك. تم اختيار عينات من تسعة تقارير إخبارية خلال فترة تبدأ من 17 يناير 2020 إلى 13 أغسطس 2020. ويظهر تحليل هذه التقارير تمثيلاً سلبياً لقضية فايروس كورونا (كوفيد-19). تم تحديد سبعة من هياكل خطاب فان دايك الأيديولوجية مثل لعبة الأرقام، والدليل، والمعجم، والتمثيل، والعبء، والمقارنة، ووصف الفاعل.