

Short Note

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Short Note

Linguistic Misrepresentation in Pandemic Terminology: A Cognitive–Linguistic Critique of ‘Small Gatherings Cancellation’

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Abstract

This article identifies a terminological misrepresentation in the expression ‘small gatherings cancellation’—ranked by Haug et al. (2020) as the most effective non-pharmaceutical intervention during the COVID-19 pandemic. Corpus-based and theoretical analyses demonstrate that *small gathering* conventionally denotes a planned or spontaneous social event, whereas the predicate *cancellation* reinforces this event-based frame. Consequently, the phrase fails to capture the intended reference to *restrictions on simultaneous presence in commercial or professional settings*. Drawing on cognitive-linguistic theory and institutional usage from the WHO and CDC, this paper shows how such misrepresentation may trigger unintended conceptual frames, leading to interpretive ambiguity in both scholarly and policy contexts. Three alternatives are proposed to achieve better semantic alignment and enhance terminological precision and communicative clarity in future public-health discourse.

Keywords: small gatherings cancellation; cognitive linguistics; corpus analysis; semantic frame

In a 2020 article in *Nature Human Behaviour*, Haug et al. systematically evaluated 46 non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among these, *small gatherings cancellation* was ranked as the most effective. In the discussion section, the authors elaborate on this category, listing examples such as ‘closure of shops,’ ‘closure of restaurants,’ ‘mandatory home-working,’ and ‘gatherings of 50 people or less’. The terminology chosen for this category may inadvertently cause conceptual confusion and misinterpretation. Although Haug et al.’s primary objective was to establish standardized functional categories for the quantitative evaluation of diverse policy strategies, this prioritization of analytical utility resulted in a linguistically imprecise category label, creating potential risks for policy translation.

The noun *gathering*—and particularly the collocation *small gathering*—conventionally denotes a spontaneous or planned event, and the predicate *cancel* typically applies to planned events, orders, reservations, or subscriptions. Corpus evidence consistently supports this social event construal. Consequently, this phrasing does not adequately capture the authors’ intended referents—namely, the simultaneous presence of people (crowds) in commercial or professional settings such as shops or offices. The term is therefore problematic in both components: not only is *small gatherings* a misnomer, but the predicate is also a non-fit, since *cancellation* prototypically signifies the revocation of a planned or scheduled event, making it conceptually incongruent with policy measures that impose the closure of operating venues (such as shops and restaurants) or restrict in-person work in offices. Ironically, these two components cohere linguistically but are likely to fail communicatively: together they activate the prototypical social-event frame rather than the intended occupational domain. As corpus data show, this social-event pattern also recurs in documents issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Therefore, when language users encounter the phrase *small gatherings cancellation* without contextual information, they are likely to activate a cognitive frame associated with festive or social events rather than crowded workplaces or retail spaces. This potential misunderstanding follows from cognitive

linguistic principles, and the authors are urged to reconsider this terminology for greater clarity and terminological precision.

Corpus Evidence

Small gatherings cancellation, at least in ‘standard’ varieties of English, is not an effective linguistic trigger for evoking the intended conceptual domain (e.g., shop closures or mandatory home-working) in the minds of language users. While this view may appear intuitive to both native and non-native speakers of English, the argument here rests on empirical corpus evidence and theoretical analysis rather than intuition alone.

In the *British National Corpus* (BNC; 100 million words), all five occurrences of *small gathering* denote spontaneous or planned events (Davies 2004). Similarly, in the *TV Corpus* (325 million words), all 33 instances evoke the same domain, with the four most frequent content-word collocates being *having*, *host*, *friend*, *get-together*, and *party* (Davies 2019). To examine whether the usage of ‘small gatherings’ had shifted to denote the simultaneous presence of people in commercial or public settings in the six months preceding publication—possibly explaining the authors’ choice—a WebCorp search was conducted for occurrences over that period (WebCorp 2020). Among the 93 results, none referred to simultaneous occupancy in commercial or professional settings. The five most frequent content-word collocates included *birthday* (ranked first), *hosting*, *event*, *friend*, and *attend*—all reinforcing the ‘planned or spontaneous event’ construal.ⁱ

Analysis of the *Coronavirus Corpus* (over 757 million words) yielded parallel findings: *friend* was the most frequent content-word collocate of *small gathering*, followed by *family* (Davies 2020). This not only supports the claim that the phrase conventionally refers to social events but also suggests that its prototype is a family or friend get-together.ⁱⁱ Furthermore, the modifier *small* conventionally emphasizes the intimate, personal nature of the event, reinforcing the social frame rather than implying a numerical occupancy restriction in a public space. These consistent corpus data demonstrate that the phrase is an ineffective linguistic tool for communicating restrictions on commercial or professional settings.

Institutional Usage

A top-down analysis of reference material further substantiates this interpretation. On the WHO website, instances of *small gatherings* exclusively refer to planned or spontaneous events. In the Q&A section, ‘non-professional small gatherings and events’ are exemplified as ‘birthday parties,’ ‘children’s football games,’ and ‘family occasions.’ In both sample questions, *small gathering* appears as the object of *organize* and *attend*, both predicates associated with social events (WHO 2020).

Similarly, the CDC has issued two key documents addressing *gatherings* (the superordinate category encompassing *small gatherings*). Both define a *gathering* as a planned or spontaneous event, indoors or outdoors, with a small number of people participating, or a large number of people in attendance (CDC 2020a; CDC 2020b). The official definition of the superordinate category (‘gatherings’) is therefore explicitly event-focused, consistently reinforcing the linguistic distortion of the term when it is used to classify commercial and workplace restrictions. Notably, neither institutional nor general English usage employs *small gathering* to denote the kind of public or commercial crowd that Haug et al. had in mind.

Cognitive-Linguistic Analysis

The conventional denotation of *small gathering* thus diverges from the authors’ intended referent. A crucial factor in interpreting linguistic symbols is what Croft and Cruse (2004: 100) call *purport*, defined as the cognitive residue of prior experiences with the term in specific contexts. Although *purport* differs from meaning itself, it imposes *constraints* that grant certain construals a **default status**. The analysis demonstrated that ‘planned or spontaneous event’ occupies this default status

for *small gathering*, making alternative construals—such as crowds in commercial spaces—cognitively more demanding.

Crucially, the use of the predicate *cancellation* further reinforces the unintended social-event frame. *Cancellation* prototypically implies a prior plan (e.g., a reservation or a planned gathering), thereby confirming the social-event frame rather than indicating an imposed closure or mandate. This reinforces the interpretive constraint already imposed by the nominal *small gathering* on the interpreter’s construal.

One might argue that co-text or linguistic context (e.g., the examples provided in the original article) can override the constraints imposed by purport. While contextual information indeed influences construal, not all constraints carry the same weight. *Conventional constraints*—those grounded in the semantic potential of lexical items—are particularly robust and resistant to reinterpretation through novel contextualization (Croft and Cruse 2004: 102), and overriding them requires considerable cognitive effort, as the interpreter must construct a novel construal that is inconsistent with entrenched encyclopedic knowledge.

Moreover, in real communicative situations where the phrase appears outside its full academic context (e.g., in media reports or casual conversations), readers rely on stored knowledge—a constraint in its own right.[9] In such cases, the default interpretation of *small gathering* as a social event will tend to prevail and may lead to misunderstanding.

Meaning, as Fillmore (1985) argued, is both dynamic and constrained: each linguistic expression evokes a semantic frame shaped by prior usage. Frames can be modified through *recontextualization*, but such shifts do not immediately propagate through the linguistic community; early reinterpretations demand additional processing effort and are often haunted by older associations until the new meaning gains conventional status.

Terminological Recommendations

The main terminological mismatch arises from applying an event-based label to measures that are not events at all—namely, closures or occupancy limits in shops and restaurants, and mandates for remote working. Numerical caps on actual events (‘no gatherings of more than 50 people’), although grouped under the same category by Haug et al., already employ reasonably accurate and widely understood phrasing; the social-event frame is, in those cases, entirely appropriate. The communicative distortion is therefore concentrated in the commercial and occupational domain.

To remove this distortion while retaining a single, coherent label for the original category, I recommend the following primary term:

- Restrictions on Public-Facing and Occupational Activities

This phrase covers Haug et al.’s highly ranked measures. *Public-facing activities* encompasses retail, hospitality, and other customer-oriented venues, while also extending to non-household social events of limited size. This dual scope accommodates both occupancy caps in commercial settings and numerical caps on events without forcing shops or offices into a social-gathering frame. *Occupational activities* directly captures non-essential workplaces and mandates for remote working. *Restrictions* denotes compulsory policy measures in this context without implying the cancellation of a planned social occasion.

For contexts requiring a narrower focus, the following two alternatives can be used:

- Mandated Limits on Venue Occupancy and Operation

This term applies to restrictions imposed on workplaces, shops, and other operating venues. *Occupancy* denotes numerical caps on the number of persons present in a venue, while *Operation* covers limits on how the venue may function, including reduced hours, temporary closure, or the requirement to shift to remote work.

- Limits on Commercial and Professional Presence

This alternative offers brevity and specificity. *Limits* signals mandatory reductions in capacity or operation in this policy context. By specifying the scope as *Commercial and Professional*, the term

anchors the restriction to the intended venues (shops, restaurants, offices). *Presence* functions as an umbrella concept covering both total closure (zero presence) and numerical occupancy restrictions.

Adopting these terms would minimize frame misalignment and improve clarity in public-health discourse, as argued throughout this analysis.

Conclusion

The phrase *small gatherings cancellation* in Haug et al. (2020) constitutes a terminological misrepresentation. Corpus data, institutional usage, and cognitive-linguistic theory converge to show that the expression evokes a social-event frame incompatible with the authors' intended meaning—namely, restrictions on simultaneous presence in shops, restaurants, and offices.

While Haug et al.'s analytical grouping served their quantitative modelling objectives, the social-event label chosen for that grouping creates a potential communication problem in public health contexts. This linguistic ambiguity, by foregrounding the social-event frame rather than the intended public or occupational domains, may mislead both the public and policymakers regarding the nature of restrictions on commercial and workplace settings.

Adopting a more conceptually precise term would improve consistency across policy and academic communication and reduce interpretive ambiguity in future public-health messaging. More generally, the analysis illustrates how linguistic form can shape the public interpretation of health information, a point that merits greater attention in applied linguistics research and practice.

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ⁱ . While isolated reinterpretations may emerge in highly specific post-pandemic policy contexts, these are exceptional and post hoc. The overwhelming corpus pattern supports the established social-event prototype.

ⁱⁱ . A striking cross-linguistic illustration is provided by Persian-language media coverage of Haug et al. (2020), where the highest-ranked intervention was repeatedly rendered as «دورهمی‌های کوچک» (literally 'small get-

togethers’ or ‘small intimate gatherings’). This lexical choice closely reproduces the family-and-friends prototype activated by the English phrase ‘small gatherings cancellation’ in the absence of extended context, and illustrates how the English label—when encountered primarily via abstracts, tables, or headlines—readily invites a social-event construal even across languages (see, e.g. ISNA, 21 Nov 2020, www.isna.ir; Tebna, 1 Dec 2020, www.tebna.ir; and multiple other Persian-language outlets).