

**A call for Linguistic Awareness in the Age of Pandemic:
a Brief study of a Misleading Term in a Trending Covid19- Related Article in Nature
Human Behavior**

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Abstract

In an insightful article published in *Nature human behavior* on November 2020, the effectiveness of 46 “non-pharmaceutical interventions” (NPI) regarding Covid-19 pandemic have been compared¹. One of these 46 categories, the one which is ranked as the most effective measure, is named “small gatherings cancellation”. In the discussion section of that article, the authors introduce a list of what they probably assume to be representative examples of this category, namely, “closures of shops”, “closure of restaurants,” “mandatory home–working”, “gathering of 50 people or less” and so on. The name that the authors have given to this category could give rise to confusions and misunderstandings. We used corpus analysis to show that “small gathering” is commonly used to denote a planned or spontaneous “event”, and consequently does not convey what the authors intend this term to cover as its most representative instances i.e., Simultaneous presence of people (crowd) in shops or offices. Furthermore, taking a top-down approach, we focused on the information which was provided in reference material like CDC and WHO documents. The analysis showed that “small gatherings” is encoded in those sources to denote “events” and “small gatherings cancellation” is used to denote cancelling preplanned events. In conclusion, neither unspecialized language nor official/institutional discourse uses “small gathering” the way that the authors of the aforementioned article use it i.e., to refer to simultaneous presence of people (crowd) in shops or offices. Therefore, when language users come across this phrase, if they do not read the entire article, the only semantic frame that is evoked in their mind would be that of a festive or social “event” rather than of crowded shops or offices; this misunderstanding is cognitively justified and consequently changing this terminology is recommended.

Keywords: Small gatherings cancellation, Cognitive linguistics, Corpus analysis, Semantic frame.

In an insightful article published in *Nature human behavior* three months ago, the effectiveness of 46 “non-pharmaceutical interventions” (NPI) regarding Covid-19 pandemic have been compared¹. One of these 46 categories, the one which is ranked as the most effective measure, is named “small gatherings cancelation”. In the discussion section of that article, the authors clarify and even exemplify what they have in mind by this category. They introduce a list of what they probably assume to be representative examples of this category, namely, “closures of shops”, “closure of restaurants,” “mandatory home–working”, “gathering of 50 people or less” and so on. The name that the authors have given to this category could give rise to confusions and misunderstandings. “Gathering” and “small gathering” customarily convey a spontaneous or planned “event”, and “cancel” is a verbal predicate which mostly take a planned event, an order, a reservation or some kind of subscription as its *internal argument*. Corpus analysis also shows that “small gathering” is used to denote a planned or spontaneous “event”, and consequently does not convey what the authors intend this term to cover as its most representative instances i.e., Simultaneous presence of people (crowd) in shops or offices. Furthermore, this linguistic pattern is also seen in WHO and CDC documents and guidelines. Therefore, when language users come across this phrase, if they do not read the entire article, the only semantic frame that is evoked in their mind would be that of a festive or social “event” rather than of crowded shops or offices.

I argue that “small gatherings cancellation”, at least in common varieties of English language, is not the best possible trigger to activate the intended domain of knowledge (closure of shops, mandatory home-working and so on) in the minds of language users. I am not basing this claim just on some vague notion of “linguistic intuition”. This claim is supported by corpus data. All five occurrences of “small gathering” in BNC Corpus² (which consist of 100 million words), and all 33 occurrences of this phrase in the TV Corpus³ (which consists of 325 million words), evoke domain of spontaneous or planned “events”. The four most frequent content word collocates of this phrase in The TV Corpus are “having” (in the sense of *hosting*), “host”, “friend”, “get-together” and

“party”, all of which evoke an “event-ICM”. In order to find out whether the semantic components of this phrases has undergone any drastic change in the recent past, we used Webcorp (Webcorp.org.uk: a website which uses “web as corpus”) and submitted a search for occurrences of “small gathering” in web during last six months (The search was submitted on 3/12/2020). The analysis shows that none of the 93 Webcorp suggestions has been used to denote “simultaneous presence of people in shops, restaurants and offices”. Moreover, among the 10 most frequent (content word) collocates of this phrase in Webcorp search results, are “birthday” (ranked first), “hosting” (ranked third) as well as “event”, “friend” and “attend”, all of which support the claim that this particular phrase customarily gives access to the domain of a planned or spontaneous ‘events’. Finally examining the collocates of “small gathering” in Coronavirus Corpus⁴ (which consists of more than 757 million words), we found out that “friend” is the first most frequent content word collocate of this phrase, and the second most frequent collocate is “family”; a finding which not only is compatible with our claim that this linguistic form is conventionally used to refer to spontaneous or planned “events”, but suggests that the *prototype* of “small gathering” is “family/friend get-togethers”.

Taking a top-down approach, in contrast with the bottom-up corpus analysis that was presented, we focused on the information which was provided in reference material⁵. In the case at hand, WHO and CDC can be considered as “reference material”. Occurrences of “small gathering” in WHO website only refer to planned or spontaneous events: in Q&A section of WHO website “non-professional small gatherings and events” are exemplified as “birthday parties”, “children’s football games”, and “family occasions”. It is worth mentioning that in both sample questions that are addressed in that section, “small gathering” is used as the internal argument of “organize” and “attend”.⁶ Also, two documents concerning “gathering” (which is the superordinate category for small gathering) has been published by CDC which defines “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".^{7,8} In conclusion, neither unspecialized language nor official/institutional discourse uses "small gathering" the way that the authors use it i.e., to refer to simultaneous presence of people (crowd) in shops or offices.

The conventional denotation of "small gathering" in English is not compatible with what the authors mean by this symbol. One of the factors which are relevant to the interpretation of a linguistic symbol is what Croft & Cruse call *purport* which "is a function of previous experience of construed occurrences of the word in specific situation".⁹ We should bear in mind that, although purport should not be mistaken with the meaning itself, it constitutes a constraint on the way a linguistic form can be construed. This type of constraint gives certain construal of a linguistic form a "default status".⁹ In the case at hand we demonstrated that "planned or spontaneous event" has this special status for "small gathering", and consequently it would be cognitively harder to "impose a different construal" on this purport.

One may argue that "linguistic context" (e.g., exemplification of the concept of "small gathering" in the Article) is also a constraint and so, this constraint has the potentials to disarm what the purport may contribute to the meaning. While it is true that linguistic context is a constraint, it is also true that not all the constraints have the same strength. It is arguable that a *conventional constraint*, one which is imposed by semantic potential of words, is a strong constraint⁹, so strong that cancelling it through something that we can call "an unprecedented contextualization" would take extra cognitive effort. We also point toward a more practical problematic, namely, frequent situations in which people come across this "term" outside its immediate linguistic context (like when it is being reported in a short news story or even in a casual conversation); in these situations people lean on their past experiences of this phrase, i.e., their "stored knowledge" which itself is a constraint**Error! Bookmark not defined.**- and in these situations, in the absence of the original, immediate linguistic context, may substitute it completely. These past experiences would lead language-users to the conceptual domain of planned or

spontaneous “events”, and not to the domain of simultaneous presence of people in shops or offices.

It is true that meaning is not fixed or inherent to the linguistic symbol; but it is also true that meaning is not totally free. Each and every linguistic symbol is associated with a respective semantic *frame*¹⁰. We can modify these frames, but “frame modification” does not mean that the minute a person decides to modify a “meaning” it will evoke the intended meaning in the minds of the vast community of language users, and when it finally begins to evoke that, it would take more cognitive effort, and it would probably be haunted by what it used to denote, until it gets conventional.

We are not suggesting that a terminological noun phrase should be transparent; the truth is, most often it cannot be. But, in this case we are not talking about transparency or compositionality of a linguistic form, rather we are dealing with a noun phrase which is already established, in specialized as well as unspecialized language, and customarily gives access to a conceptual domain which is **different from what the authors are trying to convey by this term**. In a time of emergency, terminological coherence is vital and language awareness can save lives. In the light of the above considerations, I think reconsidering this terminological choice would be an inspiring discursive act. In doing so, not only terminological coherence will be maintained, the chance of a highly probable misunderstanding will be reduced.

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