

# Accountability for COVID-19 policies was blurred during televised briefings, UK study shows

August 25 2022

---



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Language used during government COVID-19 briefings was intentionally "vague, slippery and ambiguous" in order to reduce its

accountability for its own policies, a new study has found.

Research by Nottingham Trent University—which examined 92 of the televised COVID-19 briefings—found that members of the cabinet used "grammatical distancing" to reduce the amount of responsibility they took for their own [policy](#) decisions.

While much of the language was seen as a genuine attempt to cultivate national unity, several instances have been identified in which the government used "lexicogrammatical strategies" to share the responsibility for policy decisions with the public, the study shows.

Lead investigator Dr. Jamie Williams, an expert in linguistics at Nottingham Trent University, said: "Previous studies have shown that there are ethical, strategic and public health imperatives that require transparency in communications during public health emergencies.

"But on the basis of our analysis, some may argue that these imperatives were not fully met by the U.K. government."

Ambiguity in the briefings centered on the use of the word "we" by cabinet members, which the researchers say is left open to interpretation as to whether it refers to the government, a [political party](#) or the general public as a whole.

A key example was in a speech by Dominic Raab on 21 May 2020 in which "we" was initially used to describe the social distancing efforts of the public, before that context was switched the subject of government policies. He stated: "We must all renew our efforts. Over the course of this pandemic people all of across the U.K. have been making difficult but vital sacrifices for the greater good. So let's not go back to square one.

"We can all play our part in the national effort, getting R down and keeping R down, and controlling the virus so we can restore more of the things that make life worth living. As we follow our plan, our testing regime will be our guiding star. It is the information that helps us search out and defeat the virus.

"Over the past few months, we have built a critical national infrastructure for testing on a massive scale. We have already put in place the building blocks. We have developed the test, we've built the test centers, and the lab capacity. We've created home testing kits."

"The vagueness and slipperiness of 'we' are fundamental to its value to political speakers," says Dr. Williams, of the School of Arts and Humanities.

"When using 'we' politicians can be collapsing the distinction between the government and the people, which implicates the public in policy decisions.

"But the public do not make policy decisions in any way. These are made by the government only.

"Such deliberate and strategic uses of 'we' allows politicians to claim consensus over political actions and of potentially controversial policies."

The study has been published in the *Critical Discourses Studies* journal.

Co-investigator Dr. David Wright, an expert in forensic linguistics at Nottingham Trent University, said, "The claim here is not that the government is encoding themselves as having no responsibility, but that there is an attempt at linguistically encoding reduced responsibility.

"We argue that the [government](#) strategically invoked the inherent

ambiguity of 'we' over the course of briefings to render opaque precisely who is responsible for key, contextually pertinent processes and actions in fighting the virus.

"Moreover, we found that this also occurred in the expression of slogans, which turned the very pieces of language designed for clarity and precision into ambiguous messages."

**More information:** Jamie Williams et al, Ambiguity, responsibility and political action in the UK daily COVID-19 briefings, *Critical Discourse Studies* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/17405904.2022.2110132](https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2022.2110132)

Provided by Nottingham Trent University

Citation: Accountability for COVID-19 policies was blurred during televised briefings, UK study shows (2022, August 25) retrieved 23 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-08-accountability-covid-policies-blurred-televised.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.