Global crisis, local responses:

A multimodal discourse analysis of editorial cartoons in Ireland and Argentina during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Previous research on the multimodal composition of editorial cartoons

- **Covid-19 pandemic:** Multimodal metaphor and impoliteness (Abdel-Raheem, 2022)

- **Brexit** (Lennon and Kilby, 2021)

- **Global financial crisis** (Bounegru and Forceville, 2011)

- **Dictatorship and unstable political contexts** (Ariyo, 2019; Tehseem and Bokhari, 2015; Prendergast, 2019)

- **Further studies on representations of editorial cartoons on Covid-19:** fear and anxiety (Wasserman and Joubert, 2020) and blame and stigmatisation (Labbé, Pelletier et al, 2022), gratitude to health care workers (Raheem, 2023) and social activism for minority groups particularly impacted by the virus (Rutherford, 2020).

Research Questions

- **How is the Covid-19 pandemic represented in editorial cartoons in Irish and Argentine mainstream media over the 2020-2021 period?**

- **What "modes" can be identified in these representations?**

- **How are these "modes" constructed (e.g. representational, compositional, interactional metafunctions)?**

- **Was there a shift in representation of the Covid-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2021 in cartoons analysed?**

Theoretical Framework

- **Representation and editorial cartoons**

- **Semiology (Barthes)**

- **Social Semiotics: modes in their social, political and cultural context (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2020 and Archer & Stent, 2011)**

Representation and editorial cartoons

- **"Constructionist":** Different ways of organising, clustering and classifying concepts and establishing complex relations between them" (Hall 1997, p.3)

- Present a "compressed and condensed" commentary on the social and political state of affairs (Medhurst and DeSouza 1981, p.220)

- Require "the unpacking of one or more layers of available cultural consciousness" (Medhurst and DeSouza 1981, p.219)

Semiology (Barthes)

- Barthes (1968) expanded on de Saussure's (1916) linguistic model of signs/signifiers/signifieds to include non-linguistic elements like images (p.9)

- Barthes views signs as products of "at the same time a social institution and a system of values" (1968, p. 14) unlike de Saussure who viewed the relationship between signs as arbitrary (1916, p. 69)

- *Elements of Semiology* (1968) explores how images are constructed and what they are intended to represent

- Barthes focuses on the "visual lexis," rather than "visual syntax," and as such his theory can be combined with *Social Semiotics* (Van Leeuwen 2001, p.92)

"Colour as a social act" (Archer & Stent, 2011)

- Colour operates at different levels: **"ideational"** (evokes certain thoughts and feelings) and **"interpersonal"** (associations with different colours are assigned through social interactions) (p.117)

- Colour comes to the forefront as a mode "when social and political conditions….are in crisis and at a point of urgency" (p.124)

- In these times of crisis "communal identity and political affiliation needed to be established fast and messages needed to be conveyed with as much clarity as possible" (p.124).
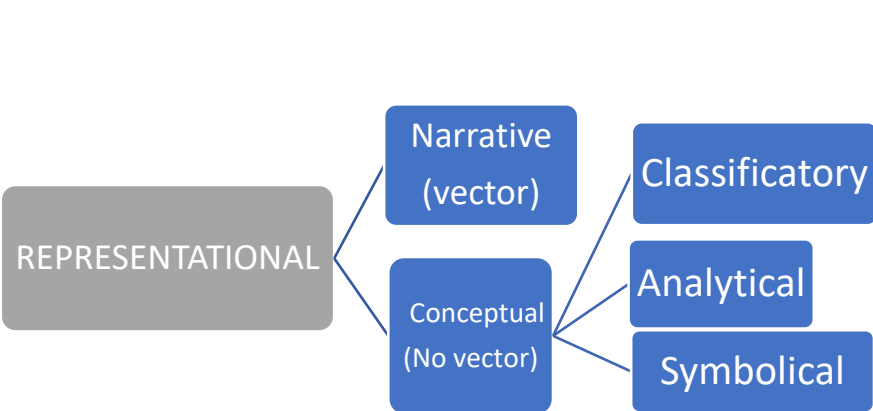
Methodology:
Social Semiotic Multimodal Discourse Analysis:
Three Metafunctions (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020)

- **Representational metafunction:** can either be narrative, which tell a visual story by means of vectors (connecting symbols), or conceptual which "represent participants in terms of their class, structure or meaning…. their generalised and more or less stable and timeless essence" (p.56)

- **Compositional metafunction:** communicated through three interrelated systems: information value, salience and framing (p.183)

- **Interactive metafunction:** social distance (intimate, personal or impersonal) and attitude (subjectivity, objectivity, involvement, detachment, viewer power, equality, representation power etc)

SOCIAL SEMIOTICS:
Three Metafunctions of Images (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996, p.56, p.154, p.183)

REPRESENTATIONAL
- Narrative (vector)
- Conceptual (No vector)
  - Classificatory
  - Analytical
  - Symbolical

COMPOSITIONAL
- Information Value
- Salience
- Framing

INTERACTIONAL
- Contact
  - Demand
  - Offer
- Social Distance
  - Intimate/Personal
  - Social
  - Impersonal
- Attitude
  - Subjectivity
    - Involvement
    - Detachment
    - Viewer
    - Equality
    - Representational Power
  - Objectivity
    - Action Orientation
    - Knowledge Orientation

Material for Analysis

- **Editorial cartoons from two newspapers:** *La Nación* (Argentina) and *The Irish Times* (Ireland), both with a strong history of editorial cartoons

- **Diachronic study:** Two periods chosen for analysis for both countries
  - 1 period of lockdown in 2020
  - 1 period of lockdown in 2021

- **Ireland:** March 27 – April 12, 2020 and December 22, 2021 to January 31, 2022

- **Argentina**: March 19 - May 10, 2020 and March 22 to May 31, 2021

La Nación

- One of Argentina's oldest and most established publications (founded in 1870)

- Circulation in 2020-2021: 348,000 subscriptions and second most visited news website in Argentina (Comscore)

- Historically conservative: sustained pro-dictatorship discourses (1976-1983)

- Right-wing discourses on Covid-19 pandemic: framing of the pandemic as impeding free movement of people rather than a threat to life on a mass scale (Balsas, Messina and Smeriglio, 2021).

Editorial Cartoons: Lockdown 2020

Fernández goes from trial to error
(April 2, 2020)

Representational Metafunction

Multimodal: text and image

Structure: conceptual

- Alberto Fernández, Argentina's left-wing president and a piggy bank/money box representing the nation's economy

- Fernandez is shown to be dressed in medical clothes, or PPE, like a doctor trying to find a solution to the economic issues raised by the pandemic

- Small money box signifies that the economy is already in a bad state as a result of high inflation

- Article on the same page about corruption in his government

Interactional Metafunction

Contact: demand; Fernández and pig look directly at viewer (vulnerability?)

Social distance: medium shot

Attitude: subjective

Compositional Metafunction

Information value: The hand holding the piggy bank in the **right** of the image draws our attention to the right side of the image

Salience: The green of Fernández' PPE and the blue of his mask draw our attention. However, the pink pig reflects the critical state of the economy

Framing:
Hand connects Fernández to piggy bank

Lines on Fernández' clothes, face and hair

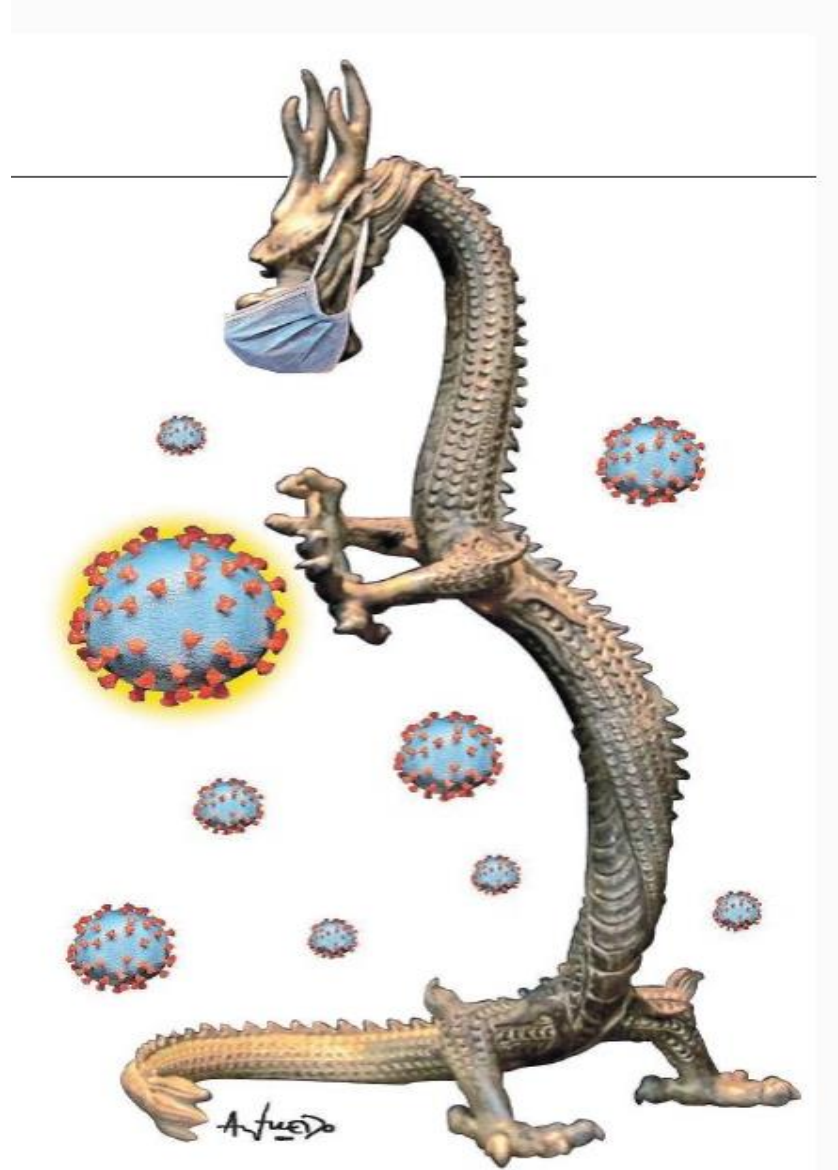# The role of China in the outbreak of Covid-19
(April 22, 2020)

Representational Metafunction

- **Multimodal:** text and image

- **Structure:** conceptual

- China, represented by the dragon, is shown to be generating the Coronavirus

Interactional Metafunction

- **Contact:** offer**; "**the viewer's role is that of invisible onlooker" (p.119); the gaze of the dragon, representing China, is focused on the Coronavirus

- **Social distance**: medium shot

- **Attitude:** subjective

Compositional Metafunction

Information value: Our attention is drawn to the **left side** of the image by the bright colours of the corona virus and the talons of the dragon that appear to be generating it

Salience: Red and yellow of the coronavirus; dark talons

Framing: the talons of the dragon connect the image; the vertical lines of the dragon and the round circle of the coronavirus

Hospitals or cemeteries for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs)
May 5, 2020

Representational Metafunction

- **Multimodal:** text and image

- **Structure:** conceptual

- SMEs called the "beating heart" of Argentina's economy being killed by the government's anti-business policies

Interactional Metafunction

- **Contact:** offer**;** figure representing SMEs looking at ground and not the viewer; defeat?

- **Social distance**: medium shot

- **Attitude:** subjective

Compositional Metafunction

Information value: Our attention is drawn to the **top** of the image by the blackness of the scissors and to the yellow sun in the Argentine flag

Salience: Placement of the scissors on top and in the back of the figure

Framing: sharp lines of the scissors and arms; also sharp lines in flag and bare feet

Editorial Cartoons: Lockdown 2021

The knocking down does not negotiate, it advances

Representational Metafunction

- **Multimodal:** text and image

- **Structure:** conceptual

- government represented as crushing its people through self-interested management of the pandemic

Interactional Metafunction

- **Contact:** offer; figure representing government is headless; figures representing Argentine people have their backs to the viewer; disengagement; Orwellian

- **Social distance**: medium shot
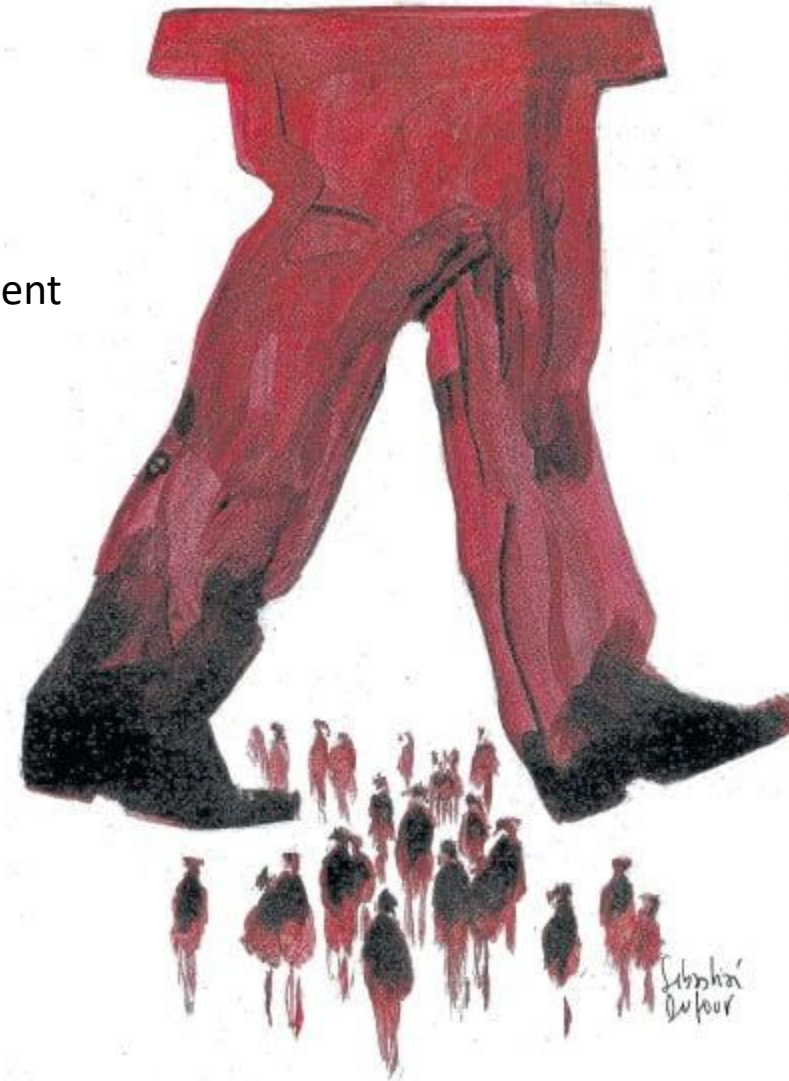
- **Attitude:** subjective

Compositional Metafunction

Information value: Our attention is drawn to the **top** of the image by the red and also to the **bottom,** by the black shoes. Figure representing government on top dominating the image while the people are smaller and at the bottom of the frame; people are blurred

Salience: Red (blood), and black (crisis)

Framing: sharp lines of the shoes; this draws a division between figure of government and people

Hostages to ineptitude and cunning
(April 31, 2021)

Representational Metafunction

- **Multimodal:** text and image

- **Structure:** conceptual

- paperclip represents government that has blocked the Argentine people's access to the life saving Covid vaccinations; syringe in colour of Argentine flag (light blue and white)

Interactional Metafunction

- **Contact:** none

- **Social distance**: medium shot
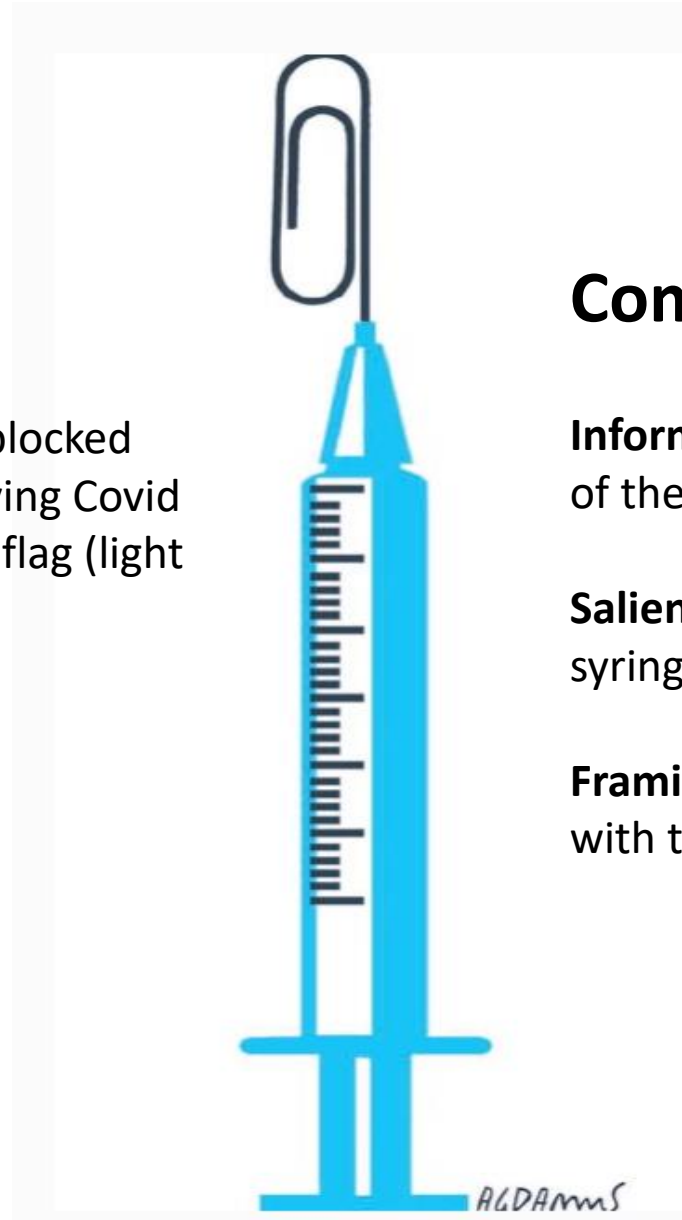
- **Attitude:** subjective

Compositional Metafunction

Information value: Our attention is drawn to the **top** of the image, where the black paper clip is placed

Salience: Black (paperclip), and blue and white syringe (Argentine flag)

**Framing:** the curved shape of the paperclip, at odds with the lines of the syringe

Representational Metafunction

Do they live on another planet?
(Abril 1, 2021)

- **Multimodal:** text and image

- **Structure:** conceptual

- members of government shown to be distanced from each other and alienated from the Argentine people

Interactional Metafunction

- **Contact:** offer; not making contact with each other or with the viewer; self-interestedness and disengagement

- **Social distance:** distant shot

- **Attitude:** subjective
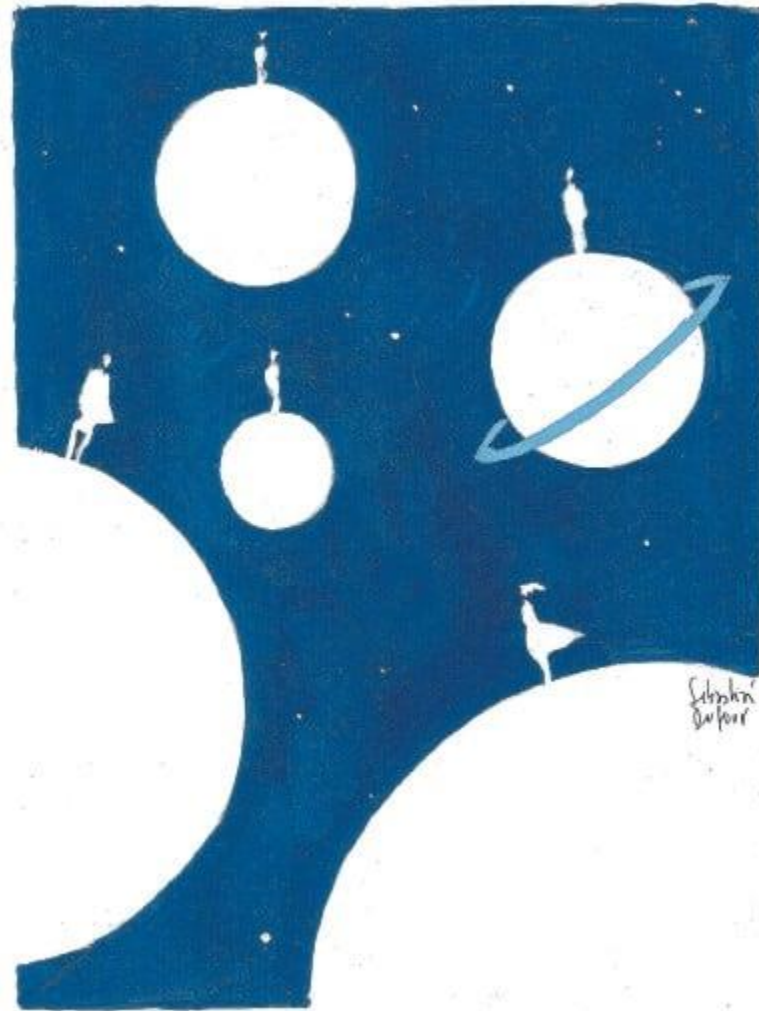
Compositional Metafunction

Information value: Our attention is drawn to the blue ring around the planet on the **right**

Salience: differences in size of planets; differences in size of the figures on them

Framing: Disconnected planets and people joined only by the blue sky

The Irish Times

- Launched in 1859

- Circulation: January to December 2019 (54,147) (ilevel.ie)

- Political orientation: Centre-left (Eurotopics)

- Previous research exploring its coverage of the pandemic has focused on article content e.g. representations of science (O'Connor, O'Connell, Burke et al, 2021) and cocooning (Gallagher, 2022)

Editorial Cartoons: Lockdown 2020

Representational Metafunction

- **Multimodal:** text (heavy) and image; commentary

- **Structure:** conceptual

- Tory government and officials breaking social distancing rules; Dominic Cummings (dark glasses, sinister) (Boris Johnson (red nose, clown); Matt Hancock (incompetent), 10 is in the form of coronavirus (they are spreading it)

Interactional Metafunction

- **Contact:** offer; hiding eyes from viewers (deceitfulness) and Matt Hancock (crossed eyes, confused)

- **Social distance**: medium with background used for commentary

- **Attitude:** subjective

March 28, 2020

Compositional Metafunction

Information value: Our attention is drawn to **centre and right** of the cartoon (yellow) and red (commentary)

Salience: closeness of three figures when they should be distancing; strategic placement of speech bubbles and commentary in foreground and background

Framing: Circular speech bubbles contrast with the square shape of the "Keep Your Distance" sign

Representational Metafunction

April 7, 2020
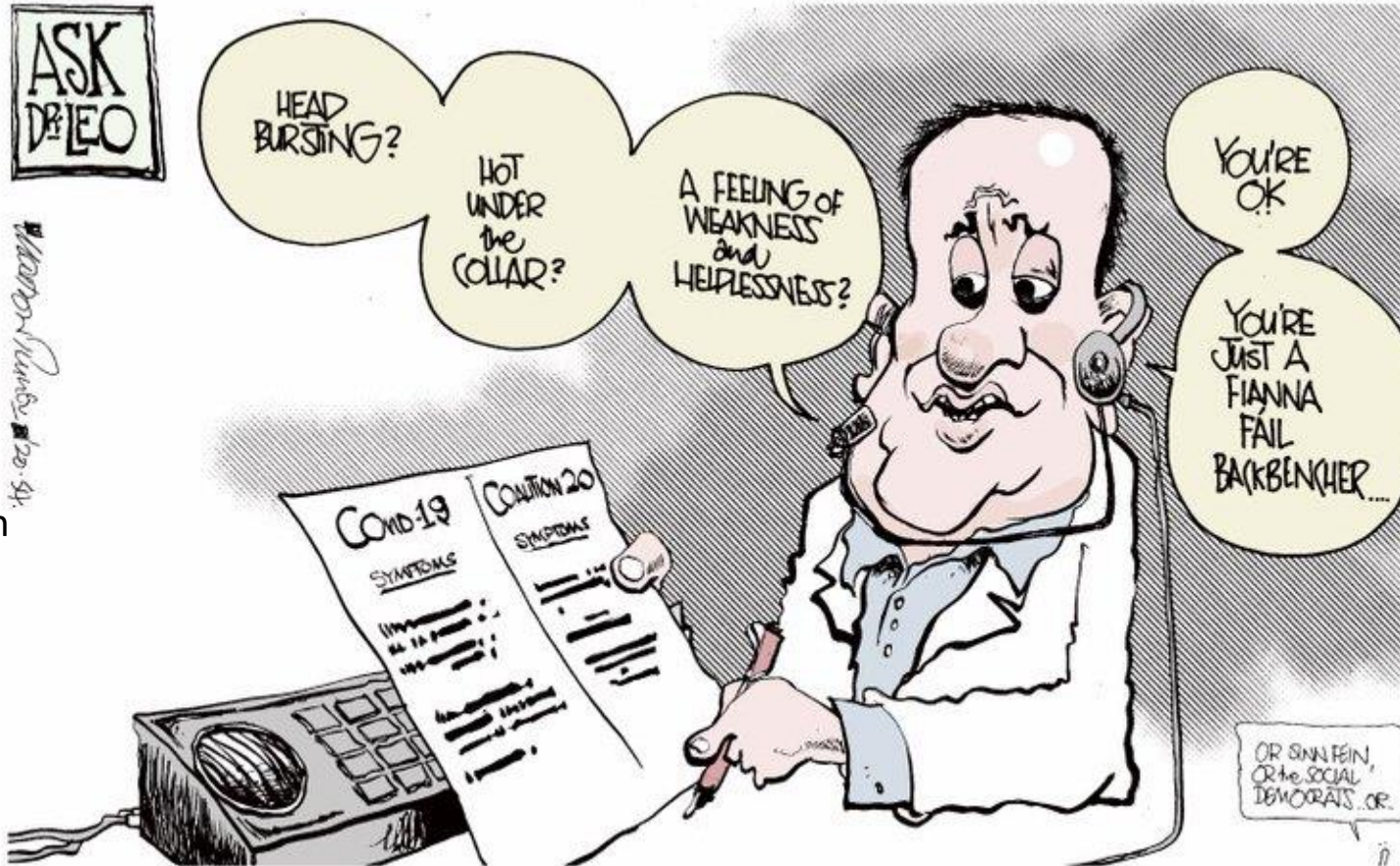
- **Multimodal:** text (heavy) and image; commentary

- **Structure:** conceptual

- Taoiseach Leo Varadkar working as a doctor during the pandemic; tensions between FG and FF in coalition referenced; comparison of symptoms of Covid to coalition partners

Interactional Metafunction

- **Contact:** offer; LV is focused on the page listing symptoms

- **Social distance**: medium with background used for commentary

- **Attitude:** subjective

Compositional Metafunction

Information value: Our attention is drawn to **centre and right** of the cartoon (page) and speech bubbles (commentary)

Salience: LV, page and telephone in foreground, commentary in background to the side

Framing: Page with Covid 19 symptoms mirrors page with Coalition 20 symptoms

Representational Metafunction

- **Multimodal:** text (heavy) and image; commentary

- **Structure:** conceptual

- interaction between public and gardaí; selfish attitude of public breaking social distancing rules

Interactional Metafunction

- **Contact:** offer; people in car looking at garda, not at viewer. We only see garda's hand (power to stop those breaking rules?)

- **Social distance**: medium, background used for commentary

- **Attitude:** subjective
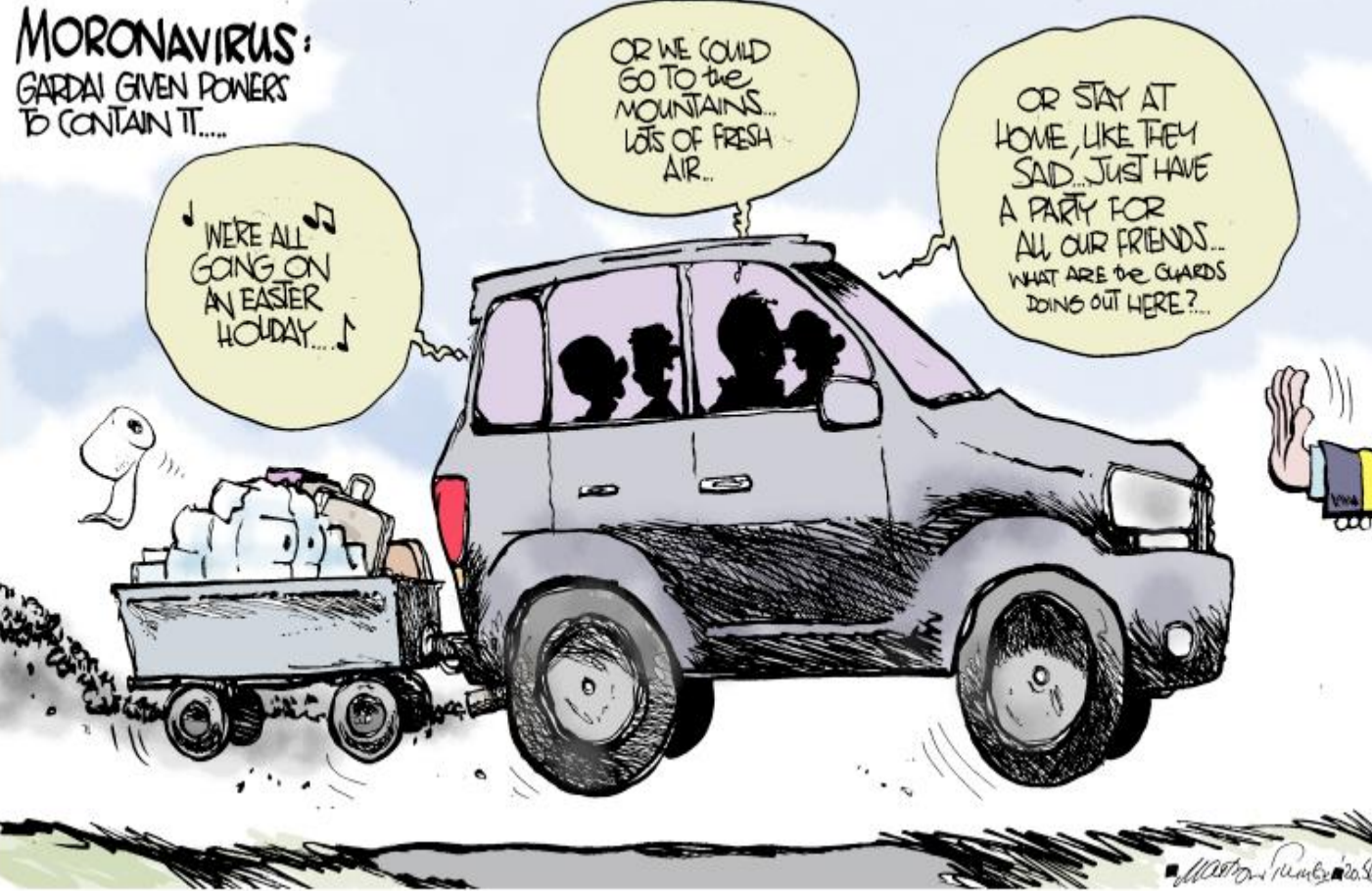
April 9, 2020

Compositional Metafunction

Information value: Full panel; black commentary on left; car and speech bubbles in the middle and garda's hand on right

Salience: Car with travellers in black (wrongdoing?), blue and yellow sleeve of garda uniform; large size of hand (power?); Moronavirus comment in bold text

Framing: sharp lines of garda hand stopping the vehicle; car in mid air (stopping suddenly?)

Editorial Cartoons: Lockdown 2021

Representational Metafunction

- **Multimodal:** text (heavy) and image; commentary

- **Structure:** conceptual

- (rich) western countries in receipt of most Covid vaccines (difference in clothes); reference to time of year (Christmas cracker, snow) which should be a time of giving/sharing

Interactional Metafunction

- **Contact:** offer; figure of west looking at vaccine smiling; figure of global south looking downcast; neither looking at viewer

- **Social distance:** medium, background used for commentary

- **Attitude:** subjective

December 24, 2021

THE CURRENT SITUATION DISPLAYED IN SEASONAL STYLE......
VACCINE
THE WEST
THE REST

Compositional Metafunction

Information value: Attention drawn to **centre** and white bubble (sound made by cracker) where we see the syringe

Salience: Figure of west holding cracker dominates the image

Framing: disconnection between west and rest shown by break in the cracker

December 22, 2021

Representational Metafunction

- **Multimodal:** text (heavy) and image; commentary

- **Structure:** conceptual

- commentary on lack of Covid bonus for non frontline workers

Interactional Metafunction

- **Contact:** offer; employer and employee seem to look at each other surprised

- **Social distance:** medium, background and foreground used for commentary

- **Attitude:** subjective

Compositional Metafunction

Information value: Attention is drawn to the green page in **centre** and its message and the yellow bubble at the **top** that reinforces the message

Salience: Employee and employee are joined by green page

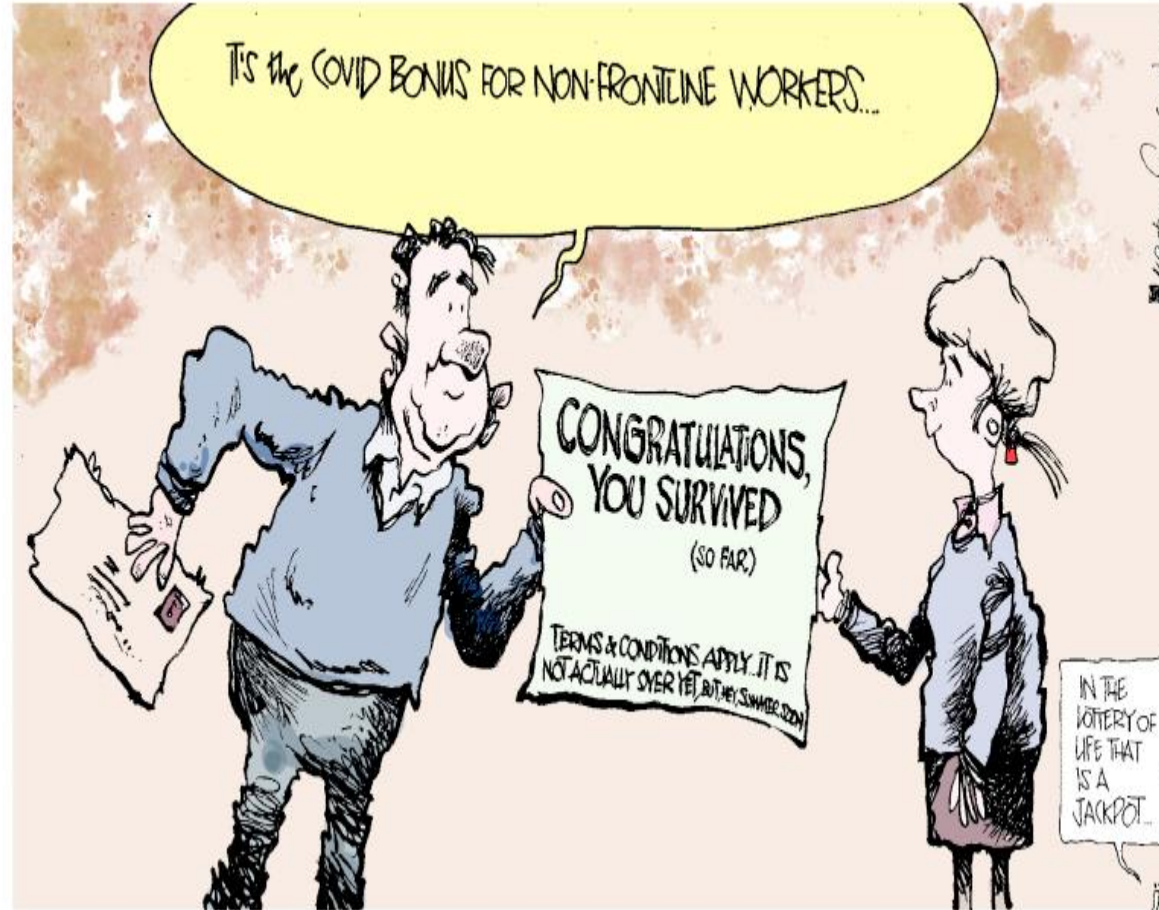**Framing:** sharp lines of green page and large font highlighting message

Representational Metafunction

- **Multimodal:** text (heavy) and image; commentary

- **Structure:** conceptual

- As pandemic lockdowns end in Europe a new threat emerges – Russia

Interactional Metafunction

- **Contact: offer;** figure of Europe looking away from Europe (fear); **demand;** Putin looking at viewer (defiance?); no contact between them

- **Social distance**: Europe in foreground and to the side (hiding); Putin central

- **Attitude:** subjective

January 25, 2022
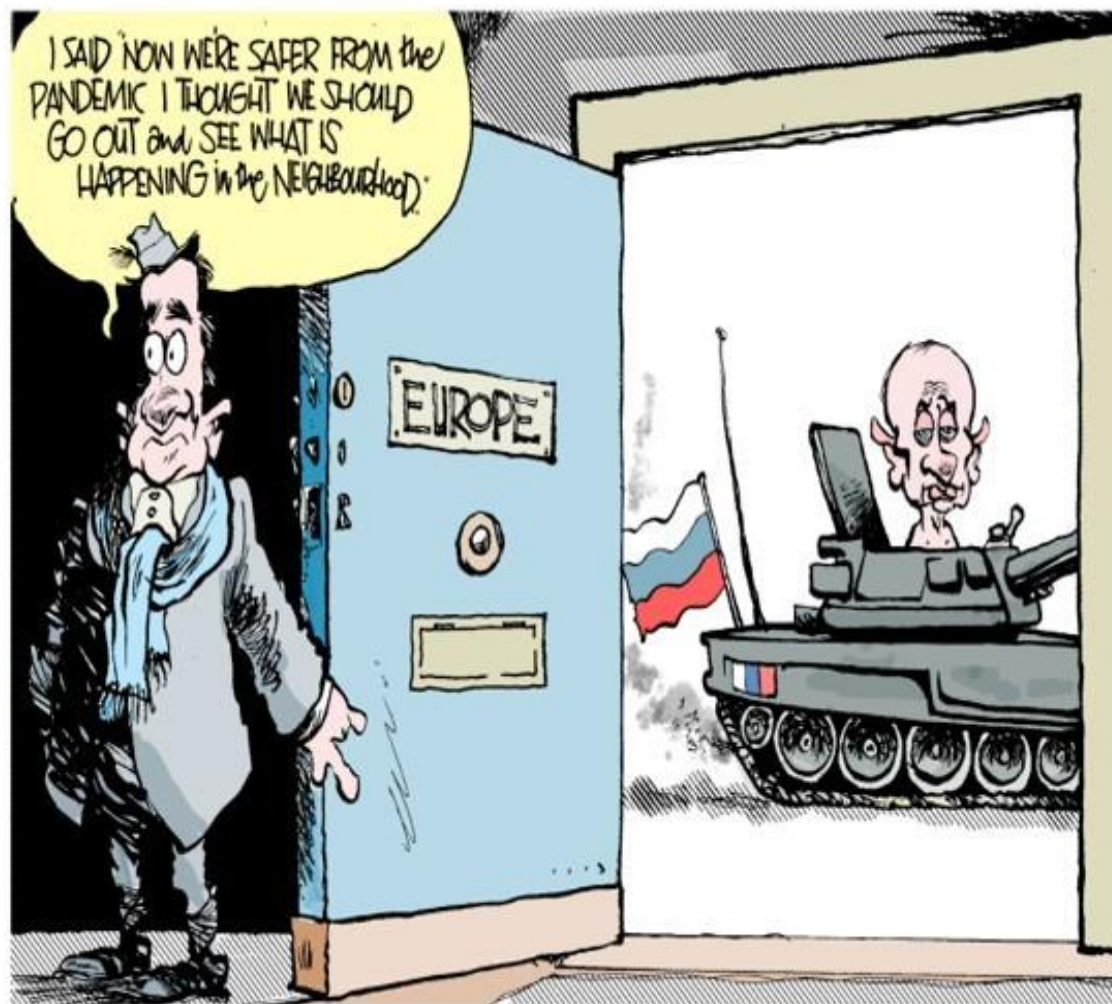
Compositional Metafunction

Information value: Attention drawn to **centre** (Putin in a tank) Dark tank contrasts with white background

Salience: Putin to the forefront (dominating)

Framing: lines of door create a disconnect between Europe and Russia (figure of Putin)

Conclusion

- **Form of editorial cartoons** Multimodal; image and text in both outlets though used differently; more text is embedded in cartoons in the Irish cartoons

- **Colour:** a key tool used in both contexts; colours of flag used repeatedly in the Argentine context – nationalist discourse is a feature of right-ring newspapers in times of crisis (Prendergast, 2021)

- **Representation:** All conceptual (not narrative) providing complex visual depictions of the pandemic; representations more outward looking in the Irish context and Argentine cartoons focussed largely on internal politics and criticisms of government; Irish cartoons also critical of general public

- **Interaction:** Mixed (demand and offer) but mostly offer (no direct eye contact/engagement with viewer)

- **Composition:** Information value, salience and framing a feature of all cartoons: Vertical lines and round curves used to connect and distance key social actors from each other. Text and image mostly reflect and reinforce each other, except in Irish case where extra commentary is added.

- Shifts in focus (Ireland) and tone (Argentina) noted across the different periods studied in both contexts though mostly in the Argentine cartoons

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