

Accounts as acts of identity

Justifying business closures on COVID-19 public signs in Athens and London

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This paper investigates accounts justifying the closures of businesses found on public signs in Athens and London during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data for the study was drawn from a corpus of COVID-19-related public signage collected in the two cities during the first lockdown. The accounts used on these signs are analysed as acts of identity and, specifically, as discursive means deployed by the authors of the signs to project themselves and their businesses favourably. It is shown that the accounts used at the micro-level of discourse align to various degrees with the dominant discourses surrounding the pandemic at the macro-level and with the values these discourses draw upon. It is also shown that the accounts are used to reframe the public's understanding of the closures and to construct identities congruent with the interests of the business owners, ensuring post-pandemic continuity.

Keywords: identity, accounts, COVID-19, public signs, dominant discourses, Greece, UK

1. Introduction

On the 11th of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a global pandemic. As the virus spread across the world, the countries concerned implemented measures to contain it, including the closures of non-essential businesses. The present study investigates the reactions of the business owners to the closures during this first lockdown by examining the messages appearing on the doors of closed businesses in Athens and London.

In Greece non-essential businesses closed on the 18th of March 2020. In the UK, lockdown regulations came into force on the 26th. Meanwhile, government

and health officials in both countries released numerous statements emphasising the dangerous nature of the virus, as well as the importance of observing the measures for health and safety reasons. The Greek government, in particular, constantly encouraged people to stay indoors through a wide-scale media campaign known as *MENOYME ΣΙΙΤΙ* ('we stay at home').

In both countries, business owners had to close their businesses and incur enormous financial losses, without knowing when they would be able to reopen and whether their clientele would return. Although the closures were legal measures enforced by the respective governments and were communicated to the public, many businesses placed signs on their door announcing their closures. Signs announcing closures that were publicly ordered by the government may seem superfluous – and it is true that several businesses did not display any. However, many businesses did, and this already indicates that these signs communicated more than merely the closure.

Public signs have been so far examined in research on Linguistic Landscapes (LL). This research has focused mainly on the identification of the different languages employed on those signs in multicultural communities and has addressed them as “multimodal objects rather than as linguistic ones” (Blommaert 2013, 41). Relatively few studies have analysed the actual messages public signs communicate and/or the linguistic means employed to communicate them (Ferenčik 2018; Ogiermann and Bella 2021; Svennevig 2021; Wierzbicka 1998).

In Ogiermann and Bella (2021) we examined the COVID-19 closure signs produced during the first lockdown in Athens and London as a form of relational work and focused on the expressive speech acts (greetings, thanks, apologies and wishes) found on these signs. In this paper, we focus on the discursive move that was most frequent in the data, i.e., the accounts provided to justify the closures. The high frequency of accounts is particularly interesting, since the reasons behind the closure were common knowledge. Moreover, unlike other discursive moves, such as apologies and thanks (see Ogiermann and Bella 2021), accounts exhibited a remarkable uniformity in the two datasets, with both Greek and English business owners employing similar accounts to explain the closures and formulating them in similar ways.

In what follows we address this uniformity along with the reasons that prompted the authors of the signs to explain the closures. Specifically, it is maintained that the accounts construct a positive self-image or a desirable identity for the business owners who authored these signs.

The signs examined in this study constitute a unique documentation of a historical event, illustrating how “particular positions of alignment and disalignment to discourses in circulation about key events come to be created and shared in the context of specific critical incidents” (Seargeant and Giaxoglou 2020, 310).

We maintain that the identities constructed through the accounts are, to a large extent, a product of the interaction of individual positionings at the micro-level with powerful discourses surrounding the pandemic at the macro-level (cf. Archakis 2020; Archakis and Tsakona 2012).

The paper is structured as follows: The next section introduces the framework of the study, clarifying the understanding of identity it draws on (2.1). We then contextualise our data by presenting and analysing the dominant discourses of the pandemic at the macro-level (2.2). The section closes with a review of research on accounts which constitute the tools via which the identities are constructed at the micro-level (2.3). Section 3 presents the method of the study, while the data is analysed and discussed in Sections 4 and 5 respectively. Section 5 also presents the study's conclusions.

2. Framework of the study

2.1 Identity

The perspective on identity assumed here is a non-essentialist, social constructionist one, according to which, identities are not considered static and a priori given, but are thought of as “representations mediated by semiotic systems such as language” (Benwell and Stokoe 2006, 31).¹

This understanding of identity presupposes a view of discourse as a tool for the construction of multiple and mutable identities (see Archakis and Tsakona 2012, 20). Identity is seen as the “social positioning of the self” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 585–6) through discourse, i.e., as emergent through the speakers' linguistic choices in specific interactional practices that have specific contexts including the situation and the actual or imaginary addressees (see, e.g., Bucholtz and Hall 2005; De Fina et al. 2006, 2). Therefore, it is not only reflecting but also producing the social world (Hall and Bucholtz 2013, 125).

In line with Bucholtz and Hall's *positionality principle* (2005), identity construction is seen as “linked to the ephemeral subject positions that individuals occupy in the flow of interaction” (Archakis and Tsakona 2012, 32). Since in every interactional move, speakers position themselves as particular kinds of people (see Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 147; Day and Kjaerbeck 2013, 18) identities are viewed as “points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” (Hall 2000, 19). These subject positions, in turn,

1. See Archakis and Tsakona (2012) and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Georgakopoulou (2021) for thorough reviews of the essentialism vs. the social constructionism approach to identity.

incorporate stancetaking (see Du Bois 2007, 143), i.e., the display of “evaluative, affective and epistemic orientations in discourse” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 595). Against this backdrop, the present study treats positioning and identity construction as synonymous.

We focus on one specific type of positioning attested in the data, i.e., the construction of causality through the use of accounts. Starting from the premise that the accounts under study do not serve the function of actually informing the public about the reasons behind the closures, we suggest that the sign authors exploit accounts as relational tools to boost their own image and to construct for themselves an identity that would prompt the audience to evaluate them positively as individuals and, by association, their businesses as worth supporting.

An important point in relation to the data examined here is that identities, albeit emergent in local interactional practices, are not unaffected by pre-existing resources, but are always “produced through contextually situated and ideologically informed configurations of the self and other” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 605). That is, ideologies and values carried by dominating structures can be imposed in a top-down manner, and affect the discursive construction of individual identities (see, e.g., Archakis 2020; Archakis and Tsakona 2012, 2016; Castells 2010; Gee 1990; van Dijk 2008). Therefore, identity construction always involves speakers’ positionings of alignment or disalignment with dominant discourses at the macro-level (see, e.g. Archakis 2020, 2–3; Gee 1990, 161–162; van Dijk 2008, 85–89).

In this vein, Castells (2010, 8) makes a distinction between *legitimising* and *resistance* identities. The former are promoted as legitimate by the dominant institutions of society (and, consequently, by the dominant discourses), while the latter are built on principles that differ from, or are opposed to, those of the dominant institutions, and resist their discourses.

As will be shown, the positionings taken by the authors of the signs through their accounts resulted exclusively in the construction of legitimising identities. However, it will also be shown that preferences for different types of accounts lead to the construction of different legitimising identities and that alignment with specific discourses can be a matter of degree.

2.2 Dominant discourses of the COVID-19 pandemic

Dominant discourses are usually connected with power institutions and “can lead to the acquisition of social goods (money, power, status) in a society” (Gee 1990, 162). Therefore, they empower those who sanction them, warranting their access to those goods.

The dominant discourses surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic emanated from the WHO, its national counterparts and, most importantly, the two countries' governments. A close look at the governmental discourses in Greece and the UK, where the signs were produced, reveals stunning similarities regarding the justifications provided for the measures taken.²

This should not come as a surprise, given the global character of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a process driven largely by technological advances and entailing "the intensified flows of capital, goods, images and discourses around the globe" (Blommaert 2010, 13), globalisation "affects language use" (Sifianou and Tzanne 2018, 164). The question as to whether globalisation in terms of language use should be seen as a homogenizing process leading to uniformity or as "a synergetic relationship between the global and the local" (ibid.) remains controversial (see, e.g., Coupland 2010). However, the similarities in Greece's and the UK's dominant discourses point towards uniformity.

'Under the advice' of the health authorities, especially the WHO, both the Greek and the English Prime Ministers and health officials tended to present the pandemic as 'the enemy' that had to be defeated through a common national effort where citizens had to 'do their part'. Moreover, there was a relentless emphasis on the importance of adherence to the newly established laws concerning the pandemic, as well as on the responsibility for protecting others.

Admittedly, certain linguistic choices were country-specific. During daily updates on COVID cases in Greece, health officials kept emphasising the need for *ατομική ευθύνη* ('individual responsibility') and for compliance with the legislation. Additionally, the slogan *μένουμε σπίτι* ('we stay at home') was systematically circulated through the media. In the UK, on the other hand, particular emphasis was placed on the need to protect the National Health System (NHS) and prevent its collapse, as well as the need to work in unison against the spread of the virus. Overall, however, the accounts that emerged on the closure signs in the two countries were strongly influenced by the globalised discourses emanating from power institutions (health authorities and governments).

2. See, e.g., the statements and appeals to the public made by the PMs and Ministers of Health of the two countries:

<https://eody.gov.gr/ta-proliptika-metra-gia-ton-periorismo-tis-diadosis-toy-koronoioy-einai-metra-atomikis-kai-syllogikis-eythynis/>

<https://eody.gov.gr/dilosi-ypoyrgoy-ygeias-vasili-kikilia-stin-enimerosi-ton-diapisteymenon-syntakton-gia-ton-neo-koronoio/>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-sets-out-plans-to-enforce-closure-of-businesses-and-other-venues--2>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-address-to-the-nation-on-coronavirus-23-march-2020>

One point that we seek to make here is that dominant discourses are not endorsed simply because they emanate from institutions of power. Since any discourse is inherently “ideological” in that it always puts forward a certain set of values at the expense of others (Gee 1990, 161–162), we maintain that the acceptability of any ideology depends on the acceptability of the values it carries and how these values become relevant in specific historical contexts. Although dominant discourses are always assumed to carry values, the issue of which values, when and why, is hardly ever addressed. Yet, we believe that for power formations to persuade individuals of the “essential ‘truth’ and ‘naturalness’” of their power (Benwell and Stokoe 2006, 30), it is necessary to convince the public of the truth and naturalness³ of the values promoted through the messages they communicate.

It is suggested here that what has rendered the governments’ discourse credible and appealing, thus prompting the sign authors to endorse it, is that it drew on values that people, regardless of cultural background, tend to consider important. Such values have been studied in social psychology research, especially by Schwarz (1992) and Schwarz and Bardi (2001) who have established ten value-constructs prevailing as life-guiding principles.⁴ Two of these seem particularly relevant to the present study: *conformity* defined as “restraint of actions [...] likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations” and *benevolence*, i.e., “preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact” (ibid.). These are the values that were promoted by the dominant discourses surrounding the pandemic: prompting the citizens to be law-abiding relates to conformity, while inciting them to consider the wellbeing of others relates to benevolence. Our analysis will show that conformity and benevolence are systematically reflected in the accounts that emerged on the closure signs. However, it will also show that individual freedom corresponding to the value-construct *self-determination*, defined as “independent thought and action-choosing” (Schwarz and Bardi 2001, 270), is also reflected in the formulations of the accounts, affecting the construction of the authors’ identities.

3. According to Fairclough (2013, 89), “a dominant discourse is subject to a process of naturalization in which it appears to lose connection with particular ideologies and interests and becomes [...] common sense. Thus, [...] it ceases to be an ideology [...] for ideology is truly effective only when it is disguised”.

4. Their universal framework of value constructs was validated empirically in more than sixty-three different cultural groups.

2.3 Accounts and desirable identities

As already mentioned, accounts are investigated here as elements of the micro-level through which the authors of the signs position themselves towards the discourses of the macro-level. Linguistic work on accounts has been influenced by research in the philosophy of language which has treated them as devices aimed to repair offensive behaviour (see, e.g., Austin 1970; Benoit 1995), mitigate the illocutionary force of speech acts and protect the interactants' face (Brown and Levinson 1987). However, it is research on accounts conducted in social psychology that we consider more useful for our study.

Sociological research on accounts has developed in parallel and often overlapped with symbolic interactionism, especially Goffman's (1959) insights on the way people present themselves to others in a self-protective fashion. Scott and Lyman (1968) were the first to advance the interest in accounts, defining them as verbal statements made by social actors to explain unanticipated or deviant behaviours, and "bridge the gap between actions and expectations" (Scott and Lyman 1968, 4). In the social-psychological paradigm, accounts are treated as means employed to maintain a positive relationship between interactants (Schlenker 1980; Schlenker, Pontari and Christopher 2001; Shaw, Wild and Colquitt 2003) and protect the account giver's image (Cody and Dunn 2007; Schlenker et al. 2001). If we accept Solstad and Bott's (2017, 620) definition of causality as "a two-place relation, relating a causing entity and a caused effect", the accounts employed in our data appear to be redundant. As already mentioned, both the causing event (the governments' decision to close the businesses) and its effect (the closure) were *a priori* known to the readers through the social context. We have to conclude then that these accounts are not part of "an objective, fact finding procedure" (Meyer 2000, 18), but form a social interaction process which aims to expose to the readers "a part of the mind of the authors" (Draper 1988, 27). In this sense, it is mainly the subjective attitudes of the authors that the accounts reveal. These attitudes are embedded into the accounts and constructed interactively in that they build on what the readers already know from the context.

Considering accounts as devices of self-image construction and protection ultimately leads us back to Scott and Lyman's (1968, 46) contention that accounts are manifestations of "the underlying negotiation of identities within speech communities".

It is emphasized that, especially when given in public, accounts can be intended "to change how people interpret a situation" and, thus, "reshape the receiver's sense of the situation [...] in a manner congruent with the interests of the sender" (Cobb et al. 2001, 1130). In other words, accounts are deployed in ways that can influence the hearer's interpretation of events, maximising rewards

for the account giver (see Cody and Dunn 2007, 248). Orbuch's (1997) study which revealed that respondents systematically formed impressions of others (e.g., degree of likability) through their accounts is indicative of their significance as tools for identity construction via impression management.

According to the impression management approach, individuals tend to "communicate accounts in ways that are [...] beneficial to a desirable identity" (Cody and Dunn 2007, 248). Desirable identities are defined by Schlenker (1986, 25) as those self-images and self-identifications that people endorse to serve their goals or purposes and "represent what people believe that they *can be* and *should be* in particular contexts" (ibid., emphasis in the original). Their dependence on the context, including the situation and the audience, renders desirable identity images a product of the moment constructed within a particular context. It follows that the concept of desirable identity construction through account giving is absolutely compatible with the premises of social constructivism about identity construction in general (see 2.1).

The analysis and the discussion to follow will examine closely the accounts used in the closure signs, in order to reveal *what* the authors of the signs consider 'desirable identities', *how* they construct them and *why* they consider them desirable and beneficial under the circumstances.

3. Method

The data collection for this research started in March 2020 and is still ongoing, with the aim to form the basis for a larger project related to public signage in COVID times. The signs that form the corpus were collected following the procedures of Linguistic Landscapes studies and involved four researchers (two in London and another two in Athens) systematically covering all areas within walking distance from their homes and taking pictures of COVID-related signs. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on a sub-corpus comprising a total of 482 signs that appeared during the first lockdown in Greece and the UK to announce closures. From these, 238 were composed in English and were found on the doors or windows of a wide range of businesses in London, while 244 come from businesses in Athens and were written in Greek. Unlike what Seargant and Giaxoglou (2020) call "top-down" signs, i.e., professionally crafted public signs with a more permanent nature, all the signs in our corpus were "bottom-up", i.e., improvised and "homemade" and, thus, "tending more to the ephemeral" (2012, 308).

Since our research focusses on accounts provided for the closure of businesses, signs merely announcing the closure, without offering any reasons for it, were excluded from the corpus. Hence, the final corpus contained 357 signs (164

English, 193 Greek) that did provide accounts. The accounts in both the English and the Greek datasets were coded by the two authors of this paper, according to their content, i.e., the explanations put forward for the business closures. The categories of accounts identified in the data are presented below.

4. Data analysis

The accounts in our data were classified as falling in one of four categories:

1. Referring to the guidelines of the government or the health authorities
2. Referring to the businesses' concern about the employees', the customers' and the general public's health and wellbeing
3. Referring to both the guidelines of the government and the businesses' concern about public health
4. Referring to COVID-19/pandemic/circumstances

Table 1 presents the distribution of these accounts in the Greek and English signs.

As shown in Table 1, the largest category of accounts in both the Greek and the English data was category 2 (32.8%), which contained accounts that refer to concerns about public health. The accounts comprising category 1, which present the authorities' instructions as the main reason behind the closure, followed closely (31.8%). Both these categories of accounts were more frequent in the Greek than the English data, with the difference being more marked in the first category (Greek: 41.5%, English: 20.7%).

The third category displayed similar frequencies of accounts in the two languages (Greek: 17%, English: 18.3%), whereas category 4, which included accounts that make general, rather vague references to the pandemic and/or 'the circumstances', was far better represented in the English (31.7%) than in the Greek data (5.7%).

Although the accounts in categories 3 and 4 were equally frequent (17.7%), the relative vagueness of the accounts in the fourth category places them beyond the scope of the present study. Hence, in what follows we will focus on categories 1–3.

Table 1. Distribution of types of accounts across London's and Athens' signs

	Athens			London			Total	
	n	%	Examples	n	%	Examples	n	%
1. Official measures	80	41.5	<i>Το κατάστημα μας θα παραμείνει κλειστό κατόπιν αποφάσεως της κυβέρνησης</i> ('Following the government's decision, our store will remain closed')	34	20.7	As per the government guidelines our office will now be closed	114	31.8
2. Safety concerns	69	35.8	<i>Με αίσθημα ευθύνης για την προστασία τη δική σας και των υπαλλήλων μας, το φυσικό μας κατάστημα θα παραμείνει κλειστό</i> ('Out of a sense of responsibility for your and our employees' protection the shop will remain closed')	48	29.3	In order to play our part in keeping people safe, this unit is closed	117	32.8
3. Combination of 1 and 2	33	17	<i>Σεβόμενοι την υγεία των πελατών μας και σύμφωνα με τις οδηγίες του κρατικού μηχανισμού, το κατάστημα θα</i>	30	18.3	The well-being of our clients and colleagues remains our main concern. We are	63	17.7

Table 1. (continued)

	Athens			London			Total	
	n	%	Examples	n	%	Examples	n	%
			<i>παραμένει κλειστό</i> ('Out of respect for our customers' health and in line with the governmental guidelines our store will remain closed')			following government advice and have now closed our offices		
4. COVID-19	11	5.7	<i>Κλειστό λόγω πανδημίας</i> ('closed due to pandemic')	52	31.7	Due to the Coronavirus outbreak, we closed the shop	63	17.7
Total	193	100		164	100		357	100

4.1 Category 1: It is the authorities

In both datasets, category 1 could be divided into two subcategories: The first involves a simple cause-effect schema presenting the government's decisions as the cause and the closure as its effect. The second comprises expressions that stress the authors' alignment with the governmental measures, as well as formulations that implicitly or explicitly manifest a stance, i.e., an evaluation of the measures.

In the Greek data, the first subcategory includes 46 of the 80 signs assigned to category 1. The most common formulation of the Greek accounts in this subcategory was *λόγω των κρατικών μέτρων* ('because of the state's measures') as exemplified in (1):

- (1) *Λόγω των κρατικών μέτρων το κατάστημα θα παραμένει κλειστό.*
Because of the state's measures, the store will remain closed.

The construction *λόγω* + *genitive* ('because of') is conventionalised for marking causality in Greek. Unlike other formulations discussed below, there is nothing in the construction's meaning that could be viewed as indication of the speakers' evaluation of the events they account for. In this sense, the construction offers itself as optimal means for presenting events "objectively" and, hence, its frequent

appearance in accounts which appeal to what really happened, i.e., that it was the government that ordered the closure is anything but coincidence.

An important finding regarding this subcategory's signs is that the authors systematically opted for constructions such as *το κατάστημα θα παραμείνει κλειστό* ('the store will remain closed') to reduce their agency. By construing an agentive event (the closure) from the perspective of the patient (the store), rather than the agent (themselves), these shop-owners obscure the fact that some action on their part is necessary for the shops to close. This discursive choice strategically removes the responsibility from the shop-owners and inevitably enhances the causal link between the government's decisions and the closures.

The signs classified in the second subcategory (34 signs) also refer to "the government's decision" (*απόφαση της κυβέρνησης*) as the reason behind the closure. However, they additionally include formulations that stress the business owners' support and/or compliance with governmental imperatives. Examples (2) and (3) are typical of this category.

- (2) *Και το κομπολογάδικο μένει στο σπίτι σύμφωνα με το Υπουργείο Υγείας!!*
The kompoloi shop also stays home in line with the Ministry of Health!!
- (3) *Τηρώντας τις οδηγίες περιορισμού της εξάπλωσης του ιού το Kowloon παραμένει κλειστό.*
Observing the instructions for the restriction of the virus's spread Kowloon remains closed.

In (2) the closure is presented as a result of the shop-owner's agreement with the authorities' policies through the use of the construction *σύμφωνα με* translated here as "in line with", but literally meaning "in agreement with". In (3), on the other hand, the causal relationship is established through the use of the causal participle *τηρώντας (τις οδηγίες)* ('observing (the instructions)'). Although what seems to be stressed in (3) and other similar instances in the data is compliance rather than agreement, we suggest that a closer look at this type of phrasing communicates stronger alignment with the government's decisions than that expressed through causal constructions such as *λόγω των μέτρων* ('because of the measures'). Unlike (1) the phrasing of (3) not only stresses the authors' compliance with the measures via the semantic meaning of the verb *τηρώ* ('to observe'), but also seems to flout the maxim of quantity by providing the reasons why the measures were introduced in the first place (to constrain the spread of the virus), which were known by the readers of the sign. Their repetition here could only be interpreted as an attempt on the part of the author to indicate that s/he considers them valid reasons for the action taken. Therefore, it appears that the author of (3) presents her/himself not only as complying with instructions but also as supporting a valid cause through his/her compliance.

Yet, it has to be noted that despite expressing stronger alignment with the government's measures, the authors of (2) and (3) still opt for backgrounding themselves as agents of the closure through the use of metonymy. In both examples, the shop is personified and assumes an agentive role. Example (2) states that *το κομπολογάδικο μένει στο σπίτι* ('the kompoloi shop stays at home') while in Example (3) the store acts as the subject of *τηρώντας* ('observing'). That is, in both cases it is the inanimate stores rather than their owners that are portrayed as following the governmental rules.

Example (4) further exemplifies linguistic means expressing not merely alignment but also explicit respect for and approval of the measures:

- (4) *Ενθαρρύνουμε ενεργά το «μένουμε σπίτι» και παραμένουμε κλειστά.*
We actively encourage "we stay at home" and we remain closed.

In (4) the shop-owner's support for the government's measures is expressed emphatically, with the closure framed as an indication of encouragement (*ενθαρρύνουμε* 'we encourage') of the governmental campaign and active participation in it.

What is noteworthy about examples like (4), is that, unlike previous instances of this category, they are constructed in ways that foreground the shop-owners' agency. This is evident in the first person plural verb forms *ενθαρρύνουμε* ('we encourage') and *παραμένουμε* ('we remain'). Moreover, *παραμένουμε κλειστά* ('we remain closed') is a case of metonymy similar to that observed in (2) and (3) above. However, this time the metonymy is reversed with the animate shop-owners portraying themselves as being in a state of closure. It could be suggested then that increased support for the government's measures goes hand in hand with the authors' willingness to assume an agentive role and project themselves as active participants in the government-initiated fight against the virus.

What could be considered as further evidence that the authors of the Greek signs placed in the second subcategory tend to position themselves as active supporters of the governmental campaign, is that they employed the slogan *μένουμε σπίτι* ('we stay at home') with considerable frequency (20.6%), either by printing their messages on the campaign's official poster (Image 1) or by adding it to the text as a hashtag (Image 2). In contrast, the slogan emerged in only 6.6% of the signs within the first subcategory.

In the English data, the distinction between the two subcategories, i.e., accounts that establish a pure cause-effect relationship between governmental instructions and the closure and accounts that express support for the measures, is less clear-cut. While none of the signs uses the subordinating conjunction *because*, the most conventionalised way of establishing causality in English, the data con-



Image 1.



Image 2.

tain some accounts introduced by *due to* and *as per*, which places them in the first subcategory, as illustrated in Examples (5) and (6):

- (5) Due to government guidance this office reception is closed until further notice.
- (6) As per the government guidelines our office will now be closed until further notice.

While *due to* has a stronger causal reading than *as per*, which primarily refers the reader to the authority behind the closures, as in the Greek data, both examples portray the closure as a state (*is/will be closed*) resulting from (*due to*) or related to (*as per*) governmental guidance. These formulations do not imply any agency on the part of the business owners, nor do they contain any evaluation of the reasons behind the closure.

The most frequent formulation introducing accounts in the English data consists of adverbial phrases starting with the present participle *following*, as in:

- (7) Following the latest government advice, this unit is closed.

The above sentence is ambiguous in that the use of *following* allows for both a purely temporal reading, in which case it could be assigned to the first subcategory, or a reading implying obedience, placing it in the second subcategory. This ambiguity disappears, however, when *following* is used as part of a full present progressive construction, as in Example (8):

- (8) As a firm we are closely following the advice from the World Health Organisation and local governments.

In the above example, *following* expresses alignment with and support for the measures, strengthened by the use of the adverb *closely*. A similar effect is achieved through the use of expressions such as *in line with* or *in accordance with*. There are only a few examples in the English data that express support for governmental measures slightly more explicitly.

- (9) This decision was made in the light of the current coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak and recent UK government advice, which the company has been carefully monitoring and following.
- (10) Following Government advice that is designed to help reduce the spread of coronavirus, our offices will be closed until further notice.

While Example (9) portrays the company as *carefully monitoring and following* governmental instructions, it refers to them as *advice*, which implies optionality. At the same time, it emphasises agentivity, with the authors of the signs portraying

themselves as those monitoring the situation and making an informed decision on the basis of governmental advice. In (10), governmental *advice* is qualified and evaluated positively, thus showing support.

Overall, however, the English accounts contained fewer and less explicit expressions communicating support for governmental decisions, compared to the Greek ones.

What is also noteworthy regarding the second subcategory in both datasets is that the presented accounts were in several cases accompanied by comments that reflected the business owner's trust in the effectiveness of the governmental policies. These comments could be viewed as assuming the function of supportive moves that enhance the positioning communicated by the account. Example (11) from the Greek, and Examples (12) and (13) from the English data are indicative:

- (11) *Κατόπιν απόφασης της κυβέρνησης για κλείσιμο όλων των εμπορικών καταστημάτων, με στόχο τον περιορισμό της μετάδοσης του κορωνοϊού, σας ενημερώνουμε ότι το κατάστημά μας θα παραμείνει κλειστό μέχρι νεωτέρας απόφασης που θα ανακοινωθεί από την κυβέρνηση. [...] Ελπίζουμε ότι με την ενέργεια αυτή της κυβέρνησης θα συμβάλουμε όλοι ώστε να επιστρέψουμε το συντομότερο δυνατόν στην κανονικότητα.*

After the government's decision to close all commercial shops aiming to contain the coronavirus spread, we inform you that our shop will remain closed until further decision that will be announced by the government. [...] We hope that with this action on the part of the government we will all contribute to the return to normalcy as soon as possible.

- (12) When it has been deemed safe by the relevant Government organisations to return to normal trading, they'll be turned back on.
- (13) We hope that you stay safe and listen to what we are being told as this will benefit all in the long run and hopefully we will get through this tough period quicker.

In (11) not only is the business owners' role in the closure backgrounded via the construction *το κατάστημά μας θα παραμείνει κλειστό* ('our shop will remain closed'), but also the government's role is highlighted by clarifying that the closure will last until the government decides otherwise. The repetitive reference to the government could be interpreted as an attempt on the part of the authors to pragmatically intensify the causal link between the government's measures and the closure, thus obscuring their own role. However, the example also provides indications of the authors' support for the measures. These consist in stating the already known purpose of the measures (see discussion of Example (3)), but, most importantly, in the comment *ελπίζουμε ότι με την ενέργεια αυτή της κυβέρνησης θα συμβάλουμε όλοι ώστε να επιστρέψουμε το συντομότερο δυνατόν*

στην κανονικότητα ('we hope that with this action on the part of the government we will all contribute to the return to normalcy as soon as possible'). The use of the deontic modal verb *ελπίζουμε* ('we hope') construes the action of the government as a potential means of returning to normalcy, thus implying that this action is indeed considered a step towards eliminating the virus spread. It is also notable that the first person plural of *ελπίζουμε* ('we hope') could be interpreted as having different referents than those of *θα συμβάλλουμε* ('we will contribute') *να επιστρέψουμε* ('to return-_{1PL}'). While, as indicated by *όλοι* ('all'), the latter refer to both the authors and the readers, the former refers only to the authors of the sign. This shift of reference seems strategic in that it renders the owner's expression of the hope an indirect instigation to the readers to show understanding for the closures and even embrace the government's measures.

Along similar lines, the author of (12) makes the reopening dependent on the government's assessment of the situation, thus implicitly displaying trust in governmental decisions. Example (13), on the other hand, urges the readers to follow COVID-19 measures, while referring to them vaguely as "what we are being told", thus reproducing governmental instructions in plain language and rendering the government as an authority whose decisions should not be questioned. The measures are further positively evaluated as beneficial and as reducing the spread of the pandemic. The formulations chosen by the sign producer create a sense of community and shared responsibility through the use of the inclusive pronoun *we* and reference to *all* as beneficiaries of the measures.

As shown by the analysis, the accounts employed in both subcategories of the first category highlight the respective governments as the main agents of the closures and their instructions as the reason behind the owners' actions.

Aligning with the directives of the dominant discourse, these accounts enable the authors to position themselves as compliant citizens and construct legitimising identities that "reproduce [...] and rationalise the sources of structural domination" (Castells 2010, 8). Their choice of accounts aims to exonerate them from being responsible for the inconvenience caused to the public by the closures. At the same time, projecting themselves as rule-abiding citizens at a time when dominant discourses declared that restrictive measures were the appropriate action to be taken, constructs for them the identity of the lawful and responsible individual who, by extension, could be thought of as a responsible businessperson.

A final note on this category of accounts concerns those of the second subcategory that involved linguistic expressions or comments that communicated stronger alignment emphasizing support for the measures. In this case, the self-presentational effects are more complex: the authors position themselves not only as lawful citizens, but also agentively, as individuals who reserve a degree of con-

trol over their choices by implying that the action was not taken solely because it was imposed upon them, but also because they themselves approved of it.

4.2 Category 2: It is us

As already mentioned, category 2 contained accounts that portrayed the closures as the result of the businesses' concerns about the virus. Although the Greek data provided more instances (35.8%), this type of accounts was also used quite extensively on the English signs (29.3%), rendering this category the largest in the data (32.8%). Examples (14) and (15), coming from the Greek and the English datasets respectively, are typical:

- (14) *Μπροστά στην ανθρώπινη ζωή όλα έρχονται σε δεύτερη μοίρα! Για εμάς η προάσπιση της υγείας και η διασφάλιση των εργαζομένων, καταναλωτών και συνεργατών μας αποτελεί πρωταρχικό μας μέλημα. Η ατομική μας ευθύνη μας επιτάσσει τη διακοπή λειτουργίας του καταστήματός μας!*
ΜΕΝΟΥΜΕ και εμείς ΣΠΙΤΙ!
 Everything comes second to human life! For us the protection of health and the security of our employees, consumers and colleagues is a priority. Our personal responsibility compels us to interrupt our shop's activity!
 We too stay at home!
- (15) Our top priority here at MJtech is the safety, wellbeing of our staff and customers, therefore we will be closed until further notices.

Although not mentioned overtly, both examples imply that health is prioritised over what is known to be the main purpose of the businesses' existence, i.e., the making of profit. What is particularly noteworthy in relation to this group of accounts is that the authors not only opt out of mentioning that the closure was imposed upon them by the authorities, but they also tend to accentuate their own agency.

In (14) the agency of the shop-owners is foregrounded and pragmatically intensified through the repetitive use of the first person plural pronominal reference (*για εμάς* 'for us', *πρωταρχικό μας μέλημα* 'our top priority', *η ατομική μας ευθύνη μας επιτάσσει* 'our individual responsibility compels us'). Moreover, the expression *η ατομική μας ευθύνη μας επιτάσσει* ('our individual responsibility compels us'), portrays the closure as the shop-owners' obligation, following their own principles rather than something imposed by some external force. It is also notable that the use of the *μένουμε σπίτι* ('we stay at home') slogan in (14) is enhanced by the insertion of *και εμείς* ('we too'). Considering that in Greek personal pronouns are only used for emphasis or contrast, the insertion of *και εμείς*

(‘we too’) here can only be interpreted as an attempt on the part of the authors to stress their own role in the joint effort to fight the virus.

As in the Greek example, the owners of MJtech in (15) describe the wellbeing of both staff and customers as their “top priority”. The formulation chosen emphasises agentivity through the use of personal pronouns, with ‘top priority’ being modified by the possessive pronoun *our* and the closure being announced via the use of the pronoun *we* (*will be closed*), which can be regarded as a form of personification.

The tendency of this category of accounts to foreground the agency of the business owners went as far as presenting the closure as their own decision. This was often stressed by formulations employing the verb *we decided* or *we have taken/made the decision*, as illustrated in (16) and (17).

(16) *Για προληπτικούς λόγους ώστε όλοι μας να είμαστε ασφαλείς, αποφασίσαμε να αναστείλουμε την λειτουργία των Boutiques μας.*

As a precaution, so that we all remain safe, we decided to suspend the activities of our Boutiques.

(17) As the situation remains ever-changing, the health and wellbeing of the Millets team and our customers has remained our top priority. Today we have taken the difficult decision to temporarily close all our stores throughout the UK.

In (16) the decision is accounted for as a precaution taken to keep safe the referents of *όλοι μας* (‘all of us’) which include both the authors themselves and the public. In (17), rather than referring to governmental instructions, the sign describes the situation as ever-changing and foregrounds the company’s decision, described as *difficult* and as motivated by concerns for the health and well-being of staff and customers, as the reason behind the closure.

It follows that the authors of these signs opt for presenting themselves as responsible and considerate individuals that *choose* to close their businesses in order to protect others.

In fact, in the Greek data, (*ατομική/κοινωνική*) *ευθύνη* (‘personal/social responsibility’) towards the fellowmen is foregrounded as the main reason behind the closure in 15.7% of the signs in this category, while positionings of the business owners as “guardians” of the community are consistent throughout the Greek signs, as in (18):

(18) *Έχοντας πάντα στο μυαλό μας ότι το Darkside πρέπει να είναι ένα ασφαλές περιβάλλον για τους artists και τους πελάτες μας και θέλοντας να βοηθήσουμε στον περιορισμό της εξάπλωσης του ιού στη χώρα μας, από αύριο Σάββατο 14 Μαρτίου θα είμαστε κλειστά. Σε μια τόσο δύσκολη στιγμή*

νώθουμε ότι είναι χρέος όλων μας να συμβάλουμε στην προσπάθεια να προστατευθούν οι ευπαθείς ομάδες και το σύστημα της χώρας μας. Always keeping in mind that “Darkside” should be a safe environment for our artists and customers and wanting to contribute to the effort to restrain the virus’s spread in our country, we remain closed as of tomorrow Saturday 14 March. In such a difficult time we feel that all of us have the obligation to contribute to the effort to protect the vulnerable groups and our country’s (health) system.

In (18) the business owners’ sense of obligation (denoted by the use of the deontic modal *πρέπει* ‘must’) to provide a safe environment for all concerned and their wish to aid the cause of constraining the virus’s spread is presented as the reason for the closure. The causal participles *έχοντας στο μυαλό μας* (‘keeping in mind’) and *θέλοντας* (‘wanting’), the implied subject of which is “we” (i.e., the business owners/authors), as designated by the main clause’s finite structure *θα είμαστε κλειστά* (‘we will be closed’) foreground the owners’ agency. This agency is further stressed by the use of the metonymical construction *θα είμαστε κλειστά* (‘we will be closed’), once more portraying the owners rather than the store as being in a state of closure. It is notable that, while in the first part of the sign the authors speak only of their own obligations and wishes, the deontic modal expression *είναι χρέος όλων μας* (‘all of us have the obligation’) portrays the obligation to protect the vulnerable as a duty of the community as a whole. That is *όλων μας* (‘all of us’) should be understood as collectively referring to the authors as well as the readers. Consequently, the whole second part of the text can be viewed as an attempt to further highlight the legitimacy of the closures by presenting them as the fulfillment of a collective obligation. Additionally, the repetitive mention of *χώρα μας* (‘our country’) in this sign’s accounts, could be viewed as aiming to present the identified obligations as not merely collective, but also patriotic.

Similarly, the English sign (19) frames the closures as resulting from the business owners’ sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of the community and as their contribution to the containment of the virus, fully omitting the governmental instructions requiring them to close and merely referring vaguely to “the current situation”.

- (19) In light of the current situation, we have closed our dining room temporarily ... but we think the most responsible thing to support the community is to step up and make this difficult decision.

It turns out that besides the identity of the responsible and considerate individuals/businesspeople, these authors strive to portray themselves as collectively oriented members of a community who fight for a common cause and do not hesitate to take initiatives to aid its fulfillment.

The dialectic relationship between the authorities' discourse and the accounts in this category is evident in both the Greek and the English examples. It could be maintained that by emphasising their wish to be responsible and communicating their concern for others, these authors accept the position attributed to them by the dominant discourses, constructing through their accounts the identity of communally spirited, responsible and caring individuals. In this sense, these accounts, like the ones placed in the previous category, also lead to the construction of legitimising identities.

Nonetheless, what is most interesting about these accounts, is that they do not reflect what has actually occurred, but they are exploited in order to reframe the readers' sense of the situation. They attempt to establish a "new normative order of values" (Cobb et al. 2001, 1128) where concern for others originates directly from the business owners' independent agency. From this perspective, alignment and agency interact in an interesting way in the accounts of this category. Unlike those of the previous category, they include no mention of the authorities' role in the closures. However, the authors' willingness to assume the role of 'guardians' of the community, as generally promoted by the dominant discourses, not only points to alignment with those discourses, but also implies a markedly positive stance towards them. In this light, these accounts can be seen as indicating alignment that is even stronger than that expressed through those of the first category.

At the same time, by omitting the role of the authorities and their instructions, the authors emphasise their own sense of responsibility and communal spirit. Therefore, they exploit the situation in order to construct an identity that they feel is the most beneficial under the circumstances: that of the responsible, considerate and communally spirited individual who, however, maintains control over her/his decisions and actions. The business owners' positioning as self-appointed guardians of the well-being of the community expands to the third category, thus becoming more prominent in the data.

4.3 Category 3: It is both

As already mentioned, the accounts of the third category combine both types of explanations found in the two previous categories. This combination was attested in similar percentages in the Greek (17%) and the English dataset (18.3%). Moreover, it was found that in both the Greek and the English accounts within this category 50% pre-posed the governmental decision and another 50% the business owners' concerns as the reason for the closure. Therefore, in both datasets, the government's decision for closure and the businesses' interest in others' wellbeing co-exist and are largely treated as equally decisive.

Examples (20) and (21), coming from the Greek and the English data respectively, are typical:

(20) *Σεβόμενοι την υγεία των πελατών αλλά και του προσωπικού μας, και σύμφωνα με τις οδηγίες του κρατικού μηχανισμού αναστέλλουμε τη λειτουργία όλων των καταστημάτων μας.*

Out of respect for the health of our customers and personnel, and in line with the state's instructions regarding the containment of the COVID-19 virus' spread, we are shutting down all our shops.

(21) As the impact of the developing COVID-19 outbreak is felt across the UK, the well-being of our clients and colleagues remains our main concern. We are following government advice and have now closed our offices.

While in both examples the concern for the wellbeing of clients and colleagues is mentioned first, through the use of the verb *remains*, the English example presents concern for the health of both staff and customers as something that has preceded governmental instructions. Yet, the closure is portrayed as resulting from the latter.

The Greek Example (20), on the other hand, despite pre-posing respect for others, presents it as of equal importance with abiding by the state's instructions by co-ordinating the two via the connector *και* ('and'). Specifically, in (20) the participle *σεβόμενοι* ('because we respect (out of respect for)') identifies the authors' respect for the health of their clients and personnel as the reason for the closure and foregrounds their agency through the participle's morphologically denoted subject "we". At the same time, the construction *σύμφωνα με τις οδηγίες του κρατικού μηχανισμού* ('in line with the state's instructions') following the connector *και* ('and') introduces an additional explanation that alludes to the state's guidelines. Furthermore, due to its literal meaning ('in agreement with'), the construction *σύμφωνα με* ('in line with'), as used in this context, can be interpreted as signaling support for the government's decisions. However, despite attributing the closures partly to the government, these authors proceed to foreground, once more, their own agency as indicated by the verb *αναστέλλουμε* ('we are shutting down (our shops)').

Many of the formulations that were typical of the previous two categories emerged in both the Greek and the English data: stress on the businesses' alignment and agreement with the measures (e.g., GR: *σύμφωνα με τις οδηγίες του κρατικού μηχανισμού* 'in line with the state's instructions'; UK: *following the latest government advice*) and expressions of support for the governments' decisions (e.g., GR: *σε πλήρη κατανόηση του υπουργείου υγείας* 'in full understanding of the Ministry of Health'; UK: *we are supporting Government guidelines*), emphasis on responsibility and care for others and willingness for collaboration in order

for the common cause to be achieved (e.g., GR: *λαμβάνουμε κι εμείς μέρος για τη μη διάδοση του ιού* ‘we are also taking part (to the effort) of not spreading the virus’; UK: *to help contain the spread of coronavirus*). On the grounds of what has been discussed here in regard to the previous two categories, there is no doubt that the authors, once more, construct legitimising identities, positioning themselves as complicit with the dominant discourses. What is more, the fact that these accounts encompass both directives underlying these discourses, i.e., the need to abide by the law and the importance of protecting others, renders them a faithful reproduction of the authorities’ discourses. Hence, it could be claimed that these accounts communicate the highest degree of alignment of all three categories examined here.

The combination of the two account types on these signs works similarly to the accounts in category 2. Although less overtly, they also aim to reframe the readers’ understanding of the reasons behind the closures, which are presented as a result of the governments’ instructions as much as of the business owners’ agency. This portrayal of the circumstances carries an implication that the business owners would have taken precautions for the community’s safety, even if these precautions had not been part of the governmental policy, or that they would not have taken these precautions having not themselves considered them beneficial for the community.

Therefore, the combination of accounts emerging in this category can be seen as an effort on the part of the authors to construct both types of identities that were pursued in the previous two categories: they construct themselves as lawful citizens who follow the authorities’ guidelines without allowing these guidelines to be viewed as an unwanted imposition. Additionally, they project themselves as considerate and collectively oriented individuals who are in control of their decisions and actions.

5. Discussion and conclusions: Identities, accounts and values

In this paper, the accounts found on the signs under examination were treated as *acts of identity* (see Le Page 1978), i.e., as discursive means deployed in order to construct the identities that the authors of closure signs wished to project. The uniformity of the account formulations across the two datasets was linked to the globalised discourses that resulted from the global impact of the pandemic.

The frequencies with which specific types of accounts occurred, along with their qualitative analysis, indicated that the identities that these authors considered desirable in both countries were, on all occasions, legitimising. This means that they were constructed through positionings aligning with the dominant dis-

courses at the macro-level, albeit to different degrees, depending on the choice of accounts. It is maintained here that the accounts classified in each category and the identities constructed thereby are revealing of the authors' prioritizing one or more of the values promoted by the dominant discourses. Specifically, the accounts in the first category were used to construct the identity of the lawful citizen, and hence promoted conformity. Accounts belonging to the second category constructed the identity of the responsible, considerate and collectively oriented professional, thus, prioritizing benevolence. The third category of accounts combined the ones attested in the previous two categories in an attempt to construct identities that projected the authors as simultaneously lawful, considerate and collectively oriented, hence adhering to both conformity and benevolence.

Therefore, although the identities constructed in the data were a matter of choice, this choice was made from a restricted range of options provided by the dominant discourses. At the same time, the authors exploited dominant discourses in order to project specific desirable and beneficial identities for themselves and their businesses. The fact that these identities were legitimising also made them appealing to the majority of the unknown recipients of the signs.

However, the shifts in agency noted in the data lead to the assumption that the authors exploited accounts to claim attributes also related to a third value-construct not promoted by the dominant discourses, that of self-direction. This construct, which, as already mentioned, is associated with independent thought and action (Schwarz and Bardi 2001, 270), manifested itself differently in each of the three categories of accounts. Its strongest version was represented by the second account category, which dissociated the closure of the business from the governmental measures. This was accomplished by omitting any reference to the measures and/or by foregrounding the business owners' "benevolence" as the main reason for the closures.

The weakest form of self-direction, on the other hand, was constructed through the accounts within the second subcategory of the first category, which were formed in ways that stated or implied the authors' alignment with and/ or support to the governmental policies. We consider this linguistically explicit alignment and support as a manifestation of self-direction through the implication that these businesses followed the measures *because* they considered them beneficial.

The third category represents a middle ground in regard to self-direction. The signs in this category combined the types of accounts attested in the two previous categories, possibly in an effort to balance two conflicting traits: to indicate that the closure, which was an inconvenience for the public, was motivated by governmental policies and, at the same time, to indicate that the businesses still retained a degree of control over their actions and decisions.

The element of self-direction observed in the vast majority of the accounts creates the impression that the qualities of law-abiding, considerate and community-spirited individuals were not imposed upon these business owners, but constituted a choice on their part. Therefore, it contributes to the projection of a self-image of autonomy and control and corroborates Archakis and Tsakona's (2012, 33) contention that, in constructing their identities, individuals can be "in a constant state of tension between *hetero*-determination and *self*-determination".

However, in the data examined here, self-determination is not expressed through disaligning with or disputing the validity of the dominant values and ideologies. Instead, it is manifested through a shift in agency, challenging not the dominant categorisations, but the degree to which these categorisations should be perceived as imposed upon the account givers. In other words, through their accounts, the authors of these signs do not simply report the causes of what has happened, but attempt to reshape the public's sense of the situation in a manner congruent with the identities they consider beneficial for themselves. Among these identities, the one of the self-directed social actor turns out to be most crucial.

One limitation of this study is that the interpretations provided were, largely, based on the researchers' perceptions of the messages the authors of closure signs intended to communicate. However, these researchers have been part of the audience to which these messages were directed and had the opportunity to discuss and test their perceptions with other members of the public and, occasionally, with business owners.

The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to have long-term effects on social life and, consequently, on macro-level discourses and micro-level discursive choices. Hence, we would like to conclude this paper by highlighting the importance of linguistic research elaborating on the relationship between the two levels for the understanding and historical documentation of these effects.

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