

**“COVID-19” OR “THE CHINESE VIRUS”?  
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE OF  
THE WEST AGAINST THE EAST**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The spread of the Coronavirus in the world has changed the daily lives of human beings on this planet as well as the social, cultural, economic, and political aspects of human lives. What is interesting in this regard is how differently countries of the world deal with this infamous virus and how differently human societies address the issue. These differences have led to different experiences for human groups in these countries. The term "Chinese virus" which is widely used by some US officials and the emphasis on the Chinese origin of the virus have increasingly entered the public sphere of American society which has reinforced the ethnocentric and hierarchical discourse of the West against marginalized human populations.

The present study analyzes the racist discourse present in the statements of some US officials regarding the Coronavirus at three levels of speech, social cognition, and society, along with a historical study of the Western countries behavior with the immigrants to show how the Western system of discrimination and the hierarchical view of the East has penetrated the deepest layers of the identity of some Americans and, by becoming a "mental model of immigrant treatment," has become a shared intersubjective knowledge among some groups in American society. This has institutionalized a special attitude towards immigrants in their minds.

## **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Adopting a descriptive-analytical method and relying on the theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis of Van Dijk's (2008, 2015), the study intends to show how the "language" used by some American officials, and the insistence on

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attributing the coronavirus to China revived the American nation's historical memory in dealing with immigrants at the "cognitive" level which has in turn reinforced racist discourses by reproducing stereotypes in a society that has always insisted on the alienation of disease and pathogens. This fact resulted in the humiliation of minority groups at the "community" level. Meanwhile, the use of the term "Covid-19" when dealing with this disease is an effective tool to counter the ethnocentric discourse of the West against the East.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, language is a social action whose purpose is to find the connection between verbal structures and social structures. In other words, critical analysis of discourse seeks to show how power structures in society are represented at different levels of speech and how language plays an active role in the production and reproduction of power relations in society. However, Van Dijk (2008, 2014) believes that linguistic structures and social phenomena are not in a direct causal relationship with each other, but what is neglected is the "cognitive" structures of the mind. According to Van Dijk's critical analysis of discourse (2008, 2014, 2015), it is our interpretation of social situations that causes a change in the linguistic context of the speech. Accordingly, Van Dijk's critical model analyzes speech at three levels: linguistic, cognitive, and social. The relationship and interaction between speech and social structures are done by a third factor called "social cognition".

Using purposive sampling, the present study selects those statements of Donald Trump and Mike Pompeo in which the terms "Chinese virus" and "Wuhan virus" are explicitly used. Considering the emphasis of Khandani, Farrokhi, and Ghanchehpour (1399) on the importance of tweets in shaping social actions and controlling public discourse, most of the following examples have been selected from the tweets of political officials.

Lexical choices and the repeated use of terms like the Chinese virus have led to violent practices in American society. However, according to Van Dijk (2008), language and its lexicon do not play a direct role in creating violence in society. According to Van Dijk, what plays an important role is one's interpretation of social phenomena, which is effective in causing unpleasant behaviors. Understanding and interpreting social phenomena are not individual behavior. Americans have learned these interpretations throughout their collective lives and internalized mental models of shared social behavior and knowledge. The long history of the humiliation of minorities in Western societies and its constant repetition by dominant discourses in society has internalized Western perceptions of non-Western societies. In dealing with the phenomena, such as the Coronavirus, American society interprets these phenomena by referring to its "social cognition", which is full of patterns of Western superiority over the East.

### **4. CONCLUSION**

Western societies, especially the United States, made use of the term "Chinese virus" instead of "Covid-19" to represent the East. The repeated use of the term Chinese virus in describing the coronavirus has shown that Western sentiments are visible in the context of Western human rights discourse. The repeated emphasis on the continent of Asia and especially East Asia on the spread of disease depicted the Western human mentality of the Eastern world and showed that the discourse of

barbarism, lack of culture, and the dirt of the East remains in the minds of at least parts of Western society. The established Western mind continues to regard the East as a source of pollution and savagery. Uncle Sam's use of disinfectants against the Chinese people in nineteenth-century America and Donald Trump's use of the term Chinese virus in twenty-first-century America suggest that the Western mind is still replete with the nineteenth-century orthodox "Western" dichotomies. The use of the term Covid-19 is to combat such thoughts.

**Keywords:** Chinese virus; Covid-19; Ethnocentric discourse; Mental models of behavior; Social cognition