

Whose Fault? Agentivity in Hungarian Political Crisis Communication

Individuals are more likely to remember the agent of an event if they hear utterances constructed with agentive language elements, such as “the government will address the issue” or “we introduce a curfew.” In these cases, the choice of number and person marking – or its omission – conveys meaning and thus imparts a specific message. This raises questions of responsibility, as these markers can deflect (second- and third-person) or take (first-person) responsibility. During crises, citizens scrutinize the government’s response and assign credit or blame based on public statements. Such linguistic choices affect immediate interpretation and long-term memory of events, potentially shaping public trust and democratic accountability.

This study examines Hungarian political crisis communication in 2024, focusing on how government representatives use language to take or deflect responsibility. Using corpus linguistic methods, the research analyzes personal pronouns and possessive markers (marked by individual words and word-endings in Hungarian) in governmental communication to understand how responsibility is expressed, particularly in crisis contexts. The analysis is based on a corpus of transcribed government press conferences (N=18; 265,919 words). All markers were analyzed using Python scripts and AntConc software to understand how Hungarian politicians frame responsibility.

In 39.2 percent of cases, deflecting responsibility has been shown in the government’s communication, i.e., second- and third-person statements occurred less frequently than first-person statements. Agentive utterances were more frequent than non-agentive ones; thus, they were more likely to name the person(s) responsible than not. In line with populist rhetoric, typical of Hungarian political communication, spokespersons deflected responsibility mainly to external entities, such as the European Union, ‘Brussels,’ and opposition parties. Statements from the government’s point of view – i.e., internal actors – were dominated by groups (e.g., the ruling party), while external actors – those outside the government – were most commonly individuals (e.g., Péter Magyar, the leader of the opposition party).