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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Beyond borrowing. Bridging political science and discourse analysis

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ABSTRACT

The study of political discourse sits at the intersection of political science and discourse analysis, yet genuine integration between these fields remains rare in practice. Political science attends primarily to situated meaning (who speaks, from what institutional position, and toward what ends), leaving linguistic variation underexamined; discourse analysis offers fine-grained accounts of internal meaning (the reality constructed through lexical and grammatical choices), but the political implications of that meaning receive less sustained attention. The paper shows that subordinating either dimension is more than a matter of emphasis: because the two produce meaning jointly, an analysis tilted toward one rests on assumptions about the dimension it leaves aside and may therefore misread the meaning it sets out to reconstruct. In response, it develops a coding scheme that holds the two together and supports both close reading and systematic analysis across a corpus. Applied to Belgian politicians' and experts' conceptions of legitimate decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic, the scheme shows what an integrated analysis recovers that an asymmetric one would miss. The paper thereby argues for a study of political discourse in which interdisciplinarity is enacted in the texture of the analysis.

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Introduction

Disciplinary boundaries are both enabling and constraining. They provide the scaffolding through which knowledge is developed, but they also delimit the kinds of questions that can be asked and how answers can be formulated (Barry, Born, and Weszkalnys 2008). This tension runs deep in the study of political discourse. Political discourse is simultaneously a linguistic practice, in which meaning is produced through specific choices of wording, and a political one, in which those same choices justify or contest power (Fairclough 2013). Each dimension is home ground for a different discipline. The linguistic dimension is the central concern of discourse analysis (hereafter DA¹), a field unified by a shared

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analytical focus on discourse itself, understood as a form of social practice reflecting and constituting reality (Angermüller 2014; Wodak and Meyer 2015). By contrast, the political dimension falls to political science, which is organized around a common set of questions about power, governance, and institutional order, approached through a plurality of methods (Bevir and Rhodes 2010; Gerring 2011). Political discourse thus belongs to both at once. Anyone studying political meaning through discourse is already operating at the intersection of DA and political science.

Proper analysis of political discourse therefore requires attending to each dimension: to the internal construction of meaning through linguistic choices, and, equally, to the normative and institutional environments in which those choices are made and take effect. This double requirement is widely acknowledged yet rarely met. In practice, the two fields work this intersection in parallel, with little genuine contact. Scholars may borrow selectively across these domains (Jacobs and Frickel 2009), but the two remain only partially integrated. The result is an asymmetry in which one field drives the inquiry while the other is reduced to a supporting role. Much political science research that draws on discourse tends to treat it as a lens yet seldom analyzes it as *discourse*, that is, as a practice in which variations in wording produce politically consequential shifts in meaning. Instead, such work remains at the level of identifying themes or mapping speaker positions, yielding descriptive accounts of who said what, when, and in what context (Wiesner 2022). DA approaches, for their part, provide fine-grained accounts of language and meaning-making, but the political stakes of that meaning usually remain at the edge of their analytical reach.

Crucially, as the two dimensions function together in producing political meaning, bracketing either leaves blind spots that not only limit but distort the understanding of political discourse. The problem is not unrecognized. Several lines of work have theorized the articulation of the two dimensions, notably discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2008), the Essex School of discourse theory (Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000), and the Discourse-Historical Approach (Reisigl and Wodak 2009). The issue, as will be argued, is not one of integrative ambition but of its enactment: most scholarship borrows across disciplinary lines without bridging them, so that linguistic form remains a given in political science while political dimensions hover in the background in DA. This gap is what the present paper sets out to address. Through an extended case study, it shows how attending to both the internal dimension of meaning (the reality constructed through lexical and grammatical choices) and the situated one (who speaks, in what institutional context, and toward what ends) allows the analysis to reach readings that would otherwise remain out of view. It thereby offers a worked example of interdisciplinarity practiced at the level of the analytical gesture.

To that end, the paper first clarifies the conceptual distinctions between forms of cross-disciplinary work, before mapping how each field has approached political discourse and where each falls short. It then develops an integrated framework and illustrates its analytical payoff through an empirical study of how Belgian politicians and experts conceived of legitimate decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interdisciplinarity: what's in a name?

Few concepts in contemporary academia are praised as readily as interdisciplinarity, and few are as poorly understood. Commonly invoked as a driver of innovation and

intellectual progress, it is rarely defined with any precision (Moran 2010, 14), and frequently conflated with related but distinct notions like multidisciplinary and transdisciplinarity, which differ significantly in their level and mode of integration. Nissani (1995) captures these differences through a now-classic fruit metaphor. Multidisciplinarity resembles a fruit salad: multiple perspectives brought together but remaining distinct. Interdisciplinarity is more like a smoothie, in which disciplinary insights are blended into a coherent whole. Transdisciplinarity goes further still, producing an entirely new dish – transcending existing boundaries rather than combining what lies within them. What sets them apart, in each case, lies as much in the process of boundary-crossing as in the product it yields.

Measured against these distinctions, much social science scholarship labelled ‘interdisciplinary’ falls short: it combines disciplinary contributions rather than integrating them (Ancarno 2018), layering insights from other fields onto a dominant disciplinary architecture. These works are therefore better described as weakly interdisciplinary: multidisciplinary in form but disciplinary in substance. External concepts enter the analysis instrumentally to support or illustrate a central disciplinary logic, without engaging with the assumptions and commitments that give them meaning in their home field. An economist using corpus linguistic tools to analyze central bank communications, for instance, might extract keyword frequencies and sentiment measures to feed into a model of market expectations, without asking how corpus linguists understand discourse or what interpretive work concordance analysis requires. A sociologist drawing on historical archives to trace the emergence of a social category, similarly, might mine the documents for datable facts in service of a present-focused theoretical argument, without attending to historians’ debates about archival silences, genre, or the conditions under which sources were produced.

Moving beyond superficial integration involves more than pooling perspectives from adjacent fields. Genuine interdisciplinarity requires that disciplinary assumptions be put into sustained dialogue (Stember 1991). It begins with joint problem-definition and proceeds through a structured integrative process that assesses the contributions of each discipline and identifies their conflicts and overlaps before synthesizing them into a coherent new perspective (Szostak 2012; Warleigh-Lack and Cini 2009). Interdisciplinarity, understood this way, is a distinctive intellectual posture attuned to the complexity of real-world problems that exceed the reach of any single disciplinary lens. It compels scholars to question foundational assumptions and build frameworks suited to complex research objects. The critical work it demands – forging new connections and developing approaches that are both rigorous and innovative – is challenging and often uncomfortable, but essential if interdisciplinarity is to fulfil its promise. It is against this standard that the following sections read the relationship between political science and DA – where, as will be shown, most work remains closer to the multidisciplinary end of the spectrum.

The political science – discourse analysis nexus

Political science and DA have both come to recognize discourse as central to the constitution of (political) life, by very different routes. Tracing those routes reveals what each field has contributed to the study of political discourse, as well as what each has

systematically left aside. As will be argued, the divergence turns in large part on how meaning itself is approached: whether the analytical focus falls on the internal construction of meaning within discourse, or on the situated conditions of its production and circulation.

A prior clarification is in order, however. ‘Discourse’ does not refer to a unified object across the traditions engaged below. It can name a regime of truth, a signifying totality, situated language use, or the meaning-making of institutions – referents that rest on ontologies not reducible to one another. What these traditions share, despite this diversity, is the premise that discourse is constitutive: language does not transparently convey political realities but constitutes them. They also agree that discourse is inextricably bound up with power, even if accounts differ on what power is and how it operates through language. These shared commitments define a common terrain on which political science and DA have nonetheless developed along distinct trajectories.

Political science has long leaned toward positivist and behaviorist approaches, particularly in its post-World War II development (Almond and Verba 1963; Easton 1953). More recent strands, however, have repositioned discourse as a constitutive element of (political) life rather than a mere source of empirical data. In particular, the discursive turn in the social sciences (e.g. Bacchi 2000) marked a significant epistemological shift, moving away from positivist and objectivist paradigms toward interpretivist, constructivist, and post-structuralist approaches. Where earlier work often treated discourse as secondary to supposedly more ‘real’ political behaviours or institutional structures, it foregrounded language as a key site where the boundaries of the political are enacted and contested (Chadwick 2000; Schmidt 2008). Substantively, this shift has expanded the range of politically relevant phenomena to encompass areas once considered peripheral to political analysis, like meaning-making, narrative construction, or symbolic legitimation.

The discursive turn has given rise to a diverse range of interpretive and post-structuralist approaches, grounded in various philosophical traditions (e.g. Foucault 1981; Gramsci 1996; Lyotard 1979). Most prominently, a post-Marxist strand – the Laclauian or Essex School of discourse theory (Glynos and Howarth 2007; Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000; Laclau and Mouffe 1985) – has developed into a coherent research programme, especially productive for the study of populism and nationalism (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Laclau 2005). Working from a post-foundational ontology, it approaches categories such as ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’ as contingent articulations whose political force derives from chains of equivalence and the drawing of constitutive outsides. It thereby shows how certain meaning configurations become hegemonic through sedimentation and reproduction across the discursive field, including within nominally opposing discourses (Mouffe 2018). Alongside this post-structuralist current, more hermeneutic and interpretive-institutionalist strands retain a stronger anchorage in mainstream political science, focusing on how situated actors deploy meaning within institutional settings (Yanow 2000); discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2008), in particular, theorizes discourse as the medium through which political actors coordinate action and legitimize institutional change.

On this basis, a range of more applied frameworks has developed. Narrative policy analysis (Roe 1994; Yanow 1996) highlights the role of storytelling in public policy, showing how dominant and counter-narratives shape problem definitions and legitimize

interventions. Deliberative discourse analysis (Dryzek 2022) links empirical discourse analysis to normative democratic theory, evaluating how discursive practices foster participation and mutual understanding across diverse publics. Argumentative discourse analysis (Hajer 1995) introduces the concept of ‘discourse coalitions’ – actors united by shared problem definitions – which influence both policy content and institutional dynamics. Alongside these, more formalized frameworks have emerged to map actors and claims across discourse events, from Discourse Network Analysis (Leifeld 2013), designed to trace the evolving structure of policy debates through actor-claim relations; Political Claims Analysis (Koopmans and Statham 1999), aimed at capturing discursive interventions in contentious politics; elite framing analysis (Druckman and Nelson 2003), focused on how political actors strategically construct meaning; and the actor-idea co-evolution framework (Steensland 2008), concerned with the mutual shaping of institutional structures and policy ideas. Content, frame, and narrative analysis, finally, are widely employed as standalone methods.

The trajectory of DA has been rather different. Unlike political science, a well-institutionalized discipline organized around issues of power, institutions, and governance, it has emerged as an interdisciplinary field – developing both as a subdiscipline within linguistics and through engagement with critical theory, structuralism, and poststructuralism (Angermüller 2017). *Political* discourse has, in this context, become a key site for exploring how language enacts and contests social order (Fairclough 1989; Van Dijk 1997; Wodak and Meyer 2015), with growing momentum since the late twentieth century. Building on post-structuralist critiques of rationalist and representational views of language (Derrida 1982), DA has unsettled, through empirically grounded inquiry, conventional assumptions about political subjectivity and the production of truth, aligning with broader shifts in cultural theory and the social sciences (e.g. Hall 1997), including the discursive turn.

A major strand of research in DA has provided fine-grained accounts of how meaning is constructed and legitimized through linguistic practice, including the naturalization of ideologies (Fairclough 1992; Verschueren 2012), the normalization of certain social categories (Baker et al. 2008; Hodge and Kress 1993), and the reproduction of power structures (Reisigl and Wodak 2005; Van Dijk 1993a). Central to this body of work is attention not only to what is said, but also to *how* it is said, what is assumed, and what is left unsaid within hegemonic or doxic discourses (Bourdieu 1991) – discourses regarded as ‘common sense’ that shape the boundaries of legitimate political debate. This focus entails that different linguistic formulations are not interchangeable, even when thematically similar: each brings into play specific associations or presuppositions that contribute to different political meanings and, ultimately, to different constructions of reality.

These issues have been investigated through a variety of scholarly traditions shaped by specific sociocultural contexts or academic lineages, such as the French school of DA (Née and Veniard 2012), as well as through distinct methodological frameworks – most notably Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 2013; Van Dijk 1993b; Wodak and Meyer 2015), and Corpus-assisted Discourse Studies (CDS) (Baker 2006; Gillings, Mautner, and Baker 2023; Marchi 2010; McEnery and Hardie 2011; Partington, Taylor, and Duguid 2013). Grounded in the view that discourse is a constitutive force shaped by and shaping institutional and societal structures (Van Dijk 1993b; Wodak and Meyer 2015), CDA has generated a substantial body of research on the linguistic dimensions of political discourse. Its influence now extends beyond discourse studies, as scholars in related fields

increasingly use it to examine how language reflects and reproduces power relations (e.g. Chaney 2015; Every and Augoustinos 2008). To explore how language naturalizes social hierarchies and reinforces hegemonic practices, CDA typically employs close, context-sensitive textual analysis, drawing on tools such as metaphor analysis (Hart 2008), practical reasoning (Fairclough and Fairclough 2011), and framing (Wodak 2001). CDS, for its part, integrates corpus linguistics tools to identify large-scale patterns in language use. Through the analysis of collocational profiles, semantic prosody, or lexical associations, it reveals discursive regularities that persist or shift across institutional settings (Baker et al. 2008; Partington, Taylor, and Duguid 2013). By combining the quantitative scope of corpus analysis with the interpretive depth of qualitative inquiry – further enriched, in some strands, by multimodal or ethnographic methods (Wodak and Forchtner 2018) –, CDS enables a systematic yet nuanced mapping of political discourse, one that places particular emphasis on methodological triangulation and on tracing how meanings stabilize over time.

The two traditions thus diverge in analytical focus. In DA, especially CDA and CDS, the emphasis often falls on *internal meaning*: identifying the ideological content embedded in lexical choices and tracing its evolution over time. While CDA's theoretical foundations explicitly attend to context (Chilton 2004; Chilton and Schäffner 2011; Van Dijk 1997), and some strands – notably the Discourse-Historical Approach (Reisigl and Wodak 2009; Wodak 2001) – make context constitutive of their protocol, the analytical weight in much empirical work remains on reconstructing implicit worldviews and ideological formations, sometimes leaving the situated dynamics of discourse less systematically specified. Most political science approaches, conversely, tend to prioritize *situated meaning*: who articulates a discourse, when, to whom, and in response to what developments. Internal meaning is then more often presupposed than systematically analyzed at the level of linguistic form, with greater emphasis placed on actors, institutional contexts, and the political consequences of discourse. As with CDA, this is not to say that integrative commitments are absent. Several traditions have theorized the relation between discursive practice and its situated conditions, though they vary in what they integrate and at what scale. Discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) articulates ideas and institutions, examining how political actors deploy coordinative and communicative discourse to legitimize institutional change, though its analytical apparatus works primarily on the content of what is said rather than on its linguistic texture. The Essex School (Glynos and Howarth 2007; Laclau and Mouffe 1985) theorizes how articulatory practices sediment into hegemonic formations that structure political subjectivity and institutional order, operating at the level of discursive formations and the logics that organize them. The problem is therefore not one of recognition. These integrative programmes operate at scales – institutional trajectories, hegemonic formations – that do not routinely extend to the systematic, cross-utterance linking of linguistic form to political logic: discursive institutionalism treats linguistic texture as largely transparent, while the Essex School works above it, at the level of articulation. The gap, in short, is one of scale.

Across the disciplinary divide

Each approach, as the preceding overview suggests, has cultivated its own analytical strengths and, with them, its own blind spots. The problem, however, runs deeper than

incompleteness: an analysis that focuses mostly on internal meaning, or mostly on situated meaning, does not simply leave the other unexamined – it produces readings whose stability depends on the dimension that remains out of view. Read predominantly along a single dimension, an utterance may appear to do one thing; bringing in the other dimension can substantially recharacterize it – sometimes by adding a layer of significance, sometimes by shifting where the analytical weight falls, sometimes by revising the inference itself. Such readings are thus not systematically wrong, but their conclusions are held in place by an unexamined reliance on the dimension they do not thematize. The two subsections that follow take each field in turn – political science first, then DA –, using an extended example to show what the missing dimension changes.

Taking discourse seriously

Despite the increasing influence of the discursive turn, the integration of discourse analysis into political science remains, in many instances, partial – and at times superficial. Empirical studies that purport to ‘take discourse seriously’ (Schmidt 2008, 305) often stop short of genuinely doing so. Instead, discourse enters the analysis as content to be sorted, and the account that results is therefore descriptive. Such practices risk ‘under-analysis through summary’ or ‘through over-quotation’ (Antaki et al. 2003, 6): presenting or paraphrasing discourse without engaging substantially with it.

To move beyond treating discourse as background content to be quoted or categorized requires close attention to how political objects are linguistically constructed. Political discourse, after all, operates as much through overt claims as through shared assumptions and normative premises; and these assumptions, rarely surfacing explicitly, are precisely what lexical and grammatical choices encode. For this reason, these choices play a central role in the meaning-making process: different formulations convey different meanings and, by extension, different political implications. Taking discourse seriously thus means treating meaning not as transparent or self-evident, but as something to be interrogated. A brief statement by Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo, made at the height of the second COVID-19 wave, makes the point concretely²:

- (1) Alexander De Croo, Prime Minister from October 2020 (Open VLD, Flemish liberal party), quoted in *Knack*, 18/10/2020: It is not the HORECA [hospitality and food service sector] sector’s fault that it has to close, but the priority is to avoid contacts.

Though brief and seemingly uncontroversial, this utterance encodes several politically consequential moves. First, while urging people to ‘avoid contacts’, it omits any direct mention of the underlying aim: reducing COVID-19 infections. This omission suggests that the goal has become doxa: so widely accepted that it no longer requires naming or justification. Foundational aims are thus rendered invisible, foreclosing contestation by presupposing consensus. Implicit too is a specific causal chain: that reducing contact is the obvious way to prevent infections, and that closing the hospitality sector is an effective instrument. Left unquestioned, this causal chain naturalizes particular policy choices and obscures both their political and empirical contestability.

Second, the closure of the hospitality and food service sector is framed as an absolute necessity. Two linguistic choices produce this effect. The modal ‘have to’³ (‘moet’ in the

original text, see Appendix 1) presents closure as a non-negotiable imperative rather than a political choice among alternatives, shielding policymakers from accountability. The syntactic structure compounds this: agency is assigned to the sector ('it has to close' / 'zij moet sluiten'), while the actual agent, the government, is absent. This absence naturalizes the measure, presenting it as the inevitable outcome of circumstances rather than a deliberate act. Together, these elements depoliticize the closure.

Third, the normative assumptions underlying the decision, such as how to balance public health, economic stability, and civil liberties, are left entirely implicit. The statement makes no reference to the values in play or to the rationale for prioritizing some over others. Yet a moral logic surfaces subtly through the phrase 'not [their] fault', which concedes the sector's innocence. This invokes a latent fairness dilemma: why should those not culpable endure the consequences? Crucially, the absence of any attempt to resolve this tension reveals that fairness is not the operative principle in legitimizing the decision. Instead, legitimacy is grounded in a consequentialist logic: in this context, at least, the expected outcomes of the closure outweigh deontological considerations of justice.

A political analyst working from propositional content would code (1) straightforwardly: De Croo justifies the closure by invoking the priority of reducing contacts, and he exonerates the sector. Read this way, the utterance registers as a fairly standard instance of health-based justification, with a conciliatory note toward an affected industry. But this reading misses most of what the preceding analysis brought to light: the elision of the deciding agent, the unresolved fairness question, the appeal to contact reduction left to carry the legitimation alone. A thematic reading thus concludes that De Croo is justifying a public health measure, whereas attending to how the utterance is phrased shows him doing something more specific: substituting one conception of political justification for another without having to defend the substitution. That is the part of the utterance's political meaning that DA recovers.

Yet in practice, even linguistically grounded studies frequently fall short of this ambition, and a gap between theoretical commitment and execution has been a recurrent object of internal critique within CDA itself (Breeze 2011; Widdowson 2004). One illustrative case is a recent study of Prime Minister Mia Mottley's discursive agency (Nartey 2024), which undertakes a Faircloughian three-dimensional analysis based on a corpus of 60 speeches. However, the textual dimension receives only limited development: Mottley's agency is organized into three identity constructs inferred from broad thematic readings rather than systematic linguistic analysis, and interpretive claims such as the 'strategic' alternation between *I* and *we* (10) are advanced through hand-picked excerpts rather than through patterns traced across the data. The example is symptomatic of a tendency that surfaces in empirical DA: even when grounded in sophisticated linguistic method, some studies can default to thematic summarization at the expense of formal-pragmatic analysis.

Gaining political thickness

Turning to DA, a different but equally consequential limitation can be found. While DA approaches provide fine-grained accounts of linguistic mechanisms and the reproduction of ideology, they often lack the conceptual tools to engage fully with the institutional and normative dimensions of their objects. As a result, their political orientation can appear more aspirational than enacted. Even when the analysis reaches toward political

science, it tends to do so instrumentally rather than in ways that genuinely support the analytical framework (Breeze 2011; Jones 2007; Threadgold 2003). Without such grounding, though, the analysis risks grasping political realities only as discursive constructions, overlooking the ways in which they function as structuring categories of political life. What such analyses often leave unaddressed is why actors speak as they do in relation to the institutional settings, power structures, and stakes that shape their discourse. DA may reveal how meaning is produced through form; it rarely asks what that meaning does politically.

In excerpt (2), the Belgian Prime Minister responds to parliamentary questioning on the generalized use of face masks by framing her government's position as an alignment with the current state of scientific advice. Her intervention mobilizes a layered structure of epistemic deference, from the WHO to the Risk Management Group to the federal government, and positions the executive within a chain of scientific authorities.

- (2) Sophie Wilmès, Prime Minister until October 2020 (MR, French-speaking liberal party) during a plenary session of the Parliament, 09/04/2020: Regarding masks, I would remind you that the shortage is global and that tensions on supply markets are extreme. I am being asked about the widespread use of masks, which is the subject of many debates in Belgium – but not only here. As you know, the recommendations we have been relaying since the start of the crisis are based on the advice of the WHO, on which the scientific experts gathered within the Risk Management Group also rely. The WHO has indeed confirmed again this week its recommendation regarding a non-generalized use of masks. At this stage, the RMG has neither recommended the widespread use of masks nor advised making their use mandatory. Nor has it, of course, prohibited or ruled out their use – as I heard in your question. No one has rejected this use. The FPS Public Health has, moreover, posted a tutorial on social media for those who wish to make their own masks. However, the RMG warns against the false sense of complete safety induced by wearing a mask – all the more so if a mask is not used in accordance with the recommendations or not worn properly. The RMG also recalls that confinement, social distancing and hygiene measures constitute the most effective protective measures at this time.

The utterance performs several politically consequential moves. First, it presents the government's position as derived from scientific advice rather than chosen among alternatives. At the time of the intervention, however, Belgium had no strategic stock of FFP2 masks: the reserve of 38 million units accumulated in 2009 had been destroyed in 2017–2018 and not renewed, under a previous government in which Wilmès herself held the Budget portfolio. Recommending generalized mask use in this context would have converted a material shortage into an imputable policy failure. What the statement frames as epistemic deference therefore operates as a retrospective alignment of scientific advice with an operational capacity shaped by prior political choices. By grounding the current position in what scientific bodies have or have not recommended, Wilmès precludes the question of what the government has or has not done: the frame of prior responsibility is displaced by the frame of present alignment. This displacement is invisible without reconstructing the speaker's position in the sequence of decisions that produced the current constraint.

Second, the intervention draws its legitimacy from a chain of authoritative bodies – WHO, Risk Management Group – in which the executive figures as a transmitter. This distribution locates decisional authority outside the government and therefore outside parliamentary contestation. Questioning is therefore redirected toward bodies beyond Parliament’s reach. The government operates under special powers, which grant the legal capacity to act by decree but carry no political mandate of their own: they are a temporary authorization precisely because the executive lacks the parliamentary majority that would allow the normal legislative course. Epistemic deference thus substitutes for the political legitimacy she will not be able to presuppose when those decisions come to be evaluated. The source of authority is relocated from a government whose mandate is contingent to bodies whose authority is not, and the conditions under which that mandate could be debated are themselves pushed out of reach. A political choice is rearticulated as a scientific constraint and, with that rearticulation, withdrawn from the arenas in which political choices are normally contested – a dynamic analyzed as depoliticization (Burnham 2001; Flinders and Buller 2006). What is at stake, beyond the local legitimation of this particular decision, is the accountability relation on which democratic government rests: the triadic structure by which an actor gives an account to a forum for a conduct (Bovens 2007). Each of its terms is unsettled here: the actor denies agency; the forum is redirected elsewhere; the conduct is requalified as transmission.

These moves are what the text accomplishes by being spoken from this position, at this moment, in this institutional configuration. A reading of (2) focused on internal meaning alone would register the government’s epistemic posture and its careful alignment with the scientific advice available at that moment. What it would leave unspecified is what kind of speech act is being performed. The intervention’s intelligibility as the management of a prior political responsibility – rather than as a neutral transmission of scientific consensus – depends on the institutional position from which it is articulated and on the sequence of decisions that shaped that position. Attending to these institutional dynamics is what allows the analysis to identify what the utterance accomplishes: a relocation of accountability away from the decisions that made the current constraint what it is.

Grounding discourse analysis in political science is, however, no guarantee of the analytical depth just described. Politically grounded studies can invoke the vocabulary of authority, legitimacy, and institutional order without making those concepts do analytical work on the discourse they examine. A recent study of pandemic governance in four autocratizing European states (Soyaltin-Colella and Sert 2024) illustrates this tendency vividly. Drawing on the Narrative Policy Framework, the authors analyze a corpus of 238 news stories to show how Viktor Orbán, Andrzej Duda and Mateusz Morawiecki, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Aleksandar Vučić narrated the COVID-19 crisis to legitimize repressive measures and contest the liberal democratic order. The introduction and case background sections carefully identify institutionally distinct trajectories: Hungary’s Coronavirus Act 2020 and rule by decree, Poland’s combination of parliamentary statutes and executive resolutions, Turkey’s presidentialist implementation, Serbia’s open-ended state of exception. Yet these distinctions barely enter the analysis of the narratives themselves. Once the discourses are sorted into ‘war’ and ‘crisis and decline’ storylines and arrayed across a common grid of setting, plot, characters, and moral, the four leaders appear as variants of a single pattern, differentiated by tonal intensity. A war narrative deployed by Orbán, supported by the constitutional majority that allows him to legislate

by decree, does not do the same political work as a war narrative deployed by Erdoğan, whose presidentialism bypasses parliament through different channels. The grid registers that both leaders cast the virus as an enemy and the opposition as villains; it cannot register that their narratives are plugged into different architectures of power and therefore accomplish different things. Political categories enter the framing of the study without structuring the analysis of the discourse. What is lost is precisely what the preceding analysis of (2) gained: the capacity to read discourse as situated, as doing what it does because of where it is spoken from.

The two shortfalls are symmetrical: political science research that registers what is said without seeing what the saying does, and DA research that traces what the saying does without grounding it in where and by whom it is done. The next section develops a framework designed to hold the two dimensions in a single analytical movement.

Bridging political science and discourse analysis: political legitimacy as a worked example

Thorough integration between political science and DA remains rare. Studies that bring together political scientists and linguists exist (e.g. Bailly et al. 2025; Heyvaert et al. 2020), but few explicitly pursue a thorough integrative approach. What follows illustrates what such integration can look like in practice, using conceptions of political legitimacy as a case study. While existing work in DA has examined how political actors discursively construct legitimacy through recurring strategies (Reyes 2011; van Leeuwen 2007; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999), the focus here is different: rather than mapping the strategies through which legitimacy is produced, the aim is to reconstruct the normative conceptions that underlie and orient those strategies. On the political science side, the proposed framework likewise operates at a different register than established traditions of discourse-oriented inquiry, whether post-Marxist (Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000; Laclau and Mouffe 1985), interpretive-institutionalist (Schmidt 2008; Yanow 2000), or deliberative (Dryzek 2022). Where these traditions reconstruct political logics, institutional dynamics, or normative ideals at a systemic or institutional level, the analysis works at the granularity of situated utterances, asking how particular conceptions are linguistically assembled in concrete speech and connected to identifiable registers of democratic theory.

The framework developed below examines how Belgian politicians and experts conceived of legitimate decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic, attending simultaneously to how conceptions of legitimacy are linguistically produced (internal meaning) and to the normative and institutional imaginaries within which they are embedded (situated meaning). The corpus comprises non-elicited public discourse produced between 1 January 2020, and 31 December 2021, in both French and Dutch. The analysis sets out to trace how legitimacy was conceptualized in practice: that is, what speakers presented as making decision-making acceptable or unacceptable.

Conceptualizing democratic legitimacy

Building a politically thick framework requires engaging closely with the intellectual traditions that have shaped modern understandings of legitimacy. Legitimacy, though central to both political theory and democratic life, remains ambiguous, even

‘muddled’ (Marquéz 2016). It is best approached as an essentially contested concept (Gallie 1955) – evaluative in nature, open to multiple interpretations, yet anchored in a shared referential core: the justification of political power. Normative theories ask when power ought to be accepted by identifying the conditions under which the exercise of political authority is justifiable, whether in terms of the right to rule, the justification of coercion, or the duty to obey (Buchanan 2002; Rawls 1971; Simmons 1979). Empirical approaches, by contrast, ask when and why power is accepted in practice: they understand legitimacy as a phenomenon of social recognition, rooted in the beliefs through which those subject to authority come to regard it as valid (Beetham 1991; Weber 1978). Each has a characteristic weakness. Normative theories tend to abstract away from the historical and social conditions in which standards of justification operate; empirical approaches risk collapsing legitimacy into mere acceptance, even when recognition is shaped by manipulation or symbolic domination (Beetham 1991; Peter 2023).

In democratic settings, the question of legitimacy takes a more specific form. Power must not only be justifiable in general terms but also compatible with the idea that those subject to it are, ultimately, its authors. In representative democracies, this requirement is mediated through institutions and procedures that govern in the name of the people rather than through their direct presence. This generates a constitutive tension: power must remain attributable to citizens through mechanisms of authorization and control, while also being capable of producing coherent collective action in response to common problems (Manin 1995; Pitkin 1967; Scharpf 1999). The tension is organized around two interrelated requirements. The first is participatory: democratic legitimacy depends on those subject to power being able, in some form, to count in its formation. In representative regimes, this takes primarily an indirect form – through elections, accountability mechanisms, and the capacity of institutions to keep the governed politically present beyond the act of voting itself (Pitkin 1967; Saward 2006). The second requirement is effectiveness: governing large political communities requires institutional capacities that go beyond what the direct involvement of all citizens can deliver – representation exists, in part, to supply those capacities. Legitimacy is tied to whether decisions actually address collective problems, and hence to the perceived competence of leaders and the capacity of institutions to produce coherent and timely public action (Estlund 2008; Scharpf 1999). These two requirements can be justified either procedurally, through the fairness and inclusiveness of decision-making processes, or substantively, through the quality and moral content of outcomes (Dahl 2007; Rawls 1971; Scharpf 1970). Crucially, they do not always point in the same direction. The more decision-making is delegated to those deemed most competent, the more it risks becoming detached from democratic authorization. Contemporary democracies are, in this sense, permanently negotiating the line between effective governance and democratic oversight.

Legitimacy through discourse

Studying conceptions of legitimacy empirically requires a method capable of reaching the standards by which political power is evaluated – standards that actors rarely state outright. This rules out approaches that operationalize legitimacy as a measurable attitude, whether through surveys, trust indices, or approval ratings. While such approaches may

register whether individuals approve of institutions or regard decisions as valid, they do not reveal the meaning actors attach to legitimacy, the criteria through which they define it, or the conditions under which the decision-making process is deemed acceptable or not. In that sense, they capture evaluations of legitimacy, but not the underlying conceptions through which legitimacy is understood.

Reaching that layer of meaning requires attending to discourse (Heritage and Taylor 2024). When political and expert actors justify or criticize decisions, they do more than express support or opposition. These standards tend to emerge through the structure of justifications, through what is implied, and through the evaluative choices that run through political speech. Discourse is therefore not merely the medium through which legitimacy claims are voiced, but the site in which conceptions of legitimacy take shape – and where, consequently, they can be reconstructed. This is precisely where the integration of political science and DA proves its value: recovering those conceptions requires both linguistic sensitivity and normative depth.

Operationalizing legitimacy

To investigate how political and expert actors conceive of legitimacy, this study develops a coding scheme that holds the internal and situated dimensions of meaning jointly in view. The corpus consists of three types of non-elicited discourse: tweets, parliamentary speeches, and press-reported statements. The focus on spontaneously produced, publicly available discourse is itself a methodological choice: it captures the conceptions of legitimacy conveyed in real-world settings, beyond the constraints of formal interviews, and addresses a tendency in political science to over-rely on elicited discourse that often fails to reflect how key issues are actually represented in the public sphere (Schaffer 2015).

The scheme is systematic and qualitative, designed to capture how speakers conceptualize legitimate decision-making across four objects that together exhaust what an account of decision-making must address:

- The qualities a decision should possess
- The qualities expected of actors involved in decision-making
- The institutional roles these actors are expected to fulfil
- The procedures the decision-making process should follow

The coding process begins with the identification of the relevant object. Once identified, each object is analyzed through a structured grid that captures the criteria of legitimacy articulated in discourse. This process is inductive and context-sensitive. It accounts for counterfactuals (what is presented as illegitimate, such as a decision made solely by experts) and anchors interpretive claims in specific lexical or grammatical cues to guard against overinterpretation. The scheme is organized around the following coding sections, each comprising several variables:

Discourse and speaker parameters: The variables in this section capture the identity of the speaker and the context of enunciation, defined in alignment with the research question and analytical objectives. In the present study, they include the date and arena of discourse production (e.g. Parliament, press, Twitter), the type of intervention (tweet, retweet, question, reply), and the language used (French, Dutch, bilingual).

Further specifications concern the speaker's identity, their actor category (expert or politician), political affiliation or domain of expertise, their formal role during the crisis (e.g. Prime Minister, party leader, appointed expert), and whether they belong to the governing majority or the opposition. Without these parameters, the situated dimension of the analysis would have no anchor: they allow legitimacy claims to be interpreted in light of who articulates them, from what institutional position, and under what political constraints. They also make it possible to identify structural patterns in how different actor types conceive of legitimate decision-making.

Contextual elements: These variables situate discursive statements within their broader communicative and political context. They capture general descriptive features of the discourse, especially its thematic and relational dimensions, that are essential for understanding how legitimacy claims operate. They encode the target of the message (a person, institution, or decision), the speaker's stance toward that target (positive, negative, or ambiguous), the specific content of the object identified (e.g. the type of policy at stake if the object is a decision, or the actor concerned if it bears on actor quality or role) and the speaker's position toward that object (support, critique, or ambiguous). Together, they provide the contextual anchoring needed to interpret what is at stake in a given utterance, making it possible to trace, for instance, how the same criteria of legitimacy operate differently depending on their specific object, or on whether they are embedded in a critique or an endorsement.

Analysis of the conception: These variables document the criteria that the identified object must meet to be considered legitimate. The information encoded under this section helps answer key questions about each object: what a decision should achieve, what qualities and behaviours actors should exhibit, what roles they should perform, and how the process should be organized. Disqualifying criteria – those that render a decision, actor, role, or procedure illegitimate – are also systematically coded. The coding process unfolds in two stages, progressively abstracting from the textual surface to broader analytical and normative insights:

Level 1 – Text-proximal coding: This first stage involves coding legitimacy criteria as closely as possible to the text, with minimal interpretive inference. Specific lexical or syntactic elements that convey evaluative expectations are encoded (see Appendix 2). By tying this first level to the wording and structure of the utterance, the analysis preserves direct access to the precise meaning of the evaluation. This makes it possible to identify more rigorously what is actually being grouped under a given legitimacy principle at Level 2, and therefore maintains transparency between the empirical material and its normative classification.

Level 2 – Normative anchoring: At this stage, coded items are grouped into broader categories reflecting shared rationales or justificatory logics. The categories were developed through an iterative movement between theory and data: grounded initially in democratic theory, the scheme was progressively refined through engagement with the corpus, making room for categories of lesser theoretical prominence that surfaced consistently in the data. This step connects empirical discourse to the normative vocabulary of democratic legitimacy, and makes it possible to move beyond isolated textual features toward recurring patterns in how legitimacy is constructed and contested.

The scheme does not itself supply a closed repertoire of theoretical resources; its function is to locate where they are needed and to discipline their mobilization. Level 1 anchors each interpretive move in specific lexical or grammatical cues; when an external theory is then brought in at Level 2, the reading is accountable to the textual feature that motivated its introduction, not to a thematic resemblance between the utterance and the theory. The framework does not replace the analyst's theoretical resources; it constrains how they can be brought to bear.

To illustrate the two-level architecture, consider example (3), which expresses a conception of the quality that a decision – in this case, the maintenance of vaccine patents – must possess to be considered legitimate:

- (3) Egbert Lachaert, party leader of Open VLD (Flemish liberal party), quoted in *De Standard*, 28/01/2021: [on the idea of abolishing vaccine patents] Without the free market and innovation, there would be no vaccine today. A fair return on investment is part of that.

The coding identifies two qualities that the decision must possess and proceeds as follows:

- Object: decision quality
- Decision type: maintaining vaccine patents
- Quality 1
 - Level 1 (text-proximal coding): Condition of possibility for vaccine existence ('Without the free market and innovation, there would be no vaccine today')
 - Level 2 (normative anchoring): Effectiveness, since patents should be maintained because they support the functioning of the innovation system. The rapid development of a vaccine is presented as having been made possible by the dynamics of innovation and competition associated with a liberal market economy. In this view, patents are legitimate (and their abolition is conversely illegitimate) as they help preserve the system's capacity to deliver concrete results.
- Quality 2
 - Level 1 (text-proximal coding): Return on investment ('A fair return on investment is part of that')
 - Level 2 (normative anchoring): Distributive justice: patents should also be maintained because they ensure fair compensation for those who have borne economic risks. Pharmaceutical companies are deemed to have invested substantial resources and taken risks in the research process, and the protection of patents is therefore justified as a way of guaranteeing an equitable return on that investment.

The two-level architecture of the scheme preserves the analytical gains of both political science and DA: text-proximal coding keeps the analysis anchored in the linguistic texture of the data, while normative anchoring connects those observations to the theoretical vocabulary of democratic legitimacy. In doing so, it also addresses a persistent limitation of empirical approaches to legitimacy: as Beetham (1991) argued, such approaches have tended to reduce legitimacy to belief or perceived acceptability, without reconstructing the normative principles that structure such judgments. The framework adopted here

avoids this reduction by drawing on democratic theory not as a rigid template imposed on the data, but as a structured vocabulary for identifying the standards through which political power is justified or contested. Together, these two layers make it possible to move between the granularity of a lexical choice and the broader normative logic it encodes, and to reveal what lies beneath the normative labels themselves: the diversity of meanings a single category can subsume, and the gaps between what a principle formally implies and how it operates in practice.

Finally, this dual architecture supports quantitative and qualitative analysis alike. The systematic coding of legitimacy claims allows for the quantification of discursive patterns and, where appropriate, statistical testing. The text-proximal dimension, in turn, preserves the qualitative depth needed to reconstruct what legitimacy actually means in the situated speech of political actors. While this analytical scheme was developed to study discursive constructions of legitimacy during the COVID-19 crisis, its logic is transferable beyond this specific context. The particular categories it proposes are meant to be adapted to fit different empirical objects. What holds across contexts is the approach it instantiates – attending at once to linguistic form and political stakes.

Examples of analysis and interpretation

The following section illustrates a selection of the observations that such a coding scheme can reveal. It focuses on examples chosen to show how the framework attends both to the internal and situated dimensions of meaning.

(I) interpreting legitimacy claims: discursive case analyses

The excerpts analyzed below put the coding scheme to work. Each is brief, and each might appear, on first reading, to say something straightforward. What the grid reveals, however, is that even a single utterance can encode multiple legitimacy claims simultaneously, operating through what is presupposed as much as through what is said. The key coding dimensions of excerpts (3), (4), and (5) are presented in Appendix 2.

In late January 2021, as vaccination campaigns began across Europe, debates over vaccine patents intensified in Belgium. Gwendolyn Rutten, former leader of the Open VLD, publicly called for a temporary suspension of the patents, publishing a sequence of tweets that framed the issue explicitly in distributive terms:

- (4) Gwendolyn Rutten, former leader of Open VLD (Flemish liberal party), on Twitter, 28/01/2021: [on why vaccine patents should be suspended] A large part of the research costs for vaccines is paid by governments. The profits that result from this are secured for years thanks to patents. These are in fact monopoly profits. You can be liberal and still not like that.

At first glance, Rutten's intervention occupies the same normative terrain as Lachaert's (see excerpt 3): both politicians, operating within the same political family and within days of each other, explicitly engage the fairness of the economic returns generated by the patent system. Yet their conceptions of what such fairness requires diverge sharply. Lachaert's statement anchored legitimate distribution in a moral economy of return on

investment – the fair remuneration of those who, through the dynamics of the free market, brought the vaccine into existence. His conception is consistent with an entitlement-based view of justice (Nozick 1974), for which a distribution is just if it arises from legitimate acquisition and voluntary transfer. On this view, redistributive intervention in the pharmaceutical industry's patent-secured profits would itself constitute an injustice, since it would disregard the historical chain of investment and risk-taking that produced the vaccine.

Rutten's statement contests this position by disputing the very identification of who has contributed. Two linguistic moves accomplish this reframing. First, the syntactic structure places governments in subject position as the agent paying research costs ('a large part of the research costs for vaccines is paid by governments'), dislodging the pharmaceutical industry from its default status as sole investor. Second, the lexical reclassification of the returns ('These are in fact monopoly profits') substitutes a critical category (monopoly) for the neutral one (return on investment) that Lachaert had invoked. The qualifier 'in fact' does additional work: it presents the reclassification as a correction of a misdescription, anchoring the disagreement at the level of what the profits *actually are*, rather than at the level of how they should be distributed.

This move echoes a broader line of argument in which the state figures as an often-invisible lead investor in pharmaceutical innovation, and the failure to socialize returns amounts to a form of private appropriation of publicly generated value (Mazzucato 2013). The final sentence makes the underlying position explicit. 'You can be liberal and still not like that' signals that what is at stake is not the rejection of distributive justice, but the identification of the premises on which it rests. While both interventions appear to operate within a distributive horizon, they diverge on the prior question of who counts as a contributor, and therefore on what the principle itself requires in this case. Where Lachaert defends the patent regime as the institutional condition of legitimate reward, Rutten argues that this regime, in its current operation, rewards the wrong contributors.

Both politicians mobilize distributive justice; both operate within a broadly liberal horizon. What separates them is the descriptive premise that the normative category presupposes. It is precisely this premise that text-proximal coding makes visible. A scheme that stopped at the normative label would register only convergence where a deeper divergence runs through the very identification of who counts as a contributor. This case thus illustrates a broader analytical capacity of the coding scheme: its ability to trace how shared normative principles can subsume divergent, even incompatible, conceptions. By requiring explicit articulation of legitimacy criteria at the text-proximal level, the framework enables systematic comparison of interpretive variation across speakers, parties, and institutional positions – variation that thematic or single-level coding would leave invisible.

In April 2020, the Belgian federal government set up the GEES ('Groupe d'experts en charge de l'Exit Strategy'), an expert advisory group tasked with designing the country's exit from the first COVID-19 lockdown. Alongside clinicians and epidemiologists, the group also included economists, most notably Mathias Dewatripont. Over the course of 2020, the involvement of the consulting firm McKinsey in the GEES's work sparked public controversy, both for the substantial cost of the contracts and for the perceived

risk of private influence on the substance of expert recommendations. The excerpt below is Dewatripont's response to these criticisms, as reported in the press:

- (5) Mathias Dewatripont, economist and member of the GEES, quoted in *Le Soir*, 04/11/2021: Without McKinsey, we would not have been able to produce all the notes that we did produce. They were accustomed to managing this type of project and offered us a methodology, without influencing our recommendations.

Read on its face, the statement mobilizes a single justificatory register: operational effectiveness. It does not merely credit McKinsey with a helpful contribution; it presents the firm as the condition of possibility for the GEES's output, foreclosing any alternative scenario. The following clause extends the same register: 'they were accustomed to managing this type of project and offered us a methodology'. McKinsey's contribution is described in terms of capacity, experience, and methodological infrastructure. On this reading, the legitimacy of the procedure rests on what it enables the GEES to deliver; a conception close to what Weber (1978) identified as *Zweckrationalität*, instrumental rationality oriented toward efficient goal-attainment.

The final qualifier, however, reframes the entire statement. 'Without influencing our recommendations' anticipates and neutralizes a second criterion that is operative in the argument but that the statement does not itself mobilize to justify the arrangement. By denying that McKinsey influenced the substantive content of the expert advice, Dewatripont acknowledges that the legitimacy of the procedure is evaluable on grounds distinct from effectiveness – namely, the scientific autonomy of the experts' judgment. This echoes what has been identified as the norm of *disinterestedness* in the ethos of science, that is the expectation that scientific claims are authoritative precisely because they are produced without external interference from non-epistemic interests (Merton 1973; for an empirical analysis, see Rondiat 2025). The negation brings into view a normative register that the positive argument leaves unarticulated, a register under which the question of whether the recommendations were still the experts' own would be a fully intelligible challenge. The statement does not justify the procedure on the grounds of scientific autonomy; scientific autonomy functions instead as a boundary that the argument preemptively secures. The structure of the denial signals that the criterion is active in the debate and that the argument is built partly around its anticipation.

Effectiveness thus supports the procedure positively, while scientific rationality bounds it negatively. What legitimates the arrangement is operational capacity; what would delegitimize it is a breach of substantive autonomy. This asymmetry points to a general feature of legitimacy claims in contested terrain. Positions are rarely held together by a single criterion; they are often maintained by one register of justification while being shielded from objection by a second, whose mobilization remains more or less implicit. The statement can be read, in Weberian terms, as articulating two distinct forms of rationality: an instrumental logic, invoked to justify the arrangement, and a value-oriented one, which appears only through negation as a boundary condition of its legitimacy.

A coding scheme that registered only actively mobilized criteria would record Dewatripont's claim as an effectiveness argument and stop there. Registering what would render the procedure illegitimate reveals the latent presence of scientific rationality as an evaluative standard at work in this debate, and recovers the two-tier normative

structure that sustains Dewatripont's position. More generally, it shows that discursive positions often carry more normative content than their positive articulations suggest. Legitimacy claims also reveal, through what they deny or preempt, the broader map of criteria considered operative in a given controversy. The text-proximal coding of both positive criteria and their negated counterparts therefore gives access to a layer of normative meaning that a single-level scheme, oriented only toward active justification, would systematically leave unexamined.

Such close analyses illustrate complementary capacities of the coding scheme. The Lachaert-Rutten pair shows that the same label, distributive justice, can operate as the site of a disagreement rather than as its common ground. Dewatripont's statement shows that discursive positions often rely on more normative criteria than they positively articulate: what is denied or preempted is part of the legitimacy claim, not outside it. In both cases, the richness of the analysis depends on holding together two dimensions: how claims are formulated in text, and what is politically and normatively at stake in their formulation.

(II) mapping legitimacy claims: quantitative patterns

The close readings above reveal how individual utterances encode legitimacy claims, but the situated dimension of the framework invites a further question: how do such claims distribute across speakers, institutional positions, and moments of the crisis? The systematic coding makes this question tractable, shifting the analytical focus from what is done in a given utterance to what is done recurrently across the corpus. The following results, drawn from a sample of 1833 utterances (611 tweets, 611 press statements, and 611 parliamentary interventions), illustrate what becomes visible at this scale. The section focuses on three of the strongest and most instructive associations in the corpus.

The analyses reported below combine descriptive distributional tests with multivariate modelling. Global associations between variables are first assessed using chi-square tests with simulated p -values, which provide an overall picture of distributional differences across actor categories, arenas, and time periods. To quantify effect sizes and account for the clustered structure of the data – whereby multiple utterances may be produced by the same speaker – odds ratios are estimated from mixed-effects logistic regression models (glmer), with speaker modelled as a random intercept. This approach accounts for clustering at the speaker level and allows the identification of associations that hold after controlling for other variables in the model. Corrections for multiple comparisons are applied using the Benjamini-Hochberg procedure, and Bonferroni-corrected results are reported where relevant to distinguish robust from more fragile effects.

The strongest source of variation in the corpus concerns the association between the object of a legitimacy claim and the normative register it activates, $\chi^2(20) = 351.84$, $p < .001$. Given that objects and legitimacy criteria are coded from the same utterances, these associations should be interpreted as structured co-occurrences rather than independent causal effects. Mixed-effects models confirm and specify this pattern. Actor-centred discourse is very strongly associated with ethics and moral authority (OR = 14.23, BH-adjusted $p < .001$, robust to Bonferroni correction), while being comparatively unlikely to invoke effectiveness or distributive justice. Decision-centred discourse draws more heavily on rationality (OR = 2.93, BH-adjusted $p < .001$), distributive justice (OR =

9.01, BH-adjusted $p < .001$), effectiveness, and general interest, while being less likely to mobilize democratic oversight, deliberation, or proceduralism. Procedure-centred discourse, for its part, is structured primarily by democratic oversight (OR = 5.66, BH-adjusted $p < .001$), deliberation and participation (OR = 14.37, BH-adjusted $p < .001$), and proceduralism. These patterns show that different objects call on different normative registers, recurrently and systematically. Actors are judged primarily in moral terms, decisions in epistemic and outcome-oriented terms, procedures in democratic-process terms. What the coding adds, then, is not only that normative registers vary across utterances – this the close readings already suggested – but that the variation is structured by the type of object under evaluation. Legitimacy is therefore segmented by what is up for evaluation.

Speaker type constitutes a second major source of variation, $\chi^2(10) = 66.59$, $p < .001$. Mixed-effects models show that expert discourse is more strongly associated with rationality (OR = 1.97, BH-adjusted $p < .001$, robust to Bonferroni correction), while political discourse is more likely to invoke proceduralism (OR = 2.19, BH-adjusted $p < .001$) and general interest (OR = 1.73, BH-adjusted $p = .004$). Additional associations with representativeness, effectiveness, and distributive justice are observed in political discourse, though these are less robust and do not survive Bonferroni correction. The pattern points to a meaningful divergence between an expert repertoire centred on epistemic legitimacy and a political repertoire drawing more heavily on procedural, collective, and institutional forms of justification. Experts, when they speak publicly about pandemic governance, disproportionately invoke rationality, the register that ties legitimacy to the quality of reasoning, evidence, and scientific method. Political actors, by contrast, more often reach for registers that connect legitimacy to the respect of procedures and to the realization of the general interest. The division is not absolute – political actors do mobilize rationality, and experts do speak in procedural terms – but it reflects a structural feature of the public discourse in which legitimacy claims circulate during crisis governance. This contrast should not, however, be interpreted independently of object distribution: experts and political actors do not speak about the same objects in the same proportions, and the divergence in normative registers partly reflects this structural difference in discursive focus.

This contrast becomes more differentiated when the analysis distinguishes between specific institutional positions and expert statuses, $\chi^2(90) = 226.95$, $p < .001$. Within political discourse, parliamentarians are more strongly associated with effectiveness (BH-adjusted $p < .001$) and democratic oversight (BH-adjusted $p = .001$), party presidents with general interest (BH-adjusted $p < .001$), and ministers with proceduralism (BH-adjusted $p = .004$) – all effects surviving Bonferroni correction. Within expert discourse, experts frequently interviewed by the media stand out for their particularly strong association with rationality (BH-adjusted $p < .001$), while parliamentary experts show a weaker tendency toward adhesion and consent, an effect that does not survive Bonferroni correction and should be interpreted cautiously. At first glance, some of these associations may appear counterintuitive – parliamentarians associated with effectiveness rather than oversight alone, ministers associated with proceduralism rather than with the effectiveness of their decisions (which one might expect to be foregrounded in a context demanding swift action). Such patterns likely reflect the division of discursive labour characteristic of each position: parliamentarians mobilize effectiveness not only to endorse governmental action but to contest it, in the form of efficacy-oriented critique;

ministers foreground proceduralism to defend the regularity of their decisions in the face of external scrutiny. The same register, in other words, can serve opposing argumentative functions depending on the institutional position from which it is mobilized. The justificatory repertoire thus depends not only on whether speakers intervene as politicians or experts, but on the specific role and platform from which they speak.

Together with the close readings, these patterns show the two faces of the same framework: the same coding that recovers the normative structure of a single utterance also maps how such structures distribute across the institutional landscape of a crisis.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the study of political discourse inhabits an interdisciplinary space in which political science and DA must be bridged through sustained dialogue. Discourse is where political meaning is produced and naturalized, grasping it fully requires both the sensitivity to linguistic form that DA brings and the normative and institutional grounding that political science provides. Most existing work acknowledges this in principle without following through in practice, drawing selectively on one tradition without engaging with what the other requires. The paper has proposed an approach that takes such integration seriously as a practice, demonstrating what each tradition contributes and what their combination reveals. It has done so by building a framework that moves between the granularity of lexical choices and the normative depth of democratic theory, holding both dimensions in view simultaneously.

Applied to conceptions of political legitimacy in pandemic-era Belgium, the integrated framework revealed dimensions that single-discipline analyses would have left aside. Close reading of individual utterances – first in the diagnostic analyses, then through the coding scheme – showed how legitimacy is constructed not only through explicit claims but through presupposition, lexical choice, and strategic framing: a modal verb depoliticizing a closure, a negation securing an unspoken criterion. The quantitative analysis, in turn, uncovered structural patterns in how different actor categories, institutional positions, and communicative arenas are associated with distinct justificatory repertoires – patterns that connect the texture of individual utterances to broader dynamics of crisis governance and democratic legitimation. Beyond these specific findings, the framework made visible something about the theoretical categories it mobilized. By requiring that each normative label be anchored in the lexical and grammatical choices that motivate its use, the analysis showed that categories such as distributive justice are not stable analytical primitives. The same principle could subsume descriptively incompatible conceptions, and what appeared as a shared justificatory horizon could conceal deep disagreement about the premises the principle rests on. Bridging, in this sense, exposes the internal heterogeneity of categories and, at times, the instability of their referents.

The analytical framework developed here lends itself to broader application. Its transferability lies in the movement it enacts – the commitment to holding linguistic form and political stakes in view at the same time – rather than in the specific categories it proposes, which can and should be adapted to different empirical objects. The internal/situated distinction thus functions as a standing diagnostic: a reminder that any analysis of political discourse that attends to only one of its dimensions risks not just missing part of the object, but misreading the part it does attend to. The case made in the paper is,

ultimately, for an interdisciplinarity that is practiced, whose commitments are visible in the texture of the analysis, not merely in its framing.

Notes

1. In what follows, 'DA' refers to discourse analysis as an established interdisciplinary field with its own theoretical and epistemological foundations. When 'discourse analysis' appears in full, it designates the analytical practice of analyzing discourse, which any researcher may engage in regardless of disciplinary affiliation.
2. The translations presented in the paper are from the author. Original versions can be consulted in Appendix 1.
3. I translate 'moet sluiten' as 'has to close' rather than 'must close'. While both are grammatically possible, *has to* better reflects an externally imposed necessity in English. This choice preserves the sense that closure is presented as a constraint imposed by circumstances.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Excerpts and translations

Excerpt	Original	Translation
1	Niet de schuld van horeca dat zij moet sluiten, maar prioriteit is contacten vermijden	It is not the hospitality sector's fault that it has to close, but the priority is to avoid contacts.
2	S'agissant des masques, je rappelle que la pénurie est mondiale et que les tensions sont extrêmes sur les marchés de l'approvisionnement. On m'interroge sur le port généralisé du masque, qui fait l'objet de nombreux débats en Belgique – mais pas seulement. Comme vous le savez, les recommandations que nous relayons depuis le début de la crise se fondent sur l'avis de l'OMS, sur lequel se basent les experts scientifiques réunis au sein du Risk Management Group. L'OMS a confirmé encore cette semaine, c'est vrai, sa recommandation relative à un usage non généralisé des masques. À ce stade, le RMG n'a pas davantage recommandé le port généralisé du masque, pas plus qu'il n'a conseillé de le rendre obligatoire. Il ne l'a évidemment pas non plus interdit ni refusé – comme je l'ai entendu dans votre question. Personne n'a rejeté cet usage. Le SPF Santé publique a, du reste, mis en ligne sur les réseaux sociaux un tutoriel pour celles et ceux qui souhaitent s'en fabriquer. Cependant, le RMG met en garde contre le sentiment erroné de totale sécurité induit par le port du masque – a fortiori si son utilisation n'est pas conforme aux recommandations ou qu'il n'est pas employé de manière appropriée. Le RMG rappelle aussi que les mesures de confinement, de distanciation sociale et d'hygiène constituent les mesures de protection les plus efficaces aujourd'hui.	Regarding masks, I would remind you that the shortage is global and that tensions on supply markets are extreme. I am being asked about the widespread use of masks, which is the subject of many debates in Belgium – but not only here. As you know, the recommendations we have been relaying since the start of the crisis are based on the advice of the WHO, on which the scientific experts gathered within the Risk Management Group also rely. The WHO has indeed confirmed again this week its recommendation regarding a non-generalized use of masks. At this stage, the RMG has neither recommended the widespread use of masks nor advised making their use mandatory. Nor has it, of course, prohibited or ruled out their use – as I heard in your question. No one has rejected this use. The FPS Public Health has, moreover, posted a tutorial on social media for those who wish to make their own masks. However, the RMG warns against the false sense of complete safety induced by wearing a mask – all the more so if a mask is not used in accordance with the recommendations or not worn properly. The RMG also recalls that confinement, social distancing and hygiene measures constitute the most effective protective measures at this time.
3	Zonder vrije markt en innovatie was er nu geen vaccin. Daar hoort een faire return on investment bij.	Without the free market and innovation, there would be no vaccine today. A fair return on investment is part of that.
4	Groot deel onderzoekskosten van vaccins wordt door overheden betaald. De winsten die hieruit voortvloeien worden jaren veilig gesteld dank zij patenten. Dat zijn eigenlijk monopoliewinsten. Je kunt liberaal zijn en dat niet leuk vinden	A large part of the research costs for vaccines is paid by governments. The profits that result from this are secured for years thanks to patents. These are in fact monopoly profits. You can be liberal and still not like that.
5	Sans McKinsey, nous n'aurions pas pu produire toutes les notes que nous avons produites. Ils ont l'habitude de gérer ce type de projets et nous ont offert une méthodologie de travail, sans influencer nos recommandations.	Without McKinsey, we would not have been able to produce all the notes that we did produce. They were accustomed to managing this type of project and offered us a methodology, without influencing our recommendations.

Appendix 2. Coding of excerpts (3), (4) and (5)

Coding parameters	3 – Egbert Lachaert	4 – Gwendolyn Rutten	5 – Mathias Dewatripont
Discourse parameters			
Type of intervention	press statement	tweet	press statement
Actors type	politician	politician	expert
Party	Open VLD	Open VLD	NA
Area of expertise	NA	NA	economics

(Continued)

Continued.

Coding parameters	3 – Egbert Lachaert	4 – Gwendolyn Rutten	5 – Mathias Dewatripont
Formal role during the crisis	party leader (replaces Gwendolyn Rutten on 22/05/2020)	party leader (replaced by Egbert Lachaert on 22/05/2020), MP	member of the GEES
Contextual elements			
Target of the message	vaccine patents; pharmaceutical companies	vaccine patents; pharmaceutical companies	the involvement of McKinsey in the work of the GEES
Stance vis-à-vis the target	Positive	Negative	Positive
Object	quality of decision	quality of decision	procedures
Stance vis-à-vis the object	support	critique	support
Analysis of the conception			
Type of role, decision, actor or procedure	vaccine patents	vaccine patents	involvement of private consultants in expert advisory bodies
Legitimacy criteria (Level 1)	(i) condition of possibility for vaccine existence (ii) fair return on investment	(i) correct attribution of contribution (ii) limitation of monopoly profits	(i) operational capacity enabled by consultants (ii) preservation of substantive autonomy of experts (via VS criteria)
Lexical cues	(i) without the free market and innovation, there would be no vaccine today; (ii) a fair return on investment is part of that	(i) a large part of the research costs for vaccines is paid by governments (ii) these are in fact monopoly profits	(i) we would not have been able to produce all the notes that we did produce (ii) without influencing our recommendations
Theoretical anchoring (Level 2)	(i) effectiveness (ii) distributive justice	(i) distributive justice (ii) distributive justice	(i) effectiveness (ii) scientific rationality
Legitimacy criteria VS	NA	NA	external interference in the substantive content of expert advice
Lexical cues	NA	NA	without influencing our recommendations