
Stay safe! – A wish, advice, or an order?
Pragmatic creativity in times of a pandemic.

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The present paper analyses the different meanings the expression *Stay Safe* has acquired on two types of public signs that have appeared across London businesses throughout the Covid-19 pandemic: closure signs and signs regulating behaviour, both of which abounded in creative language use. Rather than merely announcing the closure, closure signs redirected customers to online services, declared support with governmental measures and reinforced the businesses' relationship with customers (Ogiermann & Bella 2021). Signs regulating behaviour, on the other hand, rather than merely replicating governmental instructions, used creative formulations, constructing a certain image for the businesses, and developing personalised strategies of customer retention (Feyaerts & Heyvaert 2022).

Drawing on 350 closure signs and 500 directive signs, this paper documents the creative uses of the expression *Stay Safe* in the context of a pandemic and the pragmatic changes it has undergone over a relatively short period of time. On closure signs, the imperative *Stay Safe* took on the function of a farewell formula (Brown & Levinson 1987: 98) expressing a wish directed towards the addressee's safety and well-being, with its exact function depending on its position in the text, its co-text and exact form. When *Stay Safe* started appearing on signs implementing containment measures, the imperative regained its directive function, away from concern for the recipient to an expression directing customers towards certain forms of behaviour and thus concern for others.

The study shows how creative meanings emerge in the context of a global health crisis, while also illustrating the complexity of the relationship between form and function, with the speech acts performed by *Stay Safe* and the strength of their illocutionary force depending on both context and co-text.

References: • Brown, P. & S.C. Levinson (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: CUP. • Feyaerts, K. & G. Heyvaert (2021). "Welcome Back, We've Missed You!" Humanized Business Communication in Shop Window Messages during Early 2020-Lockdown. *Languages* 6: 1-26. • Ogiermann, E. & S. Bella (2021). On the dual role of expressive speech acts: Relational work on signs announcing closures during the Covid-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Pragmatics* 184: 1-17.