PROGNOSTIC PRACTICES AND NORMALISM IN PANDEMIC DISCOURSE IN BRITAIN AND GERMANY – A CASE STUDY ON COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

At times of crisis, normality becomes an object of desire and a contested political object. This article uses the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study to examine how 'normality'-discourses unfolded during the first year (2020) of the coronavirus crisis in selected print news media from Britain and Germany. Referring to 'normalism' (Link, 2004) we assume that notions of the normal have become a powerful narrative to prioritise the status quo at times of crisis. Our data show a strong discourse on normalism indicated by an overall more frequent use of expressions of normality. Normality is a frequent topic of discussion, much more so in British than in German news coverage. The concept of normality is used in prognostic practices in all relevant fields of knowledge, with the economy standing out in the UK, while in Germany the education system was more widely discussed. Nevertheless, in both countries the discourses of normalcy remained vague, thereby allowing the unequal reality of 'the normal' to remain unaddressed. We found three patterns: 'carry on as normal', 'back to normal' and the 'new normal' with varying occurrences. 'Carry on as normal' dominated the early days when there was a tendency to emphasise the need not to panic and hopes for a quick 'return to normal' were raised in particular in statements by politicians from conservative parties. The acceptance of a 'new normal' of living with COVID-19 was followed in the later months by the growing insight that COVID-19 does not only change the present but the future as well. However, the prospect of a 'new normal', and thus the idea of seeing the state of emergency as an opportunity for social change, remains a rare and elitist concept.

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Prognostic Practices and Normalism in Pandemic Discourse in Britain and Germany – A case study on Covid-19

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1. Introduction

It is at times of crisis when the self-evident reality of the lifeworld (Schütz, 1972) is interrupted, and an unquestioned state of normality becomes an object of desire. Nevertheless, a former state of *normality* is hardly reachable when catastrophes have not only interrupted people's lives but have engraved feelings of helplessness, shock and loss in memory and bodies. The desire to come back to a former *normal* might become a generalised dream that also dismisses the built-in contradictions and injustices of an *old normal* not all members of a society might like to come back to. Hence an exalted past can become a contested political object about a however defined *normal*. Eventually recognising that a temporary crisis can evolve into fundamental social change, public debate might shift from an *old* to a *new normal.*

This article examines such issues, in an analysis of the discourse-semantic tensions between an *old* and a *new normal* during the COVID-19 crisis. We are interested in when and how the desire to protect or to return to an *old normal* is expressed and to what extent it gives way to the insight that there might be a *new normal* to engage with. We will examine such processes in public debate by the example of the first year of the crisis in Britain and Germany (2020), two countries with different styles of governing, various ways of political responses and different rates of excess deaths (Rothstein *et al.*, 2022). These countries are also characterised by diverse healthcare resources[1], different pandemic plans[2], and styles of journalism (Grundmann & Scott, 2012), which influence the experienced reality of the pandemic and how it is publicly debated. Observable public discourses reflect these socially and culturally shaped social responses and public concerns in Britain and Germany. They manifest in denial or worry about the likely effects of the new virus entering Europe. Subsequently they are shaped by the growing numbers of fatalities resulting in feelings of loss of loved ones as well as the experienced hardship of lockdown measures and finally the need to engage with a *new normal.*

Crisis communication always has a more or less overt teleological dimension, aiming at a target state beyond the exceptional situation, as both sociological (Zinn, 2020a) and corpus-linguistic literature (Müller, 2021) have shown. Therefore, we measure what we

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1   Compare OECD statistics on health care resources: stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?
    DataSetCode=HEALTH_REAC

2   For example, the EU countries' different influenza pandemic plans: www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/seasonal-
    influenza/preparedness/influenza-pandemic-preparedness-plans

call 'prognostic practices'. These are future references around the concept of normality, which are involved in discourse patterns of crisis communication. In terms of methodology, we approach the task with corpus linguistic methods as an interdisciplinary team from sociology and linguistics. The challenge is to translate sociologically relevant questions into corpus analyses without losing sight of the social dimension. We meet the challenge by operationalising sub-questions corpus-linguistically and translating them back into the sociological explanatory model before each step of analysis in order to draw conclusions, which are then operationalised in turn. The individual steps of the research thus follow a corpus linguistic logic, while their succession refers to explanatory models of the sociology of risk and uncertainty (Zinn, 2020a, 2021).

We start with exploring the *normal* and its emotionally loaded role to stabilise the social world and move on with justifying our *research approach* and analysis of language and its use in the public sphere with the help of a large corpus of newspaper coverage. Our considerations take a historical perspective of modernisation since the focus on innovation rather than tradition requires new approaches to the normal, or as Link (2004) suggested, a new concept which merges the normal with the normative into a new *normalism*. Consequently, the study turns to the analysis of how normalism in prognostic practices is performed linguistically in COVID-19 reporting in 2020. We use keyword analysis to test the significance of normality vocabulary, we then measure its distribution, identify and categorise patterns to refer to concepts around normality and contextualise the findings with sociologically informed observations. We expect that problems of normalism become a key problem during the pandemic but might play out differently in the institutional contexts of Britain and Germany and that the old as well as the new normal remains necessarily vague. Hopes to come back to the old normal are likely to be more emphasised at the beginning of the crisis while considerations of a new normal might manifest with the crisis continuing and a not yet-defined future may become more frequently mentioned. However, competing positions might be observable which generally emphasise the old vis-à-vis a new normal. The article concludes with insights and perspectives for further research.

2.   The significance of the 'normal' and modern 'normalism'

2.1.   Theorising normality

A crisis, such as a pandemic, interrupts not merely the routines of everyday life, it questions the anthropological foundations of human existence as the German philosopher Arnold Gehlen once suggested (Gehlen, 1988). The "underdetermined" humans would require institutions to stabilise the fulfilment of their needs (Maslow, 1970) to overcome existential uncertainties and anxieties. Similarly, identity theorists have long argued for people profiting from stable and predictable social environments to allow healthy identities to evolve (Baumeister, 1987; Erikson, 1950). People would develop feelings of ontological security which provide them with the ability to engage with the uncertainties of our

times and to trust others and social institutions (Giddens, 1991). Such subjective conditions are mirrored by a lifeworld of routinised practices which provide a self-evident reality people live by (Schütz, 1972). These are fostered by normative frameworks which protect the lifeworld against deviations. It is the not-knowing how many people deviate from the normative expectations that contribute to stabilising norms even guiding individual behaviour counterfactually (Popitz, 1968). Nevertheless, scholars argued from the perspective of modernisation theory that ongoing social rationalisation would contribute to calculable evidence becoming more influential for orienting social activities in contrast to divinely ordained normative orders (Weber, 1948). *Normality* as calculated average behaviour is an invention that goes back to the introduction of statistics and probability theory and the accumulation of population data informing political intervention (Hacking, 1991). Rather than enforcing divine orders modern societies are increasingly concerned with shaping average individual behaviour by identifying and manipulating the (risk) factors influencing people's behaviour (Hall & Link, 2004). Thereby the *normal* as average and as *norm* become fused in what Jürgen Link has introduced as the heuristic concept of *normalism* (Link, 2004). Hence, Link does not simply use the term *normalism* to describe the normative power of the everyday (everydayness, as he calls it). Rather, he uses it to describe a condition that exists only in modern, data-driven societies and that conditions the compulsive orientation of the individual to statistical averages. According to Link, normalism in this sense is a necessary safeguard against the centrifugal forces of acceleration. Normalism is thus the tendency to reduce statistical deviations to mean values and thus to secure the sociality of the individual but should be understood as a social mechanism that is formed in discourses and limits the individual's scope for agency (Taylor, 2009).

In summary, it can be argued that normality as a self-evident state of the world is embedded in the pre-conscious routines and assumptions of the lifeworld and therefore misses any linguistic markers. In contrast, the thematisation of normality implicates a deviation of such a state (Grice, 1975; Krzyżanowski, 2020). It indicates when normality becomes a matter of concern, is challenged, or is already lost and might have become a contested domain. However, it might be argued that modern societies need normalism to balance the acceleration of innovative forces against the need for stability and control (Link, 2004).

We hypothesise that first, normalism in this sense plays a particularly important role during the COVID-19 pandemic, and second, that normalism becomes explicit because the deviation from the mean affects not only individuals but the entire society on many levels simultaneously. It is perceived as a shock to normality, to which a meaningful response can only be made by referring to normality. The usual manifestations of social practices, largely invisible until then, become visible and serve as a reference point for the desired behaviour during the pandemic.

The state of exception is thus the state of discourse in which the social structure of the normal is revealed in language. This gives linguistics the opportunity to achieve sociologically relevant results – assumed that it is sociologically informed. Since the normal is

addressed precisely when it is absent, the analysis of a crisis discourse such as the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to examine the regulative function of the normal in language using corpus linguistic methods. This is described and demonstrated in detail below.

We are following an interdisciplinary approach that focuses on language as a central constitutive element of social reality, which is systematically involved in social practices making them possible as well as reflecting them (Bourdieu, 1991; Fairclough, 1992). Such social practices do not only vary with social domains and milieus, they also change historically, which has been observed in historical semantics (Koselleck, 1989) as well as sociology (Luhmann, 2003). We therefore consider the print and online news media amongst other media as an important part of the discursive practices in the public sphere (Habermas, 1989) shaping people's consciousness and reflecting social debates about key issues. The communication of normalism during the COVID-19 pandemic is an expression of how it is socially understood and managed. With our approach we follow a growing body of research that has proven that corpus linguistics provides well-developed research tools to examine sociological research questions (Müller, 2021; Müller, Bartsch, & Zinn, 2021; Zinn, 2020b; Zinn & McDonald, 2018; Zinn & Müller, 2022).

2.2.   Normality in pandemic discourse and crisis communication

Against this theoretical background, it is unsurprising that the concept of 'normality' has been addressed in academic analyses of the COVID-19 discourse. However, this often happened in passing when analysing vaccination-related crisis communication and linguistic management of uncertainty. Related studies focus on communication strategies, media representation and public perceptions of uncertainty. Warren and Lofstedt (2021) evaluate communication strategies related to vaccine introduction in the UK, France, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland. Their research shows that the notion of returning to 'normal' is fraught with uncertainty, particularly due to the indeterminate timelines associated with vaccine efficacy and distribution. They conclude that countries will not return to pre-pandemic conditions any time soon, highlighting the persistent nature of uncertainty in public health communication (Warren & Lofstedt, 2021). Nerlich and Jaspal (2021) analyse media representations of social distancing in two British newspapers, *The Times* and *The Sun*, during the early months of the pandemic. They "observe a shift from framing social distancing as a threat to the continuity of normal life to framing non-compliance as a threat to social order" (Nerlich & Jaspal, 2021, p. 11). Ratcliff, Wicke and Harvill (2022) review 60 studies of public communication about uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic from January 2020 to February 2022. 'Uncertainty' is defined 'as "the state in which reasonable knowledge about risks, benefits, or the future is not available"' (Ratcliff, Wicke, & Harvill, 2022, p. 2). They report on the hypothesis, raised by Han *et al.* (2021) and Simonovic and Taber (2022), that framing scientific uncertainty as normal should reduce ambiguity aversion. The authors of these papers draw on the competence hypothesis, 'which suggests that people dislike uncertainty because it reduces their perceived competence' (Ratcliffe, Wicke, & Harvill, 2022, p. 15). Communicators

can help the public accept uncertainty as an inherent part of scientific processes and decision-making during a pandemic by normalising uncertainty. This approach aims to alleviate the discomfort associated with uncertainty, thereby promoting a more informed and resilient public response. Overall, the studies on the pandemic discourse reported here support the thesis that normality is not a fixed concept but a constantly evolving one, shaped by public discourse, media narratives, and scientific communication.

3. Methodology and methods

To examine the dynamics of the discourse-semantics of normalism during the coronavirus crisis we have built a text corpus of print-news media covering February to December 2020. Articles were retrieved from the media databases LexisNexis and ProQuest. The newspapers we included and the corpus sizes are listed in Table 1.

	UK	GER
Texts	54,613	71,693
Sentences	1,515,150	2,740,787
Tokens	36,033,746	48,949,531
Newspapers	The Daily Mail, Evening Standard, The Daily Mirror, The Guardian, The Times	Bild plus, Der Spiegel, Die Welt, Die ZEIT, FAZ, Stuttgarter Zeitung, taz

Table 1. *Corpora – newspaper coverage of the COVID-19 pandemics in the UK and Germany 2020*

To maximise the comparability of the corpora and precision of the retrieval, we used the search terms corona*, COVID-19 and SARS-COV-2 for both the British and the German corpus (case-insensitive). Coronavirus and COVID-19 (British corpus) and Corona and COVID-19 (German corpus) were the search terms for both corpora that produced the most correct hits over the targeted period in pre-tests. Corona* also covers the variety of different corona compounds in German press discourse (e.g. Coronakrise ('coronavirus crisis'), Coronamaßnahmen ('coronavirus measures') – 6,962 different types in the corpus). SARS-COV-2 was used in the first weeks in both countries to refer to the new virus and was important to cover the initial phase of the pandemics discourse. After the data went through phases of pre-processing, which included tokenization, lemmatization, part-of-speech tagging (POS tagging), and sentence segmentation, they were uploaded to CQPweb (Hardie, 2012) for detailed corpus analyses.

We carried out several steps to test our hypothesis that the concept of 'normality' is particularly meaningful in our datasets and, if confirmed, to gradually gain a deeper understanding of how normality is conceptualised in the data. To test the hypothesis that normality is more frequently referred to in the context of reporting on COVID-19, we conducted a keyword analysis (Section 4.1). We used reference corpora containing national and regional newspaper articles from Germany and the UK from the period 2000-

2020, which were randomly selected and balanced in terms of newspapers and years. The newspapers analysed here are included in the reference corpora. The corpus sizes and newspapers are listed in Table 2.

	UK	GER
Texts	300,712	404,800
Sentences	22,542,556	34,667,381
Tokens	489,482,702	574,558,986
Newspapers	Daily Express, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Daily Record, Scotland on Sunday, Sunday Express, Sunday Herald, Sunday Mail, The Guardian, The Herald, The Independent, The Observer, The Scotsman, The Times	BILD am Sonntag, Berliner Zeitung, Bild plus, Bunte, Der Spiegel, Der Tagesspiegel, Die Welt, Die ZEIT, Focus, Frankfurter Rundschau, Hamburger Morgenpost, Mitteldeutsche Zeitung, Neue Zuercher Zeitung, Nordwest Zeitung, Nuernberger Nachrichten, Passauer Neue Presse, Rheinische Post, Saechsische Zeitung, Stuttgarter Zeitung, Suedwest Presse, Welt am Sonntag, Stern, taz

Table 2. Reference corpora: randomly selected newspaper articles from Germany and the UK published between 2000-2020

For keyword calculation, we measured lemmas and used Log Ratio (with 0.01% significance filter, adjusted LL threshold = 41.33); minimum frequency 20 in both lists. In our case, the keyword analysis does not serve to explore the corpus, but we use the procedure to test our initial hypothesis that normality is addressed more frequently than usual in the news articles about the COVID-19 pandemics covered by our corpora. In this way, we also recognise which normality words occur significantly frequently in the data sets and thus gain the starting point for distribution analyses. We could also have tested the words *normal* and *normality* for significance, but we wanted to take an inductive approach to see which normality vocabulary is found in each keyword list (cf. Section 4.1).

We then searched for sentences with `normal.*` in our corpora, measured their distribution and analysed their properties (Sections 4.2 and 4.3). We applied concordance, keyword, and collocation analyses to gradually learn more about the prognostic practices around normality. We did not follow a predetermined methodological path but used corpus linguistic methods to learn incrementally more about our subject in a hermeneutic process. Each finding raised a new question, which we then operationalised. To illustrate this process, we describe and justify the steps we took in detail in the analysis section. Our aim was, on the one hand, to approach the corpus in an undogmatic way to leave as much space as possible for linguistic and sociological intuitions, since normalism is a concept that needs to be explored interpretatively and cannot simply be measured in corpora. On the other hand, transparency and methodological rigour were required, with as many quantifications as possible. However, we have accepted that operationalisation al-

ways means simplification and not all of our sub-categories could be quantified due to the high lexical variation.

Finally, we classify prognostic practices that exploit normality as a resource of crisis communication (Section 4.4). We observed sentences with `normal.*`, extracted patterns and created categories, which we interpreted as different prognostic practices around the concept of 'normality'. We present formalisations that consist of abstracted labels of the semantic complement classes and predicates as in the following example:

[SOCIAL ACTOR|SOCIAL GROUP|INSTITUTION] *should|will carry|get|go on as normal*

From this we built CQL queries, which we then used to measure the distribution of the corresponding categories over time. The patterns not only form the basis for constructing CQL queries, but also have intrinsic value in themselves, as they facilitate the assessment of discursive constellations of action predicates and actor groups associated with prognostic practices. We analysed textual evidence in a social context to better understand and relate them to broader social events and dynamics.

4. Analyses

4.1. *Normalism as a key concept in the pandemic discourse*

Keyword analysis shows us that words around normality are indeed more common in COVID-19 discourse than might be expected. Even the high-frequency adverb *normally* is highly significant in both corpora. Interestingly, abstract terms such as *normality* and *normalisation* are keywords in the German data, whereas they are not used more frequently than average in the British data. For reasons of German morphology, we find a whole series of compounds in the German corpus that are used to address partial aspects of normality: *Normalzeit* ('normal time'), *Normalmodus* ('normal mode'), *Normalstation* ('normal ward'), *Normalniveau* ('normal level'), *Normalzustand* ('normal situation'). Since such and similar concepts are expressed in English with phrases, it is not surprising that the adjective *normal* is comparatively even more frequent in the British corpus and that the distance between the relative frequency in the reference corpus is significantly higher (Table 3).

UK	Word	f corp_1	f/Mill. corp_1	f corp_2	f/Mill corp_2	positive KW	Log Ratio	LLR
	normality	1073	29.78	2331	4.76	+	2.64	1839.47
	normal	7474	207.42	36411	74.39	+	1.48	5176.77
	normalise	133	3.69	890	1.82	+	1.02	48.71
	normally	2470	68.55	18181	37.14	+	0.88	699.4
GER								

Normalbetrieb ('normal operation')	435	8.89	454	0.69	+	3.68	1153.83
Normalzeit ('normal time')	61	1.25	93	0.14	+	3.14	132
Normalmodus ('normal mode')	29	0.59	46	0.07	+	3.08	61.24
Normalstation ('normal ward')	47	0.96	79	0.12	+	2.99	95.63
Normalniveau ('normal level')	41	0.84	78	0.12	+	2.82	76.67
Normalität ('normality')	2883	58.9	7850	11.97	+	2.3	4018.82
normalisieren ('normalise')	452	9.23	1465	2.23	+	2.05	528.03
Normalisierung ('normalisation')	368	7.52	1329	2.03	+	1.89	379.67
Normalzustand ('normal situation')	168	3.43	655	1	+	1.78	157.47
normalerweise ('normally')	3862	78.9	18748	28.58	+	1.46	2627.36
normal ('normal')	7170	146.48	70798	107.94	+	0.44	558.93

Table 3. *Words with the root normal.* in the keyword lists of the British and German COVID-19 corpora*

We then measured the distribution of words with the root *normal.**. The graph shows a steep rise in the curve, starting in the week from 24 February to 1 March in the German data and one week later in the English corpus (Figure 1). This is related to the first major outbreaks in each country. After the absolute peak in April, the frequency for the German dataset drops sharply and does not rise again until the end of the year, when lockdown measures are justified with regard to normality in the Christmas period. This differs from the UK corpus without the peak in April and with frequencies remaining at the same level. Normality is discussed throughout. Overall, normality words are used significantly more often in the UK corpus.
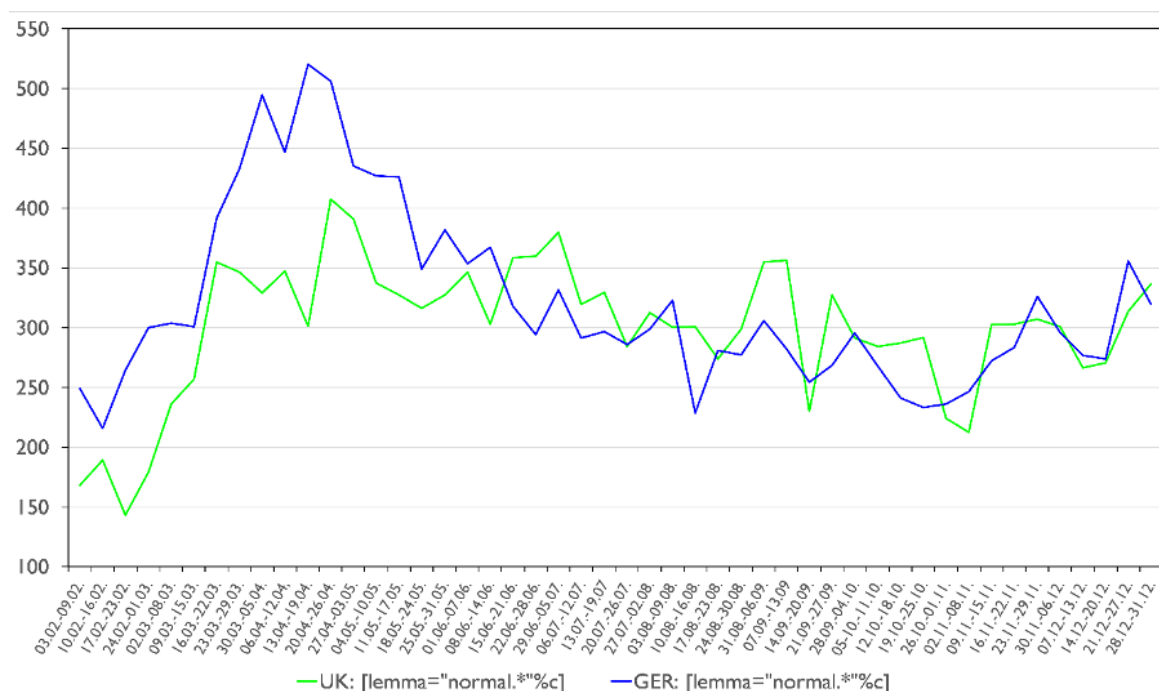
Figure 1. *Mentions of words with the root normal.* in the British and German COVID-19 corpora – distribution over time – f per million words*

After the early peeks, the downward trend of communicating normalism reversed finally in November. In both countries, vaccination was presented as the major possibility to come back to normal and became the central theme in the news media as well. The peak in early November shows the political pressure to provide a solution for the crisis with Christmas closing in. This included escaping the hardships of lockdowns but also stopping the economic loss for many businesses with lacking or significantly reduced Christmas sales to be expected.

4.2.   Knowledge domains in prognostic practices around normality

When reviewing the concordances of the query `normal.*`, we found that there is a tendency in both the British and German data to refer to the future in different ways. To further explore this observation systematically, we saved the sentences containing words with the root *normal.** as a sub-corpus and conducted a keyword analysis of the lemmas using the full corpora as reference corpora. We measured lemmas and used Log Ratio (with 0.01% significance filter, adjusted LL threshold = UK: 34.03; GER: 34.95) and a minimum frequency of 3 in both lists. Indeed, we found considerable time-related vocabulary in the keywords, which points to statements that address normality with reference to the future. This is listed in Table 4.

	UK	GER
V		
action	*return, restore, carry (on), go*	*einkehren* ('return'), *zurückfinden* ('find back'), *zurückkehren* ('return'),

		weiterlaufen ('run on'), *übergehen* ('pass over'), *laufen* ('run')
state		*weiterleben* ('live on'), *dauern* ('last')
cognition	*expect, hope*	*(s.) sehnen* ('yearn'), *hoffen* ('hope')
modality	*would, going (to), will*	
Adj/Adv		
mode	*gradual, gradually, slowly, quickly*	*schrittweise* ('gradually'), *allmählich* ('gradually'), *langsam* ('slowly'), *rasch* ('rapidly'), *schnell* ('fast')
distance	*closer, near, soon*	*baldig* ('soon'), *irgendwann* ('sometime'), *bald* ('soon'), *schon* ('already')
cognition	*possible*	*hoffentlich* ('hopefully'), *absehbar* ('foreseeable')
N		
time	*Easter, Christmas, spring, holidays, winter, summer, months, lockdown*	*Urlaubssaison* ('holiday season'), *Jahreszeit* ('season'), *Sommerferien* ('summer holidays'), *Schuljahr* ('school year'), *Ostern* ('Easter'), *Übergang* ('transition'), *Schritt* ('step'), *Ferien* ('holidays'), *Sommer* ('summer'), *Phase* ('phase'), *Winter* ('winter')
action		*Rückkehr* ('return')
cognition	*hopes*	*Sehnsucht* ('yearning'), *Hoffnung* ('hope')
Prep		
time	*back, towards, until*	*zurück* ('back'), *wieder* ('again'), *bis* ('until')

Table 4. *Future-related keywords in sentences containing words with the root* normal.*

These include the modal words expressing the grammatical future tense in the British data. In the German sub-corpus, the third pers. sing. *wird* ('will') is statistically significant, but not the basic form *werden*. It is therefore not included in Table 4. Both corpora contain action verbs. Adjectival and adverbial modifiers refer to the manner of a possible return to normality or to temporal distance specifications. Both corpora contain chronological landmarks such as the (respective) next holidays or festive days. Prepositions such as *back*, *towards* and *until* also indicate future reference.

We started our investigation in prognostic practices by searching sentences with grammatical future tense and formulated the following queries:

```
MU(meet (meet [lemma="will"&pos="MD"] [pos="VB"] s) [lemma="normal.*"%c]
    s)
```

```
MU(meet (meet [lemma="werden"&word!="würde.*|wurde.*"] [pos="VVINF"] s)
    [lemma="normal.*"%c] s)
```

Interestingly, the situation is reversed here (Figure 2): The increase in the British data is higher and the frequency of use of constructions relating to the future remains high, while in the German data, there is a peak in the first week of May and the curve then

drops sharply. In both data sets, the curve rises again in November and December without reaching the frequencies of spring. Thus, while normality is discussed more frequently in Germany overall, it has a more important function in the UK when it comes to the future.
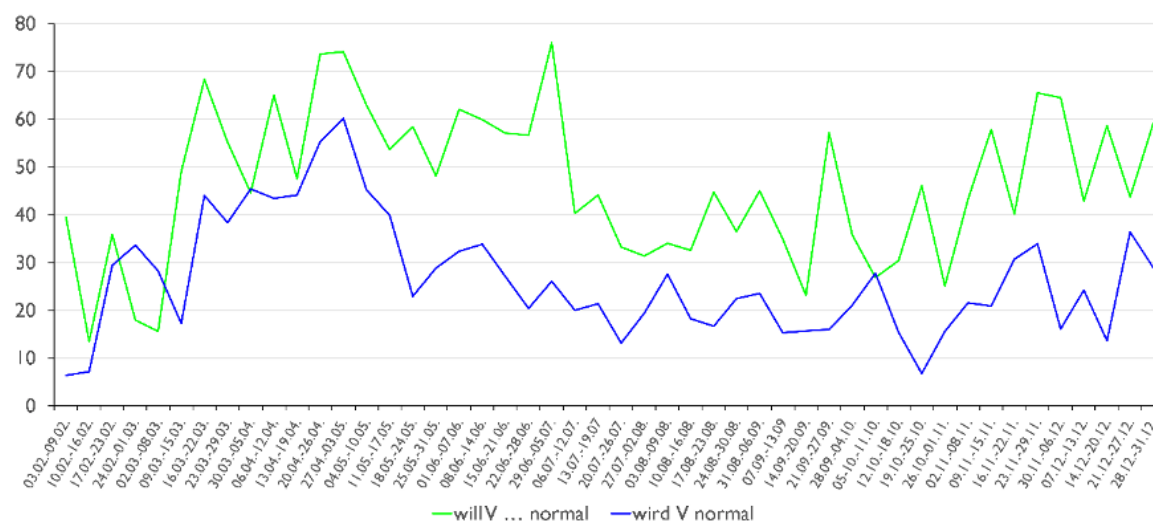

Figure 2. Mentions of words with the root normal.* in sentences with grammatical future tense – distribution over time – f per million words

We were now interested in the knowledge domains in which the prognostic practices occur. Since knowledge domains are indexed by referential nouns, we measured the substantival collocations of the constructions with *normal.** plus future reference. We then classified these according to knowledge domains in which *normality* is addressed in prognostic practices (Table 5). For both countries, we see 'Everyday Life & Time Structuring' as important domains, as well as 'Leisure & Festivities, and 'Medicine & Measures'. However, there is one notable difference: in the British data we find 'Economy & Labour Market', while in Germany 'Education' is an important domain.

UK	GER
Collocations of MU(meet (meet [lemma="will"&pos="MD"] [pos="VB"] s) [lemma="normal.*"%c] s) (nouns 10-10, Log Ratio > 1)	Collocations of MU(meet (meet [lemma="werden"&word!="würde.* | wurde.*"] [pos="VVINF"] s) [lemma="normal.*"%c] s) (nouns 10-10, Log Ratio > 1
Everyday Life & Time Structuring	**Everyday Life & Time Structuring**
circumstance, life, spring, thing, phase	*Alltag* ('everyday life'), *Herbst* ('autum'), *Schritt* ('step'), *Sommer* ('summer'), *Leben* ('life'), *Phase* ('phase'), *Umstand* ('circumstance'), *Weile* ('while')
Leisure & Festivities	
Easter, Christmas	
Medicine & Measures	**Leisure & Festivities**
vaccine, vaccination, distancing	*Sommerferien* ('summer holidays'), *Urlaubsaison* ('holiday season')
Economy & Labor Market	

employer, economy	**Medicine & Measures**
	Impfstoff ('vaccine'), *Impfung* ('vaccination')
	Education
	Schulbetrieb ('school operation'), *Schule* ('school'), *Schuljahr* ('school year')

Table 5. *Substantival collocations of words with the root normal.* in sentences with grammatical future tense - classified according to knowledge domain*

4.3.   The vagueness of 'normality'

Examining the concordances of *normal.** regarding the semantic properties of the concept 'normality' we found that in most cases 'normality' is used as an underspecified, vague concept, in both countries. The citations (1, 2) show examples of this generic use of the concept.

(1) *The shares should respond as life normalises.* – The Times, 2020-09-18

(2) *Die Massenimpfung soll helfen, schnell zu einem normalen Leben zurückzukehren.* ('The mass vaccination should help to quickly return to a normal life.') – Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2020-12-29

(3) *The new document, [...] confirmed scientists have been asked to examine whether families should be allowed to resume normal social contact with one other household.* – Daily Mail, 2020-05-12

In other cases, the contexts of normality are mentioned (3). Other contexts include school, work, Christmas, and other festivities (cf. above). But even in these cases, it is not specified what normality consists of. This seems to us to be a main feature of the concept of normality used here. It is vague enough that everyone can feel that their individual life plans are meant. Vagueness is made explicit in some cases, however, by using indefinite expressions as shown in citations (4–6). These expressions indicate uncertainty in social communication of risk.

(4) *What is the price the Government is willing to pay — in terms of lives lost to Covid-19 — to allow a gradual return to something resembling normality?* – Evening Standard, 2020-04-20

(5) *The Bank's intention is to sell the bonds it holds back into the market when more normal conditions prevail.* – Daily Mail, 2020-05-23

(6) *Trotzdem sollen die Deutschen halbwegs normal Weihnachten feiern können.* ('Nevertheless, Germans should be able to celebrate Christmas in a more or less normal way.') – Der Spiegel, 2020-08-08

This explicit mentioning of vagueness seems to occur especially when normality comes as a promise for the future to enforce restrictions on everyday life. At the same time, the discourse actors are managing expectations regarding post-pandemic normality.

It is thus a way of expressing uncertainty in social pandemic communication. To test this thesis, we extracted the constructions with explicit markers of vagueness that we found in the concordances of *normal.** and translated them into CQL queries:

```
UK: [word="some.+|.*sembl.*|sort|kind|more"][]{0,5}[lemma="normal.*"]
    within s
```

```
GER: MU(meet [lemma="normal.*"] [word="möglich(st)?|irgendwie|halbwegs|
    ungefähr"] -3 3)
```

Figure 3 shows the distribution of constructions addressing a vague concept of normality.
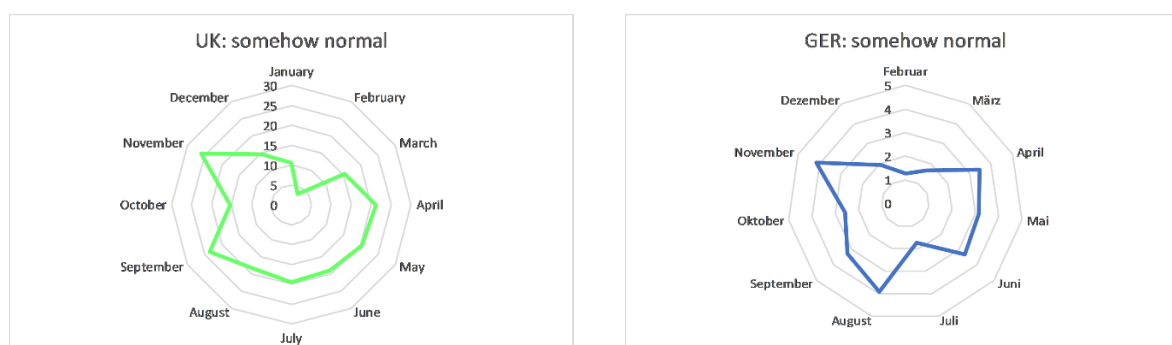
Figure 3. Mentions of words with the root normal.* in sentences with explicit markers of vagueness – distribution over time – f per million words

The graphs peak in November in each case. The frequency of vagueness constructions is almost as high in the British data in September and in the German data as early as August. We thus find evidence for our hypothesis that explicit markers were used to manage expectations of normality in times when normality in the future was used as a justification for restrictions. An important finding here, however, is that these explicit vagueness markers in constructions around normality are 6 times more frequent in the British data than in the German data. But it was at all times a key theme in our data that normality as such remains a vague concept. Whether it means turning back to an old normal or engaging in a new normal. Social risk communication, which normalises the invisibility of systematic social differences, emphasises sameness where difference is the reality and thereby downplays social conflict. This kind of enchanting the social sphere (Zinn & Schulz, 2024) is important for establishing a joint effort for high compliance of the population with pandemic measures. In this way the social communication of vagueness in normality might be part of the normalisation of difference. Indeed, there were also quite early discourses about differences and people unequally affected such as Black, Asian and other minority groups in the UK (Aldridge *et al.*, 2020). The discourse of normalisation, however, counters such a perspective since it comes with a sense that coming back to a legitimate order, however legitimate it may be, is a value in itself for people from all walks of life.

4.4. Utilising 'normality' in discourse

Having explored the distribution and thematic contexts of normality, we now turn to how the concept is instantiated in the various prognostic concepts of the pandemic discourse. We trace how 'normality' is used to achieve communicative goals central to pandemic discourse, such as explaining future social restrictions or demanding political action. We have thus categorised the concordances of *normal.** according to prognostic practices in which the concept of normality is used. We have identified three categories: 'carry on as normal' (4.4.1), 'back to normal' (4.4.2) and 'the new normal' (4.4.3). Below we list linguistic patterns that emerged in the analysis across the various practices. For all three, lexical markers can also be found in the keywords of the sentences with *normal.**
(see Table 2 above).

4.4.1. Carry on as normal

Firstly, we identified patterns that emerge in linguistic practices that identify insistence on normality as an individual and social strategy for action. We can see the relevance of these patterns from the fact that *carry (on)* is significant in the British subcorpus of sentences with *normal.** and *weiterlaufen* 'continue' and *weiterleben* 'live on' in the German dataset. A pattern that is particularly important in the UK data, especially in March, is related to the strategy of downplaying the threat posed by COVID-19 and emphasizing the negative impacts of the anti-covid restrictions. It can be found in normative utterances that are often instantiated with modals or imperatives as the textual evidence 7–8 shows.

(7) *The government held a COBRA crisis meeting yesterday where it was decided football should carry on as normal this weekend. But the English attitude is causing disbelief in the rest of Europe*. – The Daily Mirror, 2020-05-13

The British keep-calm-and-carry-on topos of the Second World War (Lewis, 2011) may have had some influence on the development of this practice. Although the phrase occurs only once explicitly in the context of normality (cf. evidence 8), it is used 66 times in the British corpus, i.e. 5 times more often in relation to the size of the corpus than in our UK reference corpus (see above).

(8) *SUPERMARKET shoppers were last night urged to keep calm and carry on shopping as normal amid fears of a second wave of panic buying.* – The Daily Mirror, 2020-09-21

A good example for the German discourse – taken from the beginning of March on the first outbreak – can be seen in evidence (9). Armin Laschet was the Prime Minister of the German region with the first big outbreak of the coronavirus.

(9) *Nordrhein-Westfalens Ministerpräsident Armin Laschet (CDU) ruft die Bevölkerung auf, Panik zu vermeiden. "Das Leben normal weiterführen und weiter einen kühlen Kopf bewahren", riet Laschet* ('North Rhine-Westphalia's Minister President Armin Laschet (CDU) calls on the population to avoid panic. "Carry on with life as normal and continue to keep a cool head," Laschet advised.') – *Bild am Sonntag,* 2020-03-01

We reviewed all textual evidence documenting such carry-on practices and extracted semi-specific patterns (listed in Table 6). The complements are each listed as formalised concepts in capital letters and square brackets. The predicates are listed in italics in their variation. The formalisations show that the issues and social groups addressed by the carry-on practices do not differ between the British and German datasets.

UK	[SOCIAL ACTOR|SOCIAL GROUP|INSTITUTION] *should|will continue|make|operate|play| proceed|trade|work as|like|with normal*
	[SOCIAL ACTOR|SOCIAL GROUP|INSTITUTION] *should|will carry|get|go on as normal*
	[FACT] *remains|will remain as normal*
GER	[SOCIAL ACTOR|SOCIAL GROUP|INSTITUTION] *kann|soll|wird normal aufstehen|arbeiten| fahren|laufen|öffnen|spielen|stattfinden|trainieren|weitermachen| weiterführen|weitergehen| weiterlaufen*

Table 6. *Patterns of the carry-on-as-normal strategy*

From these patterns we built CQL requests. It was important to exclude the negations in order to exclude those documents in which the opposite, the state of exception, is addressed (*As staff are laid off in the coronavirus crisis, the fund manager says bosses cannot carry on as normal* – The Guardian, 2020-04-02).

```
UK
([word!="unable|not"]{1,3}[lemma="continue|make|operate|play|proceed|trade|
work"%c][]{0,3}[lemma="normal.*"])|([word!="unable|not"]{1,3}[lemma="carry|get|
go"%c][word="on"]{1,3}[word="normal.*"]) within s"
GER
([word!="nicht|wieder"]{3}[lemma="normal"][lemma="aufstehen|arbeiten|fahren|
laufen|öffnen|spielen|stattfinden|trainieren|weiter.+"])|([lemma="stehen|arbeiten|
fahren|laufen|öffnen|spielen|finden|trainieren"]([lemma="normal"]|[word!="nicht|
wieder"][lemma="normal"]|[word!="nicht|wieder"]{2}[lemma="normal"]|[word!="nicht|
wieder"]{3}[lemma="normal"])) within s"
```

Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of this pattern over the survey period. Whereas the *carry on as normal*-constructions peak in March, from April on people refer to normality as it was before the COVID-19 period. The data show that it is used slightly more frequently in the UK throughout, except for the week from 28 September to 4 October, when the British curve points downwards and the German data have a peak. We measure peaks in British discourse in the early weeks of 10–16 Feb and 09–15 Mar. The curves then flatten out at mid-year in both countries and then settle at low levels with local peaks.
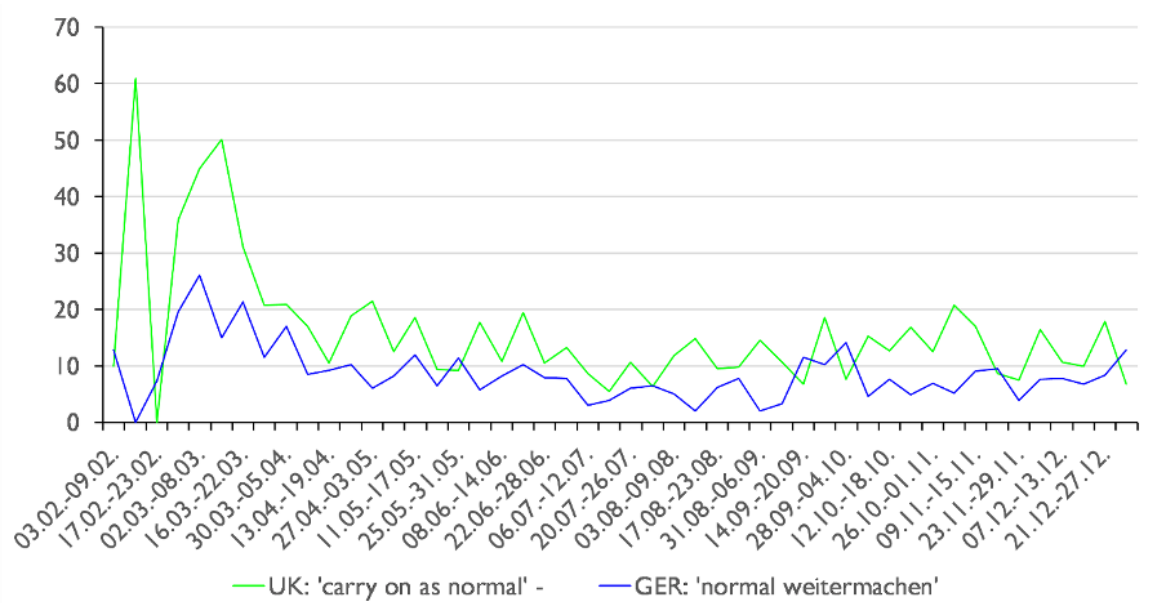
***Figure 4.** Patterns of the carry-on-as-normal strategy – distribution over time – f per million words*

In the early days of the pandemic, when there was still a lot of uncertainty about the nature of the virus, responses were based to a large degree on past experiences with similar situations. Germany was following the institutionalised strategies of contact tracing while in the UK such strategies were less developed. Instead, and surprisingly, the UK government decided to emphasise downplaying the pandemic even when the impact became increasingly clear. However, the UK finally joined the mainstream responses in Western Europe when downplaying seemed no longer an option. The relatively higher frequency of communicating 'to carry on as normal' was more important in the UK than Germany, where institutionalised strategies were relatively smoothly applied once new knowledge about the virus became available (Figure 4).

In any case the experience of the spread of a new pandemic is a disruptive experience. The early protection of normality as we found in our data was the first response. Such a response is typical for all kinds of risks to symbolically keep potential harm at a distance. In the face of an unpredictable future, people maintain predictability and control by so called 'certainty constructions' (Zinn, 2004). These make a future at least symbolically predictable and manageable, thereby producing a threshold of normality.

4.4.2. Back to normal

Secondly, we identified a set of prognostic practice centred around what we call the back-to-normality topos. For the estimation about how it is distributed, we measured sentences in which both *return* (German: *zurückkehren*) or *back* (German: *wieder/zurück*) and a word with the root *normal** occurred:

```
UK
[lemma="return|back"%c][]{,4}[lemma="normal.*"%c] within s
```

```
GER
(([lemma="normal.*"%c][word!=",|;|:"]?|[lemma="normal.*"%c][word!=",|;|:"]{2}|
[lemma="normal.*"%c][word!=",|;|:"]{3}|[lemma="normal.*"%c][word!=",|;|:"]{4})
[word="wieder|zurück"])|([word="wieder|zurück"]([word!=",|;|:"]?|
[lemma="normal.*"%c][word!=",|;|:"]{2}|[lemma="normal.*"%c][word!=",|;|:"]{3}|
[lemma="normal.*"%c][word!=",|;|:"]{4})[lemma="normal.*"%c]) within s
```

It can be observed that the number of instances of these constructions increases in both data sets in March. The increase in the British data is pronounced and persists at a high level in the following months. The peak of the curve can be identified in the week of November 9–15, which coincides with the justification and explanation of lockdown measures. In the German data, the curve declines slightly but steadily towards the end of the summer. There is also an increase in November and December, but it is relatively modest, resulting in the relative frequencies only reaching just over half of the absolute peak in April.
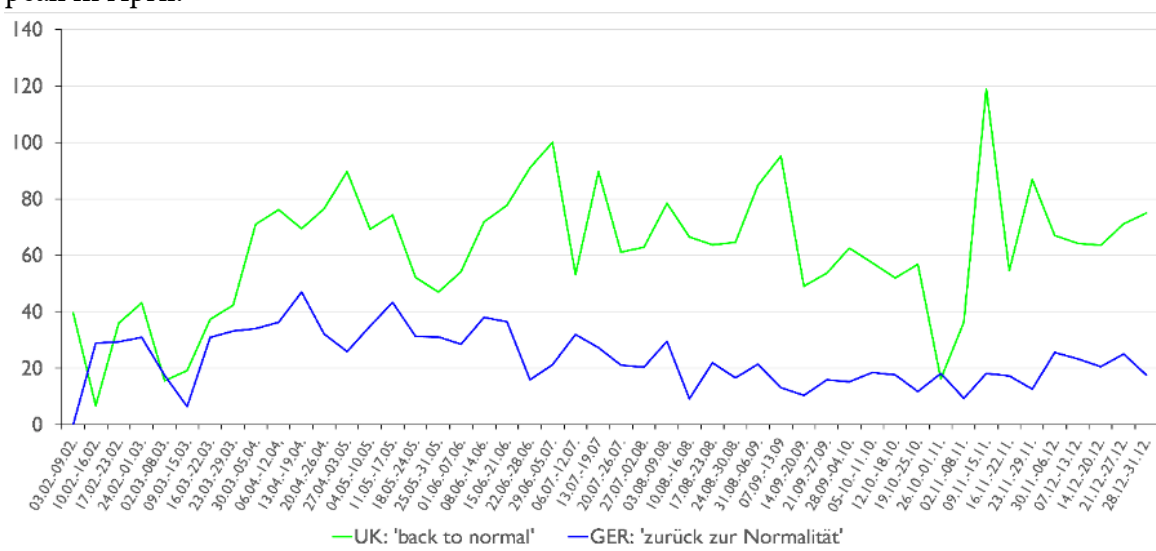

Figure 5. The back-to-normality topos: sentences containing the words return/back *(UK) or* zurück(kehren)/wieder *(GER) and words with the root* normal.* – distribution over time – f per million words*

After the seriousness of the pandemic had become obvious, the British government was criticised for responding slowly and accepting a considerable number of fatalities (Booth, 2020), from within the country but also from elsewhere in Europe and beyond. At the same time our data showed a desire to come back to normality quickly. The pressure in the UK to drop the restrictions (e.g. social distancing, lockdown) might have been stronger than in Germany considering the more frequent topos of 'returning back to normal' in our corpus (Figure 5).

We find three patterns of dealing with the *back-to-normal*-topos:

a) back to normal – quickly

The first pattern demands a quick return to normality. In the British data, the conservative side is concerned with the abolition of restrictions, even against scientific advice, as evidence (10) shows.

(10) *[Tory MP Marcus Fysh] said : 'The country should be getting back to normal, not pandering to this scientifically illiterate guff.* – Daily Mail, 2020-08-26

Evidence for this pattern can also be found in the German data. These are direct or indirect quotes or references to statements and demands made by German politicians, especially those from the conservative camp. These statements serve to justify restrictions, and the vaccination campaign at the end of the year as well.

(11) *Die Massenimpfung soll helfen, schnell zu einem normalen Leben zurückzukehren.* ('Mass vaccination should help to quickly return to a normal life.') – FAZ, 2020-12-29

Table 7 shows the variation within the quickly-back-to-normal strategy patterns.

UK	[PEOPLE|SOCIAL GROUPS] *should|will return|get back (quickly|soon|immediately) to normal* [ACTVITY]
GER	[PEOPLE|SOCIAL GROUPS] *sollen|werden (bald|schnell|rasch) wieder|zurück .... zu normaler* [ACTVITY] *kehren*

Table 7. *Patterns of the quickly-back-to-normal strategy*

b) back to normal – slowly

The evidence in favour of a slow return to normality can be divided into two categories. Firstly, there are calls for a slow, gradual and incremental return to normality, which are being made by scientists, actors from the medical sector and progressive politicians (12, 13). It is linked to the transparency requirement to communicate as openly and honestly as possible the uncertain knowledge and challenges posed by the virus. At the same time, the restrictions are conceptualised as a medical necessity without any alternative. Secondly, we find textual evidence in which journalists and actors in everyday life describe their perception that normality is slowly returning.

(12) *"As a nation we have to be really, really responsible and keep doing what we're all doing until we're sure we can gradually start lifting various interventions which are likely to be spaced — based on the science and our data — until we gradually come back to a normal way of living,"* [Dr Harris] said. – The Times, 2020-03-30

(13) [Former German Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas:] *Wir wollen Schritt für Schritt in die Normalisierung zurück.* ('We want to return to normalisation step by step.') – Bild plus, 2020-05-21

In Table 8 we can see that it is the adverbial supplements of the propositions that vary in the patterns of this strategy. The lexical choices do not differ between the UK and Germany.

UK	[ACTIVITY] *should|will return|get back (gradually|step by step|slowly).... to normal*

GER	[ACTIVITY] *soll|wird (allmählich|langsam|schrittweise|Schritt für Schritt) wieder zurückkehren|normal werden*

Table 8. Patterns of the slowly-back-to-normal strategy

c) back to normal – rejection

A third pattern rejects the idea that a return to the old normal is possible. In the Brit-ish data we find evidence of a radical rejection (14, 15).

(14) *I observe a growing group of people — the Grim Realists — who have decided that this is it. "There's no way out. We'd better get used to it. We're never going back to normal. Holidays are over."* – The Times, 2020-10-16 [sums up the attitude of certain young people].

(15) *"I don't think it's going to completely go back to normal," [photographer Rankin] said.* – The Guardian, 2020-07-30

Above all, however, the evidence of radical scepticism in the British data is limited. In the German data, on the other hand, we find evidence for a gradual scepticism (16) – in the sense of denying that quick return to normality would be possible.

(16) *„Ich sehe nicht , wie bis Weihnachten wieder normaler Schulbetrieb laufen sollte", sagte Hurrelmann.* ('"I don't see how normal school life can be resumed by Christmas" [educational scientist Klaus] Hurrelmann said.') – Die Welt, 2020-05-09

Table 9 shows the limited variation within the sample.

UK	[PEOPLE|SOCIAL GROUPS] *will never return|get back to normal* [ACTVITY]
GER	[PEOPLE|SOCIAL GROUPS] *wird nicht zu [ACTVITY] zurückkehren* [ACTIVITY] *wird nicht bald wieder normal laufen*

Table 9. *Patterns of the rejecting-back-to-normal strategy*

The UK government invested a lot and earlier than others to get the first available vaccines (Twohey, Collins, & Thomas, 2020), which might be a response to the relatively high and continuous pressure to 'come back to normal quickly' at times when the lock-downs came with high costs and the attempt to efficiently apply contact tracing had failed while the virus was spreading uncontrolled within the population (Booth, 2020). But the promise to 'come back to normal' as soon as possible was a political means for convincing the public to accept rigorous lockdowns necessary to give a rest to an overwhelmed health system – the already stretched NHS (National Health Service).

4.4.3. The new normal

A positive version of this pattern conceptualises normality as a new version of everyday life. In both corpora there are indications of two different types: first, there are calls to recognise the time period of the corona pandemic as the new normal (17–19).

(17) *You can't wait until a vaccine for Covid-19 is found - because scientists may never find one. And if 'safety' means a new level of normality, we need to accept the new 'normal' will be different.* - The Daily Mirror, 2020-05-16

(18) *I think the reality is we are all going to have to get used to this new kind of normal as we go forward, where we have to take some self-responsibility.* - Evening Standard 2020-06-23

(19) *Digitaler Unterricht wird der neue Normalzustand sein – zumindest für das nächste Schuljahr.* ('Digital teaching will be the new normal - at least for the next school year.') – Die Welt, 2020-07-07

Second, we find prognostic practices that conceptualise the pandemic as a drastic experience that will change normality not only for a certain period – but forever (20–21).

(20) *Things will come back to a new version of normal.* – The Times, 2020-04-25

(21) *Es wird eine andere Normalität geben. Die neue Normalität wird ein bisschen weniger Wachstum haben. Das alte Wachstumsmodell ist an einem Zenit angelangt. Wir werden lernen, mit weniger gut zu leben.* ('There will be a different normality. The new normal will have a little less growth. The old growth model has reached a zenith. We will learn to live well with less.') – Die Welt, 2020-03-27

This second type is related to progressive ideas of society and the economy as citation (20) shows. It challenges the normative dominance for economic growth and consumption: *We will learn to live well with less.*

There is little evidence of the new normal being addressed in both data sets. As Table 10 shows, for both the UK and Germany there are prognostic practices that refer to a specific period as well as those that characterise the new normal as a permanent state.

UK	[SOCIAL LIFE] *will turn into a new normal*
	a) *for a certain period*
	b) *forever*
GER	[SOCIAL LIFE] *verändert sich zu einer neuen Normalität*
	a) *für eine Zeitperiode*
	b) *für immer*

Table 10. *Patterns of the new-normal strategy*

Nonetheless, our data showed that from the very beginning, there were already voices in the debate suggesting that it would be a long process to come back to any kind of normal and that a quick return is a myth. It might be a rather long journey during which a new normal will establish. But these more critical narratives remained the exception in our data.

5. Conclusion and Perspectives

Our analysis has shown that normality is indeed more frequently discussed in relation to COVID-19 than in general news discourse, and much more so in British than in German discourse. Keyword analyses of constructions in the grammatical future tense have shown that prognostic practices around normality are used in the following knowledge domains in both data sets: Everyday Life & Time Structuring, Leisure & Festivities and Medicine & Measures. A context that was only identified by collocations in the British data set is Economy & Labor Market, while collocations from the context Education are only proven for the German prognostic practices. In both national discourses, normality is an underspecified concept that is easy to agree on since it does not specify what it means for different social groups. While lexical underspecification is the norm in the use of 'normal' and 'normality' we find cases in both national discourses where vagueness is explicitly marked by indefinite expressions, thus critically reflecting the lack of clarity of the concept of normality. Interestingly, indefinite expressions increased in both national discourses in late summer and November 2020, but were still infrequently used, especially in Germany. While the topos of 'carry on as normal' was used in both countries, especially at the beginning, we see patterns in which a return to normality is increasingly discussed and, above all, demanded — especially in the UK. The goal of a 'new normal' (Zinn, 2020), and thus the idea of seeing the state of emergency as an opportunity for social change, remains an elitist and rarely instantiated concept.

Altogether the desire for 'normality' as expressed in the presence of normality discourse in the examined news media does not come as a surprise. The notion of normality, in contrast to a state of exception, seems a social value implying a world of stability and control. This desire fits well the broad scholarly agreement that humans require a degree of stability in their environment to develop feelings of ontological security (Giddens, 1991) and a healthy identity (Baumeister, 1987), while phenomenologists such as Alfred Schütz (1972) suggested that the lifeworld is constituted through an unquestioned background knowledge that underpins everyday practices with meaning. Nevertheless, we can only speculate about the heightened communication of normality in the UK press. In a social world where all kinds of risks have to be managed individually as in the (neo-)liberalism policy tradition of the UK, desires for normality might be socio-culturally more emphasised. The stronger communication of normality might be an expression of the stronger political pressure the government was under to allow a normal life. This pressure might have been stronger or more strongly felt in a country with a press which has a more rigorous media culture than other countries and a neoliberal policy tradition which tend to emphasise individual responsibility for managing risk and uncertainty. In the German tradition of a conservative social welfare state regime, where stability is the more common experience, trust in institutions might be stronger and normality discourse less accentuated.

The metaphor of a valued 'normality' is also a powerful resource for legitimising an undesired present (i.e. lockdown measures) for reaching a desired 'normal' future. Thus,

it is instrumental for politics (Krzyżanowski, 2020). At times of rapid social change and uncertainties, for example, *jobs at risk* have become a normal expression of our times in the UK (Zinn, 2020b), the desire for a stable normality, remains a central political motive. Such an inclusive metaphor of the normal seems politically desirable in contexts where the new normal does not promise any improvement but might come with further deterioration of living conditions and lack of income for the already underprivileged.

There is broad scholarship which highlights the importance of a stable social environment for people's well-being. Interruptions are undesirable experiences when they are not self-induced but caused by external threats or government measures if not well justified. *Normality* is therefore a powerful political promise which is influential where it downplays and covers-up social conflicts and inequality structures at times of crisis. Thus, its particular social and political strength is its vagueness.

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