

## Disaster Discourse, Delayed States, and Civic Counter-Narratives: A Critical Sociolinguistic Study of “Citizens Helping Citizens” in Sumatra

Heri Wira Andesta<sup>1</sup>, M Afiv Toni Suhendra Saragih<sup>2</sup> Anton Purnama<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,3</sup>. Faculty of Engineering, Universitas Gunung Leuser

<sup>2</sup>Department of Indonesia Teaching, University of Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara

email: [wiraandesta5@gmail.com](mailto:wiraandesta5@gmail.com)<sup>1</sup> [m.avivtonisyhendra@umsu.ac.id](mailto:m.avivtonisyhendra@umsu.ac.id)<sup>2</sup> [antonpurnama515@gmail.com](mailto:antonpurnama515@gmail.com)<sup>3</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines disaster discourse in Sumatra by analyzing how the state and citizens are represented in public communication during the emergency response phase. Employing a Critical Discourse Analysis approach within sociolinguistics, the study analyzes a corpus of national online news reports and citizens' social media posts. The analysis focuses on the representation of social actors, lexical strategies, evaluative structures, and temporal constructions that shape meanings of delay, action, and accountability. The findings reveal that state discourse is dominated by institutional and procedural language that tends to obscure agency and normalize delayed responses as technical matters. In contrast, citizen discourse constructs a powerful counter-narrative of citizens helping citizens, foregrounding horizontal solidarity while implicitly challenging state legitimacy. This discursive tension demonstrates that disasters are socially and linguistically produced rather than neutrally reported. The study contributes to sociolinguistic research on disaster discourse by providing empirical evidence from the Global South and highlighting the role of counter-discourse in reshaping power relations, responsibility, and public trust in times of crisis.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Natural disasters in contemporary studies are no longer understood solely as ecological or technical events, but rather as discursive arenas where social, political, and ideological meanings are produced and contested. In this context, language plays a central role in framing the causes, responsibilities, and responses to disasters. Recent studies in critical sociolinguistics show that disaster discourse functions as a symbolic mechanism for negotiating state legitimacy and the position of citizens in a social order shaken by crisis (Mohr, 2022; Tierney, n.d.; Uekusa, 2019). When the state fails or is slow to respond to a disaster, this failure is not only material but also constructed and circulated through language. Therefore, discourse analysis is a relevant approach to understanding how power relations are represented, maintained, or challenged in

emergency situations. This perspective positions disasters as discursive events laden with interests, rather than neutral phenomena detached from social and political structures.

In many global contexts, official state discourse in disaster situations tends to feature bureaucratic, procedural, and impersonal language that serves to maintain institutional legitimacy and stability. Research shows that linguistic strategies such as depersonalising actors, using nominalisation, and obscuring agents are often used to dampen demands for public accountability (Billig, 2008; Hansson, 2015; Uekusa, 2019). Policy language and official statements often emphasise administrative processes and technical coordination, while aspects of structural failure or delayed response are discursively muted (Saragih, A., & Saragih, 2021). In this context, language not only reflects reality, but also constructs a particular social reality that benefits dominant actors. Critical discourse analysis views this practice as a form of symbolic power that works subtly but effectively. Therefore, understanding how the state is represented in disaster discourse is crucial to uncovering the discursive mechanisms that support or undermine the state's legitimacy in the public eye.

On the other hand, the development of digital media and social media has expanded the space for citizens' discursive participation in crisis situations. Citizens are no longer merely the subjects of news reports, but also active producers of discourse who frame their experiences, emotions, and criticisms of the state. A number of studies show that in the context of disasters, social media often becomes the main medium for the emergence of counter-discourse that challenges the state's official narrative (Alexander, 2014; Palen & Hughes, 2018; Tagliacozzo & Arcidiacono, 2016). Through more emotional, direct, and collective language, citizens build narratives of horizontal solidarity that emphasise concrete action at the community level. Such narratives not only represent social practices but also produce ideological meanings about who is responsible and who takes action. Thus, citizens' discourse has the potential to destabilise the state's dominant discourse and open up space for criticism of unequal power relations in disaster management.

In the Indonesian context, natural disasters are recurring phenomena with widespread impacts, particularly in Sumatra, which is prone to floods, earthquakes, and landslides. However, critical sociolinguistic studies of disaster discourse in Indonesia are still relatively limited, especially those examining the discursive relationship between the state and its citizens. Most previous studies have emphasised normative aspects of policy, risk management, or crisis communication, without exploring how language constructs meanings of delay, responsibility, and legitimacy (Efendi et al., 2019; Oktavia & Khairani Wardah, 2025). In fact, Indonesia's context as part of the Global South offers unique discursive dynamics, including strong values of community solidarity and mutual cooperation. This gap in research highlights the need for studies that systematically analyse disaster discourse as a social practice that both reflects and shapes power relations between the state and society (Protschky, 2022).

Several international studies within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis have shown that state delays in responding to crises are often linguistically reconstructed as something that is 'inevitable' or 'being worked on' (Azizan et al., 2020; Lueg et al., 2020). However, few studies have explicitly examined how such delays are challenged by citizen discourse through narratives of solidarity. This is where the concept of counter-narrative becomes relevant, as it allows for analysis of the forms of symbolic resistance that emerge in the public sphere. In the context of disasters, counter-narratives do not always take the form of formal political opposition, but rather through everyday language that emphasises collective action and empathy (Omar & Habil, 2023). This study positions the narrative of citizens helping citizens as a discursive practice that serves to shift the centre of legitimacy from the state to citizens, thereby opening up new perspectives in sociolinguistic studies on crises and governance.

This research departs from the epistemological assumption that language is a social practice that is not neutral and is always bound to power relations. Using a Critical Discourse Analysis approach, this study views disaster discourse as the result of interactions between social structures, institutional practices, and individual agency. The focus of the analysis is directed at how social actors are represented, how responsibility is constructed, and how moral evaluations are inserted into the text. This approach enables researchers to uncover layers of meaning that are not always explicit but operate through lexical choices and syntactic structures. Thus, this study not only describes the content of discourse but also explains how it contributes to the reproduction or transformation of power relations in the context of disasters.

The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to integrate state discourse analysis and citizen discourse analysis into a comprehensive analytical framework. Unlike previous studies that tend to separate official communication and citizen communication, this study places the two in an intertwined dialogical relationship. By analysing online media and social media simultaneously, this study is able to capture the dynamics of real-time contestation of meaning. This approach reinforces the argument that the digital public sphere is the main arena for discourse contestation in crisis situations. Furthermore, the focus on Sumatra enriches the international literature with empirical data from a non-Western context that has been underrepresented in CDA studies.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyse how state responsibility and citizen agency are constructed in the discourse on disasters in Sumatra, as well as how the counter-narrative of citizens helping citizens functions as a form of symbolic resistance to state inaction. Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of critical sociolinguistic studies by emphasising the role of counter-discourse in crisis contexts. Empirically, this study provides evidence from the Global South that is relevant to global discussions on discourse, power, and disaster governance. Thus, this study is expected to broaden our understanding of how language works as a tool of legitimisation and resistance in extreme situations.

## II. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative design with a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, which is based on critical-interpretive epistemology. Within this framework, language is understood not as a neutral system, but as a social practice closely tied to power relations, ideology, and broader social structures (Mustafa, 2025; Putranto, 2024). This study adopts the view that discourse operates simultaneously as text, discursive practice, and social practice, so that the analysis is directed not only at linguistic structures but also at the context of text production and consumption (Rosdiana, et al., 2023). With this epistemological position, this study does not aim to measure frequency positivistically, but rather to interpret how meanings about state responsibility and citizen agency are constructed, negotiated, and contested in disaster discourse. This approach is consistent with the orientation of CDA, which places analysis as a reflective and critical practice in reading the power relations that work symbolically (Ayomi et al., 2023)

The research data was sourced from two main domains, namely national online media news and social media posts (Twitter/X and Facebook) produced during the disaster emergency response phase in the Sumatra region. Data selection was conducted purposively by considering public visibility, thematic relevance, and discourse interaction intensity. Online media represents institutional discourse and journalistic mediation practices, while social media represents citizen discourse and participatory expression in the digital public sphere. The analysis instrument was developed based on the CDA framework, which includes analysis of social actor representation, lexical strategies, evaluative structures, and intertextuality patterns. The analysis categories are treated as flexible heuristic tools that are open to revision during the analysis process, in line with the CDA principle that emphasises continuous dialogue between theory and data.

The data analysis procedure was conducted systematically and iteratively through several stages. First, the data was coded to identify key social actors, including the state, institutions, and citizens, taking into account the strategies of exclusion and inclusion of actors. Second, a linguistic analysis was conducted on the lexical choices, syntactic constructions, and evaluative strategies used to represent delays, actions, and responsibilities). Third, linguistic findings are interpreted in relation to the broader socio-political context in order to reveal the ideologies and power relations at work behind the text. To maintain the credibility of the analysis, the data was re-read reflectively and triangulated between online and social media sources (Author, Year). From an ethical standpoint, all data is public and anonymised at the individual level, in line with the ethical principles of qualitative research in digital media studies.

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This Results and Discussion section presents the research findings while critically interpreting them by linking the empirical data to the frameworks of critical discourse analysis and sociolinguistics. The integration of results and discussion is intended to emphasize that linguistic findings are not neutral but are always intertwined with power relations, ideology, and social practice (van Dijk, 1993)

The analysis of the national online media corpus and citizens' social media posts reveals a dual configuration of discourse, namely state institutional discourse and citizen participatory discourse. These two discourses operate simultaneously within the digital public sphere; however, they represent disaster reality through systematically different linguistic devices. This divergence reinforces the argument that media are not merely channels of information but arenas for the production of social meaning.

#### Representation of State Actors: Institutionalization and the Obscuring of Agency

The representation of state actors tends to be constructed through collective and abstract entities, emphasizing structure rather than individuals.

Table 1. Representation of State Actors in Online Media Discourse

Representation Form	Linguistic Example	Discursive Function
Institutional	government, BPBD, joint task force	Actor abstraction
Nominalization	response was conducted	Shift of focus from agent
Passive	aid was distributed	Reduction of accountability

Table 1 illustrates how state actors are represented in online media discourse through linguistic strategies that foreground institutional and structural dimensions rather than individuals as primary agents. Such representation constructs the state as a collective entity operating systemically, rather than as a set of agents with personal responsibility.

First, institutional representation appears through the use of collective terms such as *government*, *BPBD*, and *joint task force*. These lexical choices function to abstract state actors so that actions are not attributed to specific individuals or officials. Consequently, the state is discursively constructed as a homogeneous and impersonal formal structure.

Second, the use of nominalization, for instance in the phrase *response was conducted*, transforms action into a process or event. This strategy shifts the reader's focus from the question of "who acts" to "what occurs," thereby obscuring the acting agent. As a result, state action is perceived as a technocratic activity unfolding almost naturally.

Third, passive constructions such as *aid was distributed* weaken the relationship between action and actor. By omitting an active subject, the discourse reduces emphasis on individual

state accountability while framing the action as the outcome of a system rather than the decision or initiative of specific actors.

Overall, the table demonstrates that nominalization and passive structures operate as discursive strategies that obscure individual state agency. This finding is consistent with the view that institutional discourse often naturalizes actions through language, representing political decisions as neutral administrative or technical processes (Fairclough, 2020)

### The State as a Procedural Entity

State language consistently represents disasters as managerial issues.

Table 2. Lexical Strategies in State Discourse

Lexical Type	Example	Discursive Effect
Administrative	coordination, data collection	Disaster as a technical matter
Procedural temporal	gradual, in accordance with procedures	Normalization of delay
Evaluatively neutral	still under process	Deferral of evaluation

The state consistently represents disasters as managerial and administrative matters. This is reflected in lexical choices that emphasize procedures, stages, and technical processes, positioning disasters not as humanitarian crises demanding rapid and evaluative responses but as bureaucratic affairs that must follow specific mechanisms.

First, the use of administrative lexical items such as *coordination* and *data collection* frames disasters as objects of technical management. These word choices shift attention from the immediate impacts on victims toward bureaucratic activities, so that state response is perceived as a legitimate and structured sequence of administrative work.

Second, procedural-temporal lexical items such as *gradual* and *in accordance with procedures* function to normalize delays in disaster response. By stressing that actions are carried out sequentially and according to procedure, delays are not interpreted as failures but as logical consequences of the governing system. This strategy implicitly mitigates potential public criticism regarding the speed of state response.

Third, the use of evaluatively neutral lexical items such as *still under process* postpones the emergence of judgments about the effectiveness of state policies or actions. Such expressions create the impression that the situation is not yet final for evaluation, thereby suspending space for critical questions regarding policy outcomes and impacts.

Overall, the table shows that these lexical choices frame state response as rational, procedural, and administratively legitimate action. This framing contributes to the reduction of criticism toward state performance, as actions are presented as part of an institutional mechanism deemed “normal.” This finding aligns with the view that legitimacy in discourse is often constructed through procedural rationalization that is, the justification of actions based on rules and formal mechanisms rather than on substantive outcomes or impacts (van Leeuwen, 2008)

### Representation of Citizens as Active Social Actors

In contrast to the state, citizens are represented as concrete subjects with high agency.

Table 3. Representation of Citizens in Social Media Discourse

Representation Form	Linguistic Example	Discursive Function
Active subject	residents evacuated	Assertion of agency
Inclusive collective	we, community	Solidarity
Local identity	village residents	Social proximity

In sharp contrast to the representation of state actors, citizens are portrayed as concrete, personal subjects endowed with high agency. In social media discourse, citizens are not positioned as passive recipients of disaster impacts but as active agents directly involved in response actions.

First, the use of active subject structures, as in the expression *residents evacuated*, explicitly positions citizens as agents of action. This structural choice emphasizes citizens' capacity to act independently and responsively, presenting them as primary actors in crisis situations.

Second, inclusive collective representation through pronouns such as *we* and terms such as *community* functions to construct solidarity and a sense of togetherness. This language not only represents action but also produces social bonds and collective identity, thereby strengthening the moral legitimacy of citizens' actions.

Third, the use of local identity markers such as *village residents* creates social and spatial proximity with the audience. This locality-based identification presents citizens as real subjects rooted in specific social spaces, making their experiences appear more authentic and emotionally resonant.

These findings indicate that citizens are positioned as principal actors in disaster narratives rather than merely as suffering objects. Such representation constructs an image of citizens as empowered and solution-oriented subjects. This pattern affirms the argument that social identity is performatively constructed through linguistic choices that index position, social relations, and capacity for action within a community (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005)

### Evaluative Lexical Strategies in Citizen Discourse

Citizen discourse in social media is characterized by the use of strongly evaluative and affective lexis, which functions to convey critical stances toward state response. Lexical choices such as *late* and *not yet arrived* introduce negative evaluation indirectly, without explicitly articulating criticism. Through this strategy, citizens can express moral judgment of state performance while maintaining their discursive position as narrators of firsthand experience rather than formal commentators.

Table 4. Lexical Strategies in Citizen Discourse

Lexical Type	Example	Discursive Function
Evaluative	late, not yet arrived	Implicit criticism
Direct action	acted on our own	Independence
Affective	cannot wait	Urgency

In addition, lexical items emphasizing direct action (*acted on our own*) and affective expressions (*cannot wait*) construct a narrative of independence and urgency. Citizens are represented as actors driven by immediate need and situational emotion, positioning their actions as legitimate and morally justified responses. This pattern aligns with the concept of implicit evaluation, whereby judgment is not overtly stated but implied through evaluatively and emotionally loaded lexical choices (Ballon, 2010)

### Constructing State Delay through Temporal Patterning

Criticism of the state in citizen discourse is often constructed through the organization of temporal structure rather than explicit evaluative statements. Chronological patterns such as *before aid arrived* emphasize the temporal gap between urgent need and state response,

producing delay as a meaningful narrative fact. By foregrounding sequence, citizen discourse invites readers to infer the mismatch between crisis and institutional action.

Table 5. Evaluative Temporal Patterns

Pattern	Realization	Function
Chronology	before aid arrived	Emphasis on gap
Contrast	citizens acted first	Implicit criticism
Narrative progression	eventually aid arrived	Retrospective evaluation

Furthermore, temporal contrasts such as *citizens acted first* and narrative progression such as *eventually aid arrived* generate retrospective evaluation of state performance. The state is positioned as a late-arriving actor, while citizens appear as the initial responsive agents. Through this strategy, criticism remains implicit and non-confrontational. This pattern corresponds to the notion of strategic ordering of information, in which sequencing produces evaluative and ideological effects without overt criticism (van Leeuwen, 2008)

### The “Citizens Helping Citizens” Narrative as an Ideology of Solidarity

Horizontal solidarity narratives in citizen discourse consistently emerge through emphasis on collective action, active language, and minimal reference to formal institutions. Expressions such as *community pooling resources* highlight joint action that strengthens social cohesion, while active constructions such as *we moved immediately* position citizens as primary agents in disaster response. This representation constructs solidarity as arising from shared initiative rather than structural command.

Table 6. Characteristics of Citizen Solidarity Narratives

Characteristic	Example	Function
Collective action	community pooling funds	Social cohesion
Active language	we moved immediately	Agency
Minimal institution	without waiting	Implicit delegitimation

Moreover, phrases such as *without waiting* implicitly delegitimize institutional roles by stressing citizens’ independence from official mechanisms. The state is not directly attacked but is positioned as non-essential in emergency situations. This pattern reflects an ideology of grassroots resilience, in which citizens are framed as the primary moral actors in disaster response. Such findings resonate with arguments that digital disaster discourse frequently constructs civic solidarity as a competing source of legitimacy alongside institutional authority (Ayomi et al., 2023)

### Media as a Site of Discursive Coexistence

Online media function as mediators that juxtapose state and citizen discourse without critically integrating or recontextualizing them. State discourse typically derives from officials and is delivered in formal institutional style, whereas citizen discourse emerges from lived experience and is presented narratively. These differences in source and style underscore a discursive distance between authority and grassroots experience.

Table 7. Intertextual Relations in Media Discourse

Aspect	State Discourse	Citizen Discourse
Source	officials	citizens
Style	formal	narrative
Integration	parallel	not synthesized

The parallel placement of the two discourses without synthesis or evaluation means that media operate primarily as channels of distribution rather than arenas of critique. Readers are thus confronted with adjacent but analytically unconnected narratives. This pattern supports the view that news media often reproduce discursive inequality by granting formally equal space while leaving underlying power relations unchallenged (Tagliacozzo & Arcidiacono, 2016)

### **Discursive Implications and Power Relations**

Overall, the findings demonstrate that disaster discourse is not merely a representation of events but an arena for negotiating power and legitimacy. The state maintains authority through procedural language and agent abstraction, while citizens construct moral legitimacy through narratives of action and solidarity. This pattern reflects the classic dynamic between institutional and grassroots discourse described in critical discourse studies (Friedensen & Gowen, 2024)

The integration of results and discussion underscores that differences in actor representation, lexical strategy, and evaluative structure are not accidental linguistic variation but ideologically shaped discursive practice. The study thus extends disaster discourse research by showing how citizen agency, linguistically constructed, challenges the dominance of state discourse within Indonesia's digital public sphere.

### **Discussion**

The findings demonstrate that disaster discourse in Indonesia's digital public sphere is structured by a dual configuration of institutional and citizen narratives that coexist yet operate through contrasting linguistic logics. State discourse constructs disasters as procedural and administratively manageable events, foregrounding institutional structures while backgrounding individual agency. In contrast, citizen discourse represents disasters as urgent lived crises, foregrounding human actors, collective action, and affective evaluation. This divergence confirms that linguistic representation is inseparable from power and legitimacy, as different actors mobilize language to sustain authority or moral credibility within the same communicative space.

From a critical discourse perspective, the state's reliance on nominalization, passive constructions, and procedural lexis functions to naturalize governance actions and depersonalize responsibility. By framing response as *coordination*, *data collection*, or processes that are *still underway*, institutional discourse presents disaster management as technocratic routine rather than contested political decision-making. Such representation aligns with the view that institutional language often legitimizes authority through procedural rationality and abstraction of agency, thereby minimizing accountability and potential critique (Fairclough, 2020; van Dijk, 1993). The linguistic construction of the state as a systemic entity rather than a set of accountable actors thus reinforces institutional dominance in public interpretation of disaster response.

Citizen discourse, by contrast, constructs legitimacy through experiential immediacy and moral agency. Active clauses (*citizens evacuated*, *we moved immediately*), inclusive pronouns (*we*, *community*), and affective–evaluative lexis (*cannot wait*, *late*) position citizens as responsive agents confronting urgent reality. This pattern reflects sociolinguistic insights that identity and authority are performatively enacted through linguistic choices that index social position and action capacity (Alexander, 2014; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). In disaster narratives, such linguistic positioning transforms citizens from victims into protagonists, generating an alternative locus of legitimacy grounded in solidarity and action rather than institutional mandate.

Temporal structuring further differentiates the two discourses. Citizen narratives construct state delay through chronological sequencing (*before aid arrived*), contrastive ordering (*citizens acted first*), and retrospective closure (*eventually aid arrived*). These patterns produce evaluative meaning implicitly, allowing criticism to emerge through narrative structure rather than overt accusation. Strategic ordering of events thus functions as an ideological device that frames the state as reactive and citizens as proactive, subtly challenging institutional authority without direct confrontation (van Dijk, 1993; van Leeuwen, 2008). The result is a discursive reallocation of moral precedence: those who act first are implicitly those who care most.

The recurring “citizens helping citizens” narrative consolidates this reallocation into an ideology of horizontal solidarity. Collective expressions (*community pooling resources*) and minimal institutional reference (*without waiting*) construct resilience as grassroots capacity rather than state provision. This framing implicitly delegitimizes institutional centrality by presenting effective response as originating from civic initiative. Disaster sociology has noted that digital-era disaster communication frequently elevates community solidarity as a competing legitimacy source alongside formal authority (Friedensen & Gowen, 2024). In the Indonesian context, such narratives linguistically enact community resilience as moral superiority rather than merely practical necessity.

Online media operate as the arena in which these competing discourses coexist. By juxtaposing official statements and citizen testimonies in parallel without analytical synthesis, media platforms reproduce discursive plurality while avoiding explicit evaluation. This structural neutrality masks asymmetry: institutional discourse retains formal authority, whereas citizen discourse carries experiential authenticity. As media discourse studies suggest, presenting divergent voices without critical integration can sustain underlying power relations by appearing balanced while leaving institutional legitimacy intact (Ballon, 2010). Thus, media do not merely transmit disaster narratives but structure the conditions under which institutional and grassroots legitimacy are negotiated (Mohr, 2022; Palen & Hughes, 2018).

Overall, the study demonstrates that disaster discourse is a site of ideological struggle over agency, responsibility, and moral authority. The state sustains legitimacy through procedural rationalization and agent abstraction, whereas citizens construct counter-legitimacy through narratives of immediacy, action, and solidarity. These findings extend critical disaster discourse research by showing how linguistic representation enables citizen agency to symbolically challenge institutional dominance within Indonesia’s digital public sphere. The coexistence of these discourses indicates not a replacement of institutional authority but an ongoing negotiation in which procedural power and moral agency compete for interpretive primacy in public understanding of disaster response.

#### IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study shows that disaster discourse in Sumatra functions as a discursive arena that reveals negotiations of responsibility, agency, and legitimacy between the state and citizens. Through critical sociolinguistic analysis of online media and social media texts, this study reveals that the state is consistently represented through institutional, procedural, and depersonalised language, which tends to obscure agency and normalise delayed responses as technical consequences. In contrast, citizens are constructed—and construct themselves—as active, responsive, and morally charged social actors through narratives of horizontal solidarity of citizens helping citizens. The tension between these two discursive configurations not only reflects differences in linguistic style, but also marks unequal power relations in the production and circulation of meaning around disasters in the digital public sphere. Thus, disasters are not merely understood as natural events, but as social events that are intensely produced and debated through language.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of disaster discourse studies by expanding the focus of analysis to the Global South context, which has been relatively

marginalised in international sociolinguistic literature. Findings on the massive discourse of citizens help citizens affirm the importance of paying attention to counter-discourse as an alternative source of legitimacy that can challenge the dominance of state discourse. The implications of this study emphasise the need for a more reflexive, transparent, and linguistically accountable approach to disaster communication, both in public policy practice and in critical language education. Further research is recommended to explore the dynamics of interaction between state and citizen discourse longitudinally and compare it across disaster contexts, in order to understand how language plays a role in shaping trust, resistance, and social solidarity in crisis situations.

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