The 2014 Ebola outbreak in Spain. A study of social representations

Lorena Gil de Montes, Nahia Idoiaga, Martin Sainz de la Maza

The 2014 Ebola outbreak

- It was the most widespread Ebola epidemic in history
- It had great impact in society
  - High mortality rates
  - Great media coverage
- The Ebola cases in Spain

A study of social representations

- Systems of beliefs, meanings, attitudes, and images through which people organize and give meaning to the world they know

Research objectives

- How knowledge about Ebola was transformed from scientific knowledge diffused by traditional media to lay people's thinking as reflected by electronic social networks

- What role played emotional reactions when people made sense of Ebola

The process.
From science to common sense

- The transformation of scientific knowledge in the course of its diffusion
- From reified universe to consensual universe

Two communicative formats

- Reification

- More monological
- Directed
- Prescriptive

- media

- Consensualization

- More dialogical
- Heterogeneity
- Multiple voices

- Social networks. Twitter

The content.
Social representations of Ebola

- SRT emphasizes the symbolic aspects of dealing with the threat of a disease through interpersonal and media communication

- Media content:
  - Hot crisis of maximum panic
  - Process of othering
  - Downward, upward and outward blame

The content.
Social representations of Ebola

- SRT claims that the unknown becomes known through the anchoring process where new phenomena are named and classified on the basis of concepts that are meaningful to the public
- The public's content
  - The process of otherness
  - Representations of heroes, victims and villains
  - Emotional anchoring

Context of the studies

- The first European country with an Ebola infection during the 2014 outbreak
- No experience with Ebola in Spain
  - People learned about if through the media
  - Trending topic in Twitter

Method

- Sample. Articles from El Pais and 28760 Tweets written in Spanish between March 22, 2014 and November 15, 2014

- Analysis of information. Lexical analysis using Alceste software
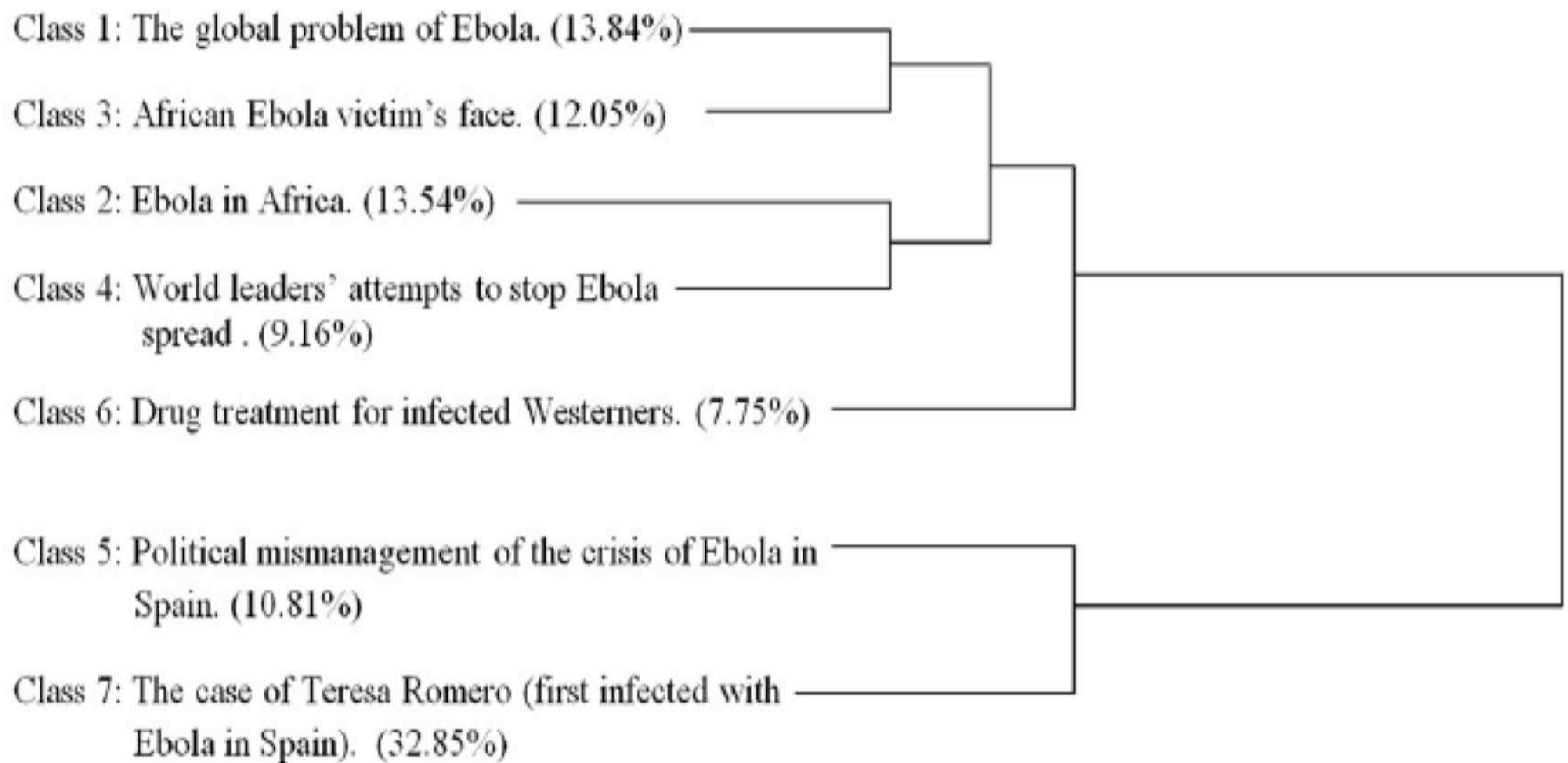
Figure 1. The hierarchical clustering dendrogram for *El País*.

Class 1: The mismanagement of Ebola in Spain
and the media coverage (21.68%)

Class 5: Teresa Romero´s case (8.48%)

Class 3:Request for help to fight Ebola (11.45%)

Class 4: Repatriations of infected Spanish

religious workers (48.20%)

Class 5: Suspicious cases of Ebola in Spain (10.19%)

Figure 2. The hierarchical categorical classes of *El País* with the percent-
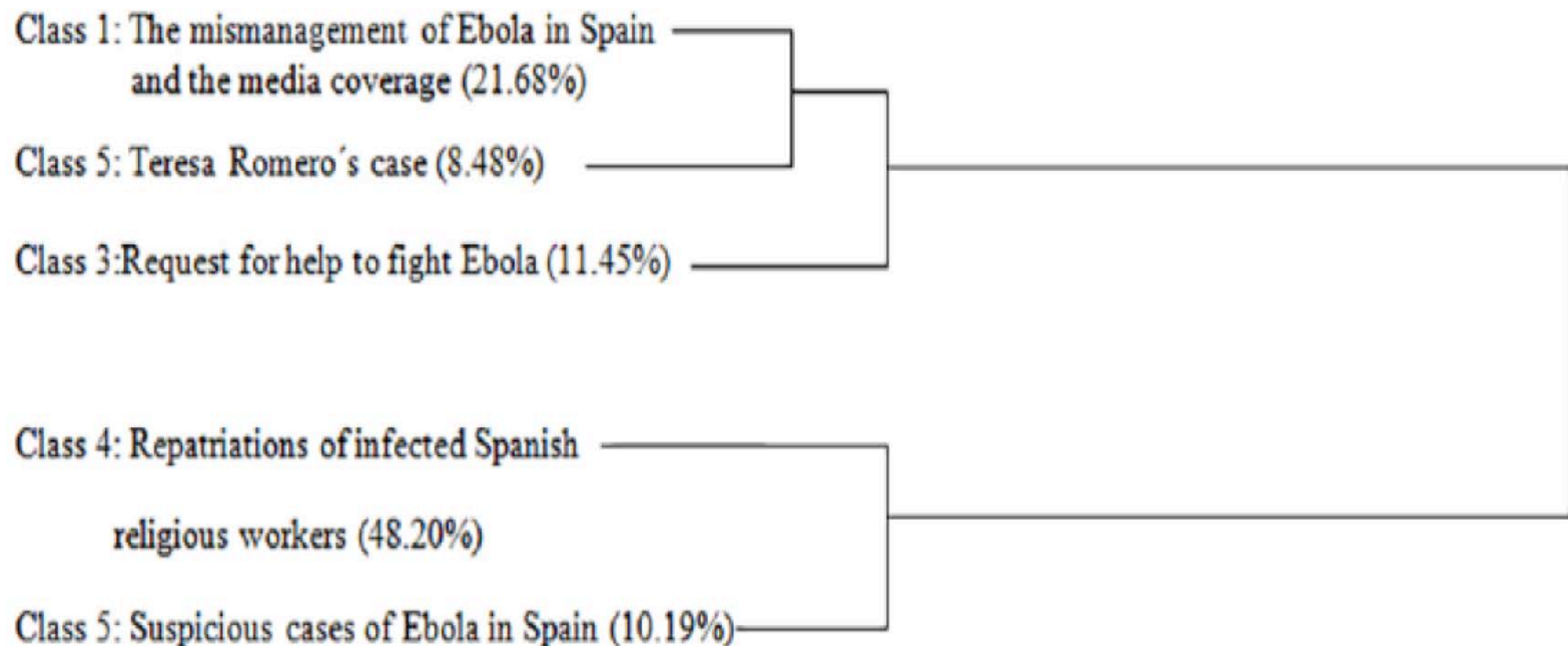
Method

- Sample. In this research 294 participants completed a questionnaire

- Materials. What comes to your mind when you hear the word Ebola?

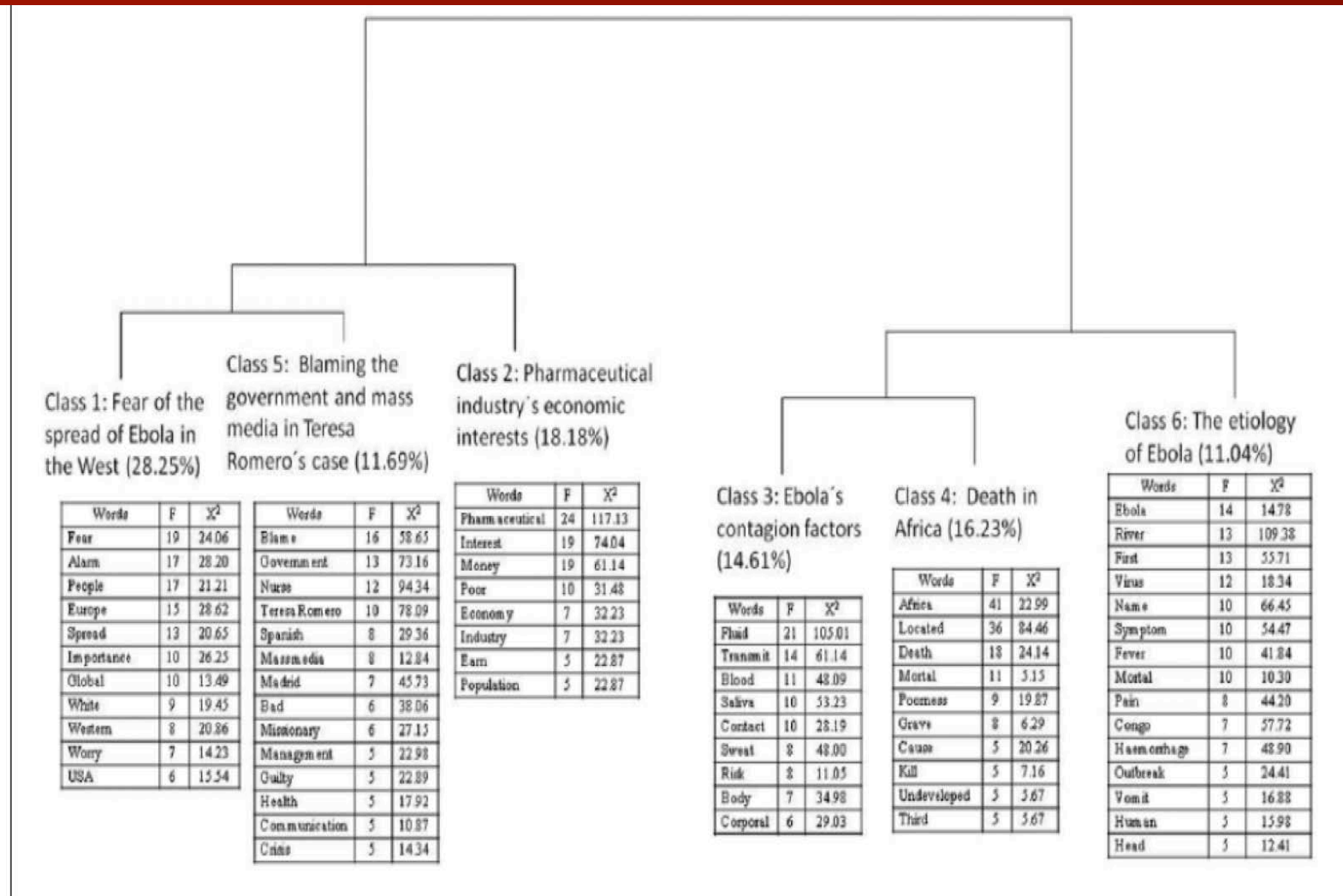- Analysis of information. Lexical analysis with Alceste software

Class 1: Fear of the spread of Ebola in the West (28.25%)

Words	F	X^2
Fear	19	24.06
Alarm	17	28.20
People	17	21.21
Europe	15	28.62
Spread	13	20.65
Importance	10	26.25
Global	10	13.49
White	9	19.45
Western	8	20.86
Worry	7	14.23
USA	6	15.54

Class 5: Blaming the government and mass media in Teresa Romero's case (11.69%)

Words	F	X^2
Blame	16	58.65
Government	13	73.16
Nurse	12	94.34
Teresa Romero	10	78.09
Spanish	8	29.36
Massmedia	8	12.84
Madrid	7	45.73
Bad	6	38.06
Missionary	6	27.13
Management	5	22.98
Guilty	5	22.89
Health	5	17.92
Communication	5	10.87
Crisis	5	14.34

Class 2: Pharmaceutical industry's economic interests (18.18%)

Words	F	X^2
Pharmaceutical	24	117.13
Interest	19	74.04
Money	19	61.14
Poor	10	31.48
Economy	7	32.23
Industry	7	32.23
Earn	5	22.87
Population	5	22.87

Class 3: Ebola's contagion factors (14.61%)

Words	F	X^2
Fluid	21	105.01
Transmit	14	61.14
Blood	11	48.09
Saliva	10	53.23
Contact	10	28.19
Sweat	8	48.00
Risk	8	11.05
Body	7	34.98
Corporal	6	29.03

Class 4: Death in Africa (16.23%)

Words	F	X^2
Africa	41	22.99
Located	36	84.46
Death	18	24.14
Mortal	11	3.15
Poorness	9	19.87
Grave	8	6.29
Cause	5	20.26
Kill	5	7.16
Undeveloped	5	3.67
Third	5	3.67

Class 6: The etiology of Ebola (11.04%)

Words	F	X^2
Ebola	14	14.78
River	13	109.38
First	13	55.71
Virus	12	18.34
Name	10	66.45
Symptom	10	54.47
Fever	10	41.84
Mortal	10	10.30
Pain	8	44.20
Congo	7	57.72
Haemorrhage	7	48.90
Outbreak	5	24.41
Vomit	5	16.88
Human	5	15.98
Head	5	12.41

Figure 1. The hierarchical clustering dendrogram of the free association with the most frequent words and the words with the greatest association $\chi^2(1)$, $p < 0.001$.
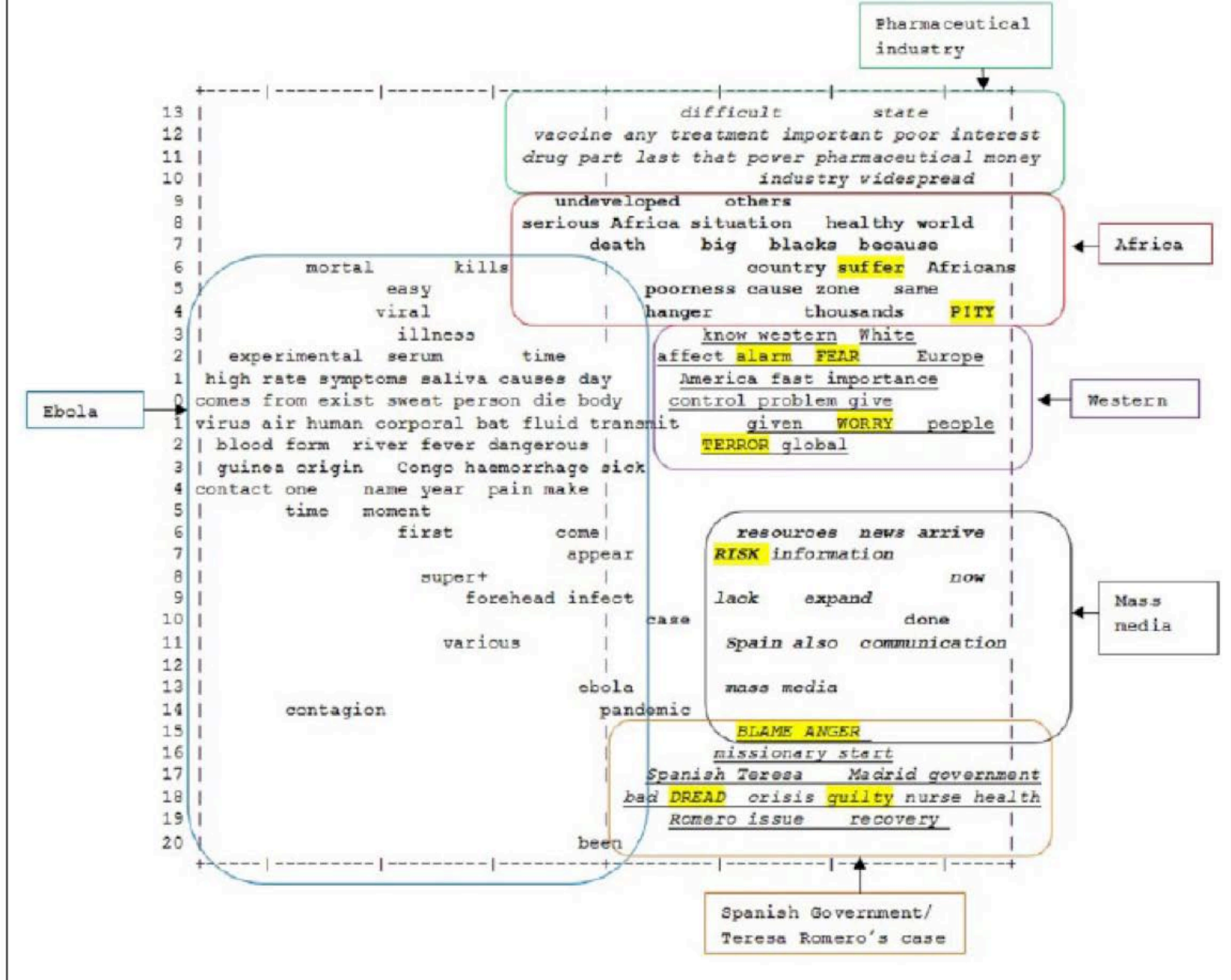
Figure 2. The multiple correspondence factor analysis produced from the descending hierarchical cluster analysis.

Discussion

- How people make sense of Ebola in their daily lives
- Reification and consensualization discoursive formats
  - More monological vs. Dialogical
  - More homogeneous vs. Heterogeneous

Discussion

- Examples of media discourse
  - It is the only realistic way to address this global threat
  - Political responsibilities must…
  - Everyone agrees that…
- Examples of Twitter
  - It is shameful to blame the repatriated religious workers
  - The government is not spending a single euro to seek a cure
  - Congratulations Teresa!

Discussion

- The public makes sense of Ebola by anchoring and objectification processes
  - A global threat
  - Emotional anchoring
  - Moral symbols

Thank you