

Role of COVID-19-related Social Media Videos and Messages in English in Triggering Panic Among People in Saudi Arabia: A study in Pragmatics

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Abstract

This study offers a pragmatic analysis of English discourse for assessing the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) related media messages and videos in English in creating fears and panic among people in Saudi Arabia. Any media, including social media, is both a source of awareness and education of individuals and it fulfilled this purpose during the current pandemic by spreading videos and messages about precautionary measures. However, it simultaneously fuelled rumours, conspiracy theories, and false information, thereby creating unnecessary panic among the public. Using qualitative data gathered through semi structured personal interviews of thirty professionals; this study concluded that certain key words in English were instrumental in the inciting of panic and fear amongst the people even as the pandemic had not yet made any considerable inroads in KSA. It also compared these with key words that went viral during an earlier pandemic to

generalise the findings. It is felt that this and similar studies carry much significance for regulatory authorities in the KSA in times of national emergencies of the dimensions of the Corona pandemic, in spreading useful and constructive information and containing dangerous, false and useless propaganda.

Keywords: EFL learners, Covid-19, Social Media, Pragmatics

Introduction

Pragmatics is an inquiry into "the state of our language usage in the social contact sense and the effect on others of our concern" (Bardovi-Harlig, 2017). Pragmatics discuss, in other words, how people interact and comprehend what others do. Pragmatics uses completely grammatical sentences rather than words or the sentence form as a tool of analysis. As Martinez-Flor and Uso-Juan (2010) put it, rhetoric and pragmatism are not merely about utterance but about the components of the statement. As Platridge (1995) introduced the 'speech act theory,' she argued that all words were constructed first to fulfill a purpose and offer a word. This requires an appreciation of words both speakers and listeners use. Austin believed that there had been three civil acts. Firstly, the act of locution that corresponds, in its basic meaning, to the act of speaking; the physical features of speech sounds (phonetic), atmospheric or mood (phatic), real or semitone and existing meanings (rhetic). Secondly, it defines the item expected by the legislation (i.e. promises, warnings, advice or threats). The speaker's aim is to create a culture-dependent vocabulary that helps the listener to recognize cultural meaning. The non-discussive effect of a conversation. Thirdly, the perlocutionary act demonstrates the true effect on the listener. The speaker then sounds and adheres generally to syntax and other semanthropic elements. The word, 'Can you open the door?', although a grammatically correct statement can still not cause anyone to open a door but has an unwelcome desire to suggest that it be opened. Nevertheless, a listener may specifically interpret the query and presume that it would just open a door, suggesting that maybe the 'you' are more conventional.

In this way, pragmatics examining the use of languages and language users should consider the non-language dimensions in order to interpret properly language in the context of social media posts regarding COVID 19 Pandemic. Inferences in expressions cannot be interpreted purely by

the interpretation of the words. Pragmatics involves inference, argues Glaser (2009), encouraging audiences to use non-linguistic information in order to comprehend the language.

What began in early January as underreported news of a mystery illness took on the form of a disastrous calamity facing the world in the weeks that followed, with ‘fear’ and its synonyms and symbols spreading like wild fire on social media. Popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram facilitated important conversations surrounding the virus, while simultaneously allowing the spread of misinformation and creating sensationalism (Ali and Kurasawa, 2020). On the other hand, it was recognised that social media helped individuals remain aware of the latest developments and take prescribed precautions (Vasterman and Ruigrok, 2013). However, issues of fear, anxiety and panic buying were commonly observed among the public with the rapid transfer of information about COVID-19 (Depoux et al., 2020), necessitating an evaluation of the impact of social media messages and information in English on triggering pain among the public and determining the extent to which social media positively or negatively contributes during a pandemic outbreak. It was the uncertainty and initial lack of information that effectively gave birth to a fear psychosis of the unknown and the unpredictable. This was immediately followed by unchecked media coverage of the happenings, and extensive social media exchange of both true and false bits of information. In modern times, media coverage is a key regulator of people’s emotions, especially fear. It may be noted that collective participation in a happening has unlimited potential for sharing of emotions, which was fear in the case of the Coronavirus pandemic. As soon as an event enters the public domain, it becomes open to debate, giving the masses something to debate about but not necessarily guiding the direction of the debate. Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004) point out how that public perception were a factor of media coverage which acts like an agenda-setting agent for the people. Wahl-Korgensen (2020) notes that in the period of one month starting January, 12, 9387 Coronavirus related stories were collectively published in leading English print media around the world. Of these, 1066 articles contained the word ‘fear’ or associated meanings, all of which were fear inducing. What was notable was that this circle of ‘fear’ was ever widening, starting with fear for life and becoming more and more inclusive with the passage of time by adding other ‘fears’, such as fear of economic backlashes, food shortages and even of nations collapsing. Soon it was apparent that more than the ‘fear’ of the disease it was an undefined ‘fear of fear’ that characterised public reaction. Equally notable

was the pattern of reporting being followed by the news media who underreported statistics on the mortality rates induced by other highly contagious diseases like Ebola or H1N1, or the comparable number of deaths caused by common influenza, with prime coverage being reserved for dramatic videos of people collapsing on the streets, cities piled up with bodies, ransacked food and provision stores, and medical professionals in forbidding special suits struggling to manage the sick people. In hindsight, these behaviours do not appear to be random; rather they bear the semblance of well thought out strategies to up the TRPs and sales of the channels and the print.

Research Problem and Significance

As per Depoux *et al.* (2020), in the era of digitalisation, social media technologies and advanced information technology, misleading rumours, false information and conspiracy theories rapidly spread across the globe within few weeks of the outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) in China. Issues concerning bulk buying of face-masks, and fear-mongering behaviour of public occurred due to circulation of important information as well as falsified information about the pandemic. In this regard, it is described that media reporting is strongly linked to public behaviour and sentiments on the private and public sectors in taking decisions regarding discontinuing airline services and imposing travel restrictions (Depoux *et al.*, 2020). Linguistic analysis is an applied linguistics technique used by many scholars, pedagogues and educationalists as an evaluation of language problems and in the search for a suitable approach. Crisis approaches to public health are constantly overlapping and interconnected on the ground and online. Social networking gives the ability to share all kinds of knowledge directly with the public. In the new world dispensation, it is imperative that health services can use social media tracking to develop national and international networks of disease prevention and surveillance. In order to address the dissemination of misleading news, the need of the hour is a more constructive and responsive public health voice on social media.

Research Objectives and Questions

The central objective of the current study is to test the hypothesis that social media, apart from disseminating a large amount of relevant and timely information to the public in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic, also triggered panic through the massive circulation of unchecked videos, images and messages amongst the Saudi people. Concurrent to this,

The proposed work aims:

- To examine the impact of social media tools on the psychology of individuals during the outbreak of a pandemic.
- To assess the benefits and drawbacks of social media messages and videos in English in the context of the coronavirus outbreak.
- To analyse the impact of the social media messages, videos and pictures on COVID-19 that were basically in English on Saudi Arabian individuals.
- To recommend strategies for minimising the negative aspects of social media use in a foreign language in a pandemic outbreak.

Review of the Literature

Feng and Zhou (2020) who watched the shifts in transient tweet patterns to learn all about COVID-19 across working hours while the pandemic grew analyzed the United States State and County Tweets. They also performed a dynamic analysis over time using an event-related task that reported negative emotions when the 1000th death was announced and positive when the lock-up measures in the countries were simpler. Lyu et al. (2020) looked at US tweets containing the expressions "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus" for a COVID-19 pandemic to achieve market classification. They compared the results with people who did not use this divided vocabulary. The findings show that there are major shifts in era, geolocation and follow-up policies. Moreover, Chen et al. (2020) reflects on researching feelings and computer problems through using tweets COVID-19, like (controvertibly) the term "Chinese Virus." "Chinese Virus" tweeting addresses other China-related concerns. The mood analysis revealed a gloomy feel for both groups, but uncontested tweets had a slightly stronger and more important sound. They further highlight the ability of the nation to combat the crisis. The divided group also focuses more about their background and what they should do.

In the viewpoint of De La Garza (2020), conversations between the active users on different social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook in the case of a pandemic outbreak, are facilitating a window to gather information and shaping the reactions of people. Social networking sites

including Facebook, Twitter and alike which did not exist at the time of significant outbreaks in the past, are providing important conversations regarding COVID-19 spreads in today's time, while also permitting sensationalism and inaccurate information to spread. Moreover, the unparalleled level of real-time details available to people through such social media platforms are providing tools they need to make a rational decision, but also trigger anxiety about what will happen next. The optimistic opinion suggests that social media can be useful at the time when many people are otherwise not connected with one another. Communications related to coronavirus, particularly ones at the society level can assist people in navigating such crisis (De La Garza, 2020).

In a similar context, Cellan-Jones (2020) argued that 24*7 news culture and the growing use of social media spread the fear rapidly than the virus itself, particularly as the coronavirus was being detected very speedily than Sars was before twenty years. Furthermore, social media is providing partial or incomplete information to people instead of covering all facts, which is actually magnifying concerns. Therefore, it is assessed that inadequate and moulded information circulated by social media platforms during pandemic outbreaks threatens people about the upcoming consequences (Cellan-Jones, 2020).

The Cinelli Social Network Infodemic Study (2020) COVID-19 sponsored the COVID-19 Information Improved Social Networking Site. They also concluded that knowing the social forces that influence the usage of information and social networking could be a big challenge as it allows us to build more efficient behavior trends that explain social behaviour and develop improved strategies for experiences during emergencies.

Dupoux et al. (2020) studied the COVID-19 global hysteria epidemic and stated that in view of the current COVID-19 crisis, we are calling for a program to share data on a real-time basis and evaluation of the different social networks in many languages and in the environment of the diaspora. This would improve public health and stakeholder skills to spot and understand social trends that propagate fear and anxiety about the coronavirus and increasingly shifting infection and prevention approaches, mitigating group tension and needless ineffective behaviors.

Thelwall and Thelwall (2020) then evaluated 3,038,026 COVID-19 tweets between 10 and 23 March 2020. It reflects on a common reaction component: class inequalities. The findings show

that people in households, socio-economic inequalities and cultural networks tweet the infection more. In contrast, more media think of the death of sport, the propagation of the disease worldwide and global reactions. Therefore, women tend to have an unequal part of the duty to effectively defend the country. Detailed reports will help raise public awareness and identify viral transmission.

In Vietnam, La et al. (2020) studied financial, social media and science journalism responses within the context of the Vietnam epidemic of COVID-19. It offers useful lessons for other countries by true cooperation between governments, civil society and private people in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The original declaration of gains made in government and media turmoil and recent work into Vietnam's current virus helped credible news outlets. The case study gives important advice not only to certain countries in the parallel struggle with the COVID-19 pandemic but also to the general approach to public health problems, underlining the reality that governments, civil society and private individuals collaborate effectively and frankly.

During the epidemic of COVID-19, Gao et al. (2020) studied Chinese mental wellbeing and social networking issues in China. The results show that SMEs had a significant influence on mental health during the COVID-19 epidemic. The government will concentrate more on mental health concerns, particularly depression and anxiety in the general community, and on addressing "infodemics" during crises in public health.

Research Methodology

For the purpose of assessing the role of social media in igniting fears among people during any pandemic outbreak, with specific reference to the impact of corona virus-related messages and videos circulated over social networking sites, on people of Saudi Arabia, this study used qualitative data because the researcher was convinced that this area required subjective evaluation to obtain deep knowledge instead of relying only on objective philosophy supported by quantitative methods. We understand that qualitative methods are commonly used for answering questions related to meaning, experience and perspective, mostly from the viewpoint of participants, and this is another reason justifying the selection of qualitative methods in the proposed research project (Lune and Berg, 2016). As a part of qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty individuals of Saudi Arabia who are active on

social media platforms. This was a non-probability typical case sample, which logically represented a cross section of the population, based on the belief that being educated and professional individuals, these were least likely to be taken in by illogical and unsubstantiated social media propaganda. In this sense, it was felt that the sample would help creating a benchmark for the reactions of the entire population. It was ensured that the convenience sample chosen from academic and non-academic staffers at Qassim University fulfilled the following conditions:

- i. They are above 25 years of age.
- ii. They have been active social media users at least for the past three years.
- iii. They have a minimum of one social media account, which they have consistently used in these past three years.
- iv. They welcome participation in the study and are willing to share their views honestly and to the best of their knowledge.

Interview data was evaluated with the aid of a thematic analysis whereby themes were generated centering around the emergent concerns voiced by the interviewees and which variedly highlighted the constructs of panic and fear as well their manifestations. Given the social distancing norms still prevalent in the KSA at the time of data collection, all interviews were conducted using the Zoom video app. A schedule was drafted and informants intimated in advance for the Zoom meet. Each interview was recorded with prior permission of the interviewee and was later manually transcribed and saved electronically. An equal representation was sought from male and female volunteers. All the informants were primed for the interview via email, clearly enumerating upon the aims and objectives of the study and their consent for participation was duly obtained by the same route.

All the interviews were conducted by the researcher in the English-Arabic language pair and the medium of communication and the task of transcribing these was assigned to his research team. The average duration of the interviews came to 42 minutes and recommended research ethic guidelines were followed. Table 1 below presents the demographic and social media status of the sample respondents.

Table 1: Demographic data

Respondent	Gender	Highest qualification	Current employment status	Number of social media in use
1	F	Bachelor's degree	Non-academic staff	2
2	F	PhD	Academic staff	1
3	F	Diploma	Non-academic staff	1
4	F	Master's degree	Non-academic staff	2
5	F	PhD	Academic staff	1
6	F	Bachelor's degree	Non-academic staff	3
7	F	Bachelor's degree	Non-academic staff	2
8	F	Master's degree	Non-academic staff	2
9	F	PhD	Academic staff	1
10	F	Master's degree	Non-academic staff	1
11	F	Bachelor's degree	Non-academic staff	2
12	F	Master's degree	Academic staff	2
13	F	Bachelor's degree	Non-academic staff	2

14	F	Diploma	Non-academic staff	1
15	F	Bachelor's degree	Non-academic staff	3
16	M	Master's degree	Non-academic staff	2
17	M	Master's degree	Academic staff	1
18	M	Bachelor's degree	Non-academic staff	1
19	M	Bachelor's degree	Non-academic staff	2
20	M	Master's degree	Academic staff	2
21	M	PhD	Academic staff	2
22	M	Bachelor's degree	Non-academic staff	1
23	M	Bachelor's degree	Non-academic staff	1
24	M	Bachelor's degree	Non-academic staff	2
25	M	Diploma	Non-academic staff	1
26	M	Master's degree	Academic staff	3
27	M	PhD	Academic staff	1
28	M	Master's degree	Non-academic staff	2
29	M	Master's degree	Academic staff	2

	30	M	Bachelor's degree	Non-academic staff	2	
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Interview Data and Results obtained via Thematic Analysis of Social Media exposure

Main theme: Recurrence of the term 'fear' and its associated synonyms and reflection of panic reaction in participants' behaviours.

❖ Discussion:

- Sub theme 1: Frightening video messages.

Discussion: Twenty-one of the participants were in agreement on the most distressing social media videos being the following:

- i. Supposedly infected people spitting in and around public places to spread purposely the virus.
- ii. Apparently healthy people falling dead on the roads presumably being infected with the Coronavirus.
- iii. Complete apathy and inability of authorities to attend to the dead lying unattended.
- iv. Mass graves being used to bury the dead for lack of space and work force to do otherwise.

Participants 14 and 26 shared that they found these videos so distressing that they had to seek psychiatric assistance to manage their fears. On being asked if they had verified the veracity of the videos, they admitted to the contrary but expressed immense 'faith' in stories doing the rounds on social media platforms because they attach a certain amount of 'sanctity' of life.

- Sub theme 2: Text messages with hyped up safety recommendations.

Discussion: Eighteen participants in all shared the view that the hyped up safety precautions doing the rounds on social media with fear, death, highly contagious, sanitation, uncontrolled, dead bodies, life support and contagion, caused them extreme anguish, so much so, that they stocked up on sanitizers and masks much beyond what they could possibly have needed. Three participants

whose close family members are healthcare professionals further shared that the latter reported how these very things had to be rationed in health facilities, as manufacturers were unable to keep up with the crazy hike in demand. In short, the people who most needed the precautionary materials and gear were the ones most suffering for their shortage.

- Sub theme 3: Racial slur.

Discussion: Participants reported feeling drawn to social media messages and videos that targeted a particular race as being the source of the virus. The term ‘Chinese Virus’ was reported as being extremely popular on the social media leading to feelings of anguish and hatred towards the entire Chinese people. At least nine of the participants interviewed reported change in buying behaviours since they encountered the term, rejecting products that were made in China out of fear that they may be infected by buying them. Similar reactions were reported by another three participants who reported they preferred to go without certain essentials (though they equally worried about their short supply in the coming weeks) rather than buy Chinese products as they believed social media messages that warned of virus transmission by means of objects.

- Sub theme 4: Videos and messages of likely food shortages leading to certain behaviours.

Discussion: The most remarkable responses were obtained on the theme of food shortages; a paranoia that the participants reported was totally uncalled for had it not been for social media messages. Participant 8 specifically reported the panic-buying spree that she went on prompted solely by social media messages and one particular video that showed that even toilet papers were no longer to be found on store shelves. She reported that so well circulated was this video that when she went out to stock on essentials, the store refused to sell her beyond the ‘rationed’ quantity of certain items even though there seemed to be no dearth of the commodity at the time.

Participant 23 reported that a certain nation or its supporters filtered messages onto the social media, which claimed that if people boycotted products made there, they would eventually have nothing to buy as the entire world’s supply chain started from this country! The effect of such messages was panic buying, and this participant shared that a friendly store assistant even warned that things were likely to be in short supply and it was best to stockpile whatever one could find in the markets.

On the other hand, participants 11, 15, 24 and 19 reiterated that social media posts though created anxiety and fear helped them get educated about the precautions that protected from catching the infection. Even so, the fear and panic quotient far outweighed the potential benefits of these posts as a warning system.

- Sub theme 5: Most frequent words/ word strings in social media messages.

Discussion: A large section of the participants (N=24) unanimously recounted the following words and expressions as being most frequently found in social media posts and videos: Death, toll, bodies, fear, virus, untreatable, pneumonia, morbidity, ventilator support, tension, shortage, risks, safety, isolation, upward graph.

On the other hand, the hard facts, such as the annual number of deaths by influenza, the ratio of cured to succumbing patients, the age bracket of those likely to succumb to the illness, etc. were highly underreported in these posts, thus starting a vicious circle of hopelessness and fear.

- Sub theme 6: ‘Expert opinion’ videos.

Discussion: False and unverified videos by people and agencies claiming to know all there was to know about the virus became a cause of much concern in the early days of the outbreak when information on the facts was not readily available. These posts, however, were taken largely at their face value, as there was no way for even governments to verify the truth of these claims since the global outbreak was quite sudden and unprecedented in the experience of mankind in the recent decades. One big negative contribution of these was the birth of the conspiracy theories, which asserted that there was nothing accidental about the happening, and that it was all part of a bigger game plan. Some of these claims were out rightly atrocious such as the theory that mass scale of vaccines and medicines to rake up huge profits was actually the ‘secret’ behind it. What is notable is that no matter how incredible these conspiracy angles appeared to the logical mind, noted seven participants, the fear psychosis was so overwhelming that these theories were attributed some credit at the end of the day. The reason for this as stated by participant 19 is that man needs an answer or an explanation to a problem, not necessarily a solution, and a concrete and tangible object or people to blame for it, even this appeared to offer some respite in the midst of the panic. Again, the ‘expert’ speak led to irrational behaviours early during the outbreak, with people being

extra cautious not to contract the infection. That was a time when it was anyhow not widespread, and as weeks ran into months, they began to feel weary and lax, at a time when the dangers were far more than earlier on, ignored genuine governmental advisories to practice sanitation and distance from others, and hence, ended up actually falling prey to the infection.

Conclusion

The current study being qualitative in nature, the number of participants was relatively small at thirty, yet the role of social media in spreading misinformation and its concomitant fear and panic amongst the people of Saudi Arabia cannot be ruled out. In fact, so palpable was this wave in some countries that administrations were forced to send out warnings of severe prosecution of people and agencies, which engaged in this anti-social act. This brings up a question that is quashed by freedom rights activists, the question of governmental control over the social media. The influence of social media is formidable today, much like other media like television and radio. Users attach legitimacy to it and posts on these media are taken as ‘truth’, a fact that caused much fear and panic amongst the Saudi Arabians, throwing into oblivion, the assurances of the administration that all was under control in KSA and there was no cause for irrational behaviors. The participants in the current study were in a way, the intelligentsia of the country, an educated and aware lot, well-adjusted to technology and its use. Even so, they admitted to the negative effects of social media posts that pertained to the global pandemic. Compared to the only other pandemic in the last one hundred years, the Spanish Flu, it is notable that the press was sensitive to its commitment as an instrument of public welfare, refrained as it did, from reporting the frightening statistics of people who were daily succumbing to the virus. This, when in 1918 itself the Spanish flu has taken a toll of 50 million people. Clearly, then the media played the game more responsibly.

Recommendations

Recommendations from this study are partly a contribution of the participants of whom at least twenty-one pointed out that the quality of their lives and those of their near and dear ones was severely jeopardised by the lack of true information and the actual deluge of unchecked information on social media. Official media, of course, were far more constrained, conscious of the legitimacy attached to every media utterance, especially in such testing times. Some participants averred that some form of governmental control of social media might not be totally

out of place. The researcher agrees with this view but also recommends that the administration can keep the floodgates of misinformation tightly shut by being the first to constructively educate its citizens in the wake of similar threats to humanity. In other words, any threat to the lives of the masses should be treated as a veritable war and the people should be prepared to face the enemy as an anticipatory measure rather than when standing close to its nose.

Implications of the study for Teaching of English (EFL) in KSA

Pragmatics, a core aspect of a foreign language is largely an ignored area of study for the EFL learner of KSA. While it is true that the EFL teaching community untiringly profess the importance of the target culture, they finer nuances of English are left out for the reason that they are challenging to teach. The present study is a step in the direction of demonstrating the significance of pragmatics in the EFL teaching-Learning scenario of KSA. The EFL learner needs to be trained in English pragmatics if he/ she has to avoid inaccuracies and misunderstandings in communication. We cite the example of the word ‘fear’, which has been at the centre of the current study. For a student of EFL who is ignorant of the pragmatics of the language, University ‘fear’ may be seen as an equivalent of any of its synonyms, such as, dread and terror. However, with some depth of the understanding of pragmatics, a discerning EFL learner will immediately define ‘fear’ for what it is, i.e. a possibility and not a certainty. This study will certainly shine the torch in the direction of pragmatic competence for the average Saudi EFL learner so that he/ she may comprehend and produce utterances, which are suitable to the social and cultural circumstances in the target language. Ensuring pragmatic competence for EFL learners may be a difficult goal for the teachers, but it certainly is one that can be achieved.

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