

Language from Praising to Criticism: A Pragmatic Perspective

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Abstract

This paper investigates the language of praise and criticism as reflected in the social media posts relating to the issue of the novel Coronavirus, which causes the disease COVID-19 emerged firstly in Wuhan, China in January 2020. The World Health Organization did not declare it a pandemic until March causing global health and economic crises. Beijing's transparency in dealing with the issue is firstly praised then criticized globally. Praise and criticism speech acts and strategies are identified and discussed to show their influence on the world general public opinion as they are employed in the discourse of social media with its huge impact without limitation of time and location, especially after using smart phones. It is a qualitative descriptive study.

Keywords:

praise, criticism, social media, speech acts, Coronavirus.

اللغة من المدح الى النقد: منظور تداولي

ليث طارق المشهداني

باحث لدرجة الدكتوراه قسم اللغة الإنجليزية كلية الآداب بجامعة طنطا

الملخص باللغة العربية:

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة التحول في اللغة من المدح إلى النقد كأحد الاستراتيجيات اللغوية للتعبير عن الرأي أو تبرير بعض القصور في أحد المواقف كما هو الحال في تغريدات ترامب المتعلقة بموضوع فيروس كورونا المستجد،

فى البداية مدح ترامب مجهود بكين فى محاربة المرض والصراحة فى التعامل مستهينا بالفيروس وبخطورته ثم تحول هذا المدح لنقد وامتد للهجوم لعدم الشفافية فى التعامل مبررا استهانتته بالمرض وتحول الوضع الصحى فى أمريكا لكارثة. الدراسة أوضحت التأثير الفعال لأفعال القول للتعبير عن الآراء الشخصية بل يمتد إلى تغيير واقع.

1. Introduction

During the last three decades, pragmatics has achieved a significant progress and has already formed an independent field concerning the study of language use. In fact, pragmatics used to be dealt with as a sub-field of linguistics as phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics but according to Jef Verschueren (1999), Secretary General of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA), it is defined as “a general cognitive, social, and cultural perspective on linguistic phenomena in relation to their usage in forms of behavior” (P.7). In this new perspective, pragmatics is placed in the set of interdisciplinary fields such as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and anthropological linguistics. He specifies it as a general functional perspective concerning the full complexity of linguistic behavior, and all sorts of cognitive, social, and cultural variables will be accounted for whenever a linguistic phenomenon is approached from this perspective. Thus, pragmatics is concerned with each level and aspect of language use, and everything within the scope of linguistics is within the research focus of pragmatics. Speech Act is one of the major topics in pragmatic studies “speech act theory has exerted an influence which has persisted until today, and it was the driving force behind the Anglo-American prominence in pragmatics” (Verschueren, 1999, p.256). Austin’s Speech Act Theory (1962) is a pioneer work

which recognizes the power of words and utterances. Based on Austin's theory, Finegan (2004) defines speech act as the actions carried out through language. That means that everyday language expresses different actions as praise, criticism, apology, compliment, etc. these actions are conveyed through Austin's three speech acts: locution, illocution and perlocution. The Speech Act Theory, and indeed the whole of pragmatic theory, is essentially concerned with how interlocutors (producers and receivers) understand one another in spite of the possibility of their saying what they do not mean, and meaning what they do not say. The Speech Act Theory projects language as an instrument for social and interpersonal interaction which take effect under felicity conditions as portrayed in Grice's conversational maxims ("be informative", "be truthful", "be relevant" and "be brief") and Hymes "Communicative Competence" which is knowledge "as to when to speak, when not to speak, with whom, when, where and in what manner" (Ndimele, p. 184). These scholars see language as a form of social action and social practice.

Moreover, Scholars deal with Pragmatics as a twofold field: pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. Kecskes(2012) clarifies that Pragmalinguistics is concerned with "the resources for conveying communicative acts and relational or interpersonal meanings" whereas the sociopragmatics can be drawn from the background and cultural knowledge of communicators, serving as the foundation for the interpretation and performance of language use in any context. For example, the utterances "I am sorry" is an expression a person can choose from his pragmalinguistic selection to express apology to another which reflects his social relationship and attitude to the interlocutor, which belongs to the field of sociopragmatics, described by Leech as "the sociological interface of pragmatics" (as cited in Rose &

Kasper, 2001). It means that “the linguistic competence that allows speakers to carry out the speech acts that their sociopragmatic competence tells them is desirable” (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000).

2. Objectives

The main aim of this paper is to show how language can shift from praising to criticism affected receivers as in the case of dealing with the novel Coronavirus issue in social media posts especially in twitter. The focus is on Donald Trump’s tweets about the novel coronavirus issue and its relation to China. Trump’s language shifts from praising Beijing to criticize its policy and transparency in dealing with the issue. This shift causes different reactions and sequences not only in America but all over the world. The study shows how language can affect receivers’ social life positively and negatively to highlight the tight relation between sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on one primary concept of pragmatics: speech Acts. According to Austin (1962, pp. 94-108), in uttering a sentence a speaker is usually involved in an act. The theory falls into three catchment points: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. A locutionary act is an act of saying something, that is, the act of producing an utterance with certain meaning. The illocutionary act refers to the social act performed by the speaker. It represents the intention of the speaker, for instance, to insult, to promise, or to praise and it is the core of the Speech Act Theory, while the perlocutionary act is the effect of the speaker’s utterance on the hearer. If a mother, for instance, says to a stubborn child who fiddles with their television set, “I will report to Daddy”, the locutionary act is the utterance, “I will report to Daddy”

which is intended to be a threat (the illocutionary act) to frighten the child out of the television set (the perlocutionary act). In a marriage vow where a husband says "I do," the utterance is not describing what is happening but is actually part of the doing and performance, hence a performative utterance in which the illocutionary act is implicit. In all, however, the utterances make sense only within specific contexts. The illocutionary forces of utterances have tremendous social implications (Malmkjaer, pp. 486-488). As Mey puts it: "words are not just labels we stick on things...The process of wording is based on interaction with our environment...We speak to the world and the world speaks back at us" (301-302). In his work on the theory, Searle (1976, p. 22) suggested five illocutionary acts that one can perform, and they themselves refer to communicative functions that utterances can serve in speech acts. These are the following:

- a) Assertives: They refer to statements that may be judged true or false because they purport to describe a state of affairs in the world.
- b) Directives: They are statements that attempt to make the addressee do something.
- c) Commissives: They are statements committing the interlocutor to a future course of action as described by the propositional content.
- d) Expressives: They refer to statements that express the interlocutor's attitude and what he/she feels.
- e) Declaratives: They refer to statements that attempt to change the world through utterances.

The core involvement of the speech act theory, for this study, is in drawing attention to the different illocutionary acts and their communicative functions to which praise and criticism belong. It is also to shed light on the notion of direct and indirect speech acts which in return have impact on

recognized politeness. Searle argues that speech acts can be performed either directly when “the speaker means exactly and literally what he says” (Searle, 1979, p. 30) or indirectly. Along this line of thought, the choice of how to perform praise and criticism is likely to make up social information that affects appropriateness of this choice. Searle (1975) claims that in indirect speech acts “the speaker [or writer] communicates to the hearer [or reader] more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information”(pp. 60-61). Taking that into account, the level of directness is correlated to the principle of politeness and the notion of face.

4. Discussion and Results

Brief knowledge of social Media discourse

Social Media with its various platforms is considered as one of the crucial technological developments that affects the human communication and social life all over the world. Such these platforms are live-casting (Skype), social network sites (Facebook), virtual worlds (World of Warcraft), content-sharing sites (YouTube, Instagram), discussion forums, chatrooms, wikis, podcasting, blogs and micro-blogging (Twitter). All these services and sites are internet-based in which users can share and exchange their production without limitation of time or location. New social practices appear due to this kind of digital social relationships which are accepted by some and refused by others. However, social media discourse and practices become a part of the global social life whether they are accepted and developed or even refused. The most noticeable point is that all these forms of social media differ in terms of self-disclosure and media richness features, which media theory proposes to distinguish social media types. Media richness is about ‘the amount of information a medium can transmit within a given time, and self– disclosure,

which ‘is critical in the establishment of interpersonal trust’, denotes ‘the desire of people to present a certain image of themselves to others, which is achieved through the disclosure of specific personal information’ (Breuer 2011, p. 2). Overall, although internet studies and social media are conceptually different, they are intertwined and connected. Internet studies and social media gather when mobilized as resources, or employed as means, for social change. Donald Trump uses Twitter platform to build his own agenda for his plans and to impose his proposal of any issue as the Coronavirus issue but in fact his attitude has been changed severely if we follow his tweets. The most noticeable feature in twitter is the expected number of words in each tweets since the average number of words on one tweet is only 41 words.

Analysis

The present paper investigates Trump’s usage of praise and criticism speech acts in his tweets about the novel coronavirus. Concerning the pragmalinguistic conventions of praise and criticism, the researcher focuses on the choice of praise, criticism as linguistic strategies with the lexical resources to achieve them. At the sociopragmatic level, light is shed on the ways that Trump has chosen to express praise and criticism, and the intended (in)directness level as this is believed to reflect the social and situational function of the strategies. It will help in understanding how followers do understand and produce evaluation in relation to the social power (authoritative voice) which is entitled to them, and “the degree of imposition” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, 1978) exercised in these tweets.

1. Praise

Praise is “words that show that you approve of and admire somebody/something” (Online Oxford Dictionary). Praise is

used to let the addressee know that he/she is worthwhile, but when it is made for something, it is used to praise someone for something he/she has done and to convey that one has surpassed a noteworthy evaluative standard (Wicklund, 1975). DelineandBaumiester (1994) assert that praise is an essential feature of interpersonal interaction to influence, socialize, encourage and reward other people. In line with Searle's illocutionary act classification, praise's communicative function (and type of speech act) is expressive because it refers to statements that express the speaker's attitude and what he/she feels. As regards its formula, praise is usually formulaic because particular parts of speech (e.g. verbs, adjectives) that describe positive evaluations are used. Praise may make use of general adjectives or adjective related to appearance, performance, manner, and so forth. Praise may also make use of such verbs as admire, love, like, enjoy, etc., the use of simile and adverbs. In general, every praise expression should embody at least one term loaded with positive semantic evaluation (Manes & Wolfson, 1980, p. 106).

Concerning effective praise, which is the welcomed by recipient, the influence that any praise may have on an individual depends on many factors, including the context and the characteristics of the recipient, etc. (Henderlong and Lepper, 2002). Such influence can be related to the three functions of praise stated by Bell and Wolfe (2004:1-4):

- a. Praise is used as a social compliment and to express friendship and let someone feel good.
- b. Praise is used to motivate and help build self-esteem and self-image.
- c. Praise is used to build relationships and encourage cooperation.

By investigating Trump's Tweet, we can notice the use of some expressions that reflect praise explicitly as "working

very hard”, “greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency” and “thank”.

China has been *working very hard* to contain the Coronavirus. The United States *greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency*. It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American People, I want to *thank President Xi!*<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump> Jan.24

This tweet comes after his admit that the person that came from China was the responsible of transferring the virus, “We have it totally under control. It's one person coming in from China, and we have it under control. It's going to be just fine,” Trump said on January 22. Even when he asserts that the virus is coming from China, he does not criticize China until now. Then he continues to talk about the virus as a case under control:

...he will be successful, especially as the weather starts to warm & the virus hopefully becomes weaker, and then gone. *Great discipline is taking place in China, as President Xi strongly leads what will be a very successful operation. We are working closely with China to help!* 12:31 PM · Feb 7, 2020

In his expressive here, he talks about President Xi’s effort positively using adjectives to encode this attitude as “strongly” and “a very successful”. Furthermore, he asserts that US works “closely” with China using “we” to include all Americans as a strategy to show the seriousness of the collective action. Then, he asserts that the virus is going to disappear to show that it is matter of time and it will be just a memory. He asks people to stay calm using directives in form of “imperative” to assert that the case is under control and no cause to worry.

"It's going to disappear. One day, it's like a miracle, it will disappear," Trump said on February 27.

"We're prepared, and we're doing a great job with it. And it will go away. Just stay calm. It will go away," Trump said on March 10.

Again,

Just finished a very good conversation with President Xi of China. Discussed in great detail the CoronaVirus that is ravaging large parts of our Planet. China has been through much & has developed a strong understanding of the Virus. We are working closely together. Much respect!7:19 AM · Mar 27, 2020

In a matter of weeks , Trump has gone from telling Americans to "stay calm" about coronavirus, to essentially acknowledging that the death toll has been far higher than two of the most consequential attacks in US history. Over 2,400 Americans were killed when the Japanese Empire attacked US forces at Pearl Harbor in 1941. Nearly 3,000 were killed in the terror attacks on September 11, 2001, including 2,753 at the World Trade Center in New York City. As of Wednesday afternoon, there were over 1.2 million confirmed cases of coronavirus in the US, and nearly 72,000 reported fatalities. Though the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that the US is still in the "acceleration phase of the pandemic," Trump has been pushing for the US to reopen and ease coronavirus restricts in order to jumpstart the economy. When asked if Americans will have to accept that there will be more death from reopening, said, "We have to be warriors. We can't keep our country closed down for years."

2. Criticism

Criticism is described as an "expression of disapproval of someone or something on the basis of

perceived faults or mistakes” (online Oxford Dictionary), criticism has been generally referred to as “negative comment[s]” (Hyland, 2000, p. 44) or as a “negative evaluation” (Nguyen, 2005, p. 7). In light of Searle’s illocutionary acts, criticism is expressive because it expresses a psychological state and a negative belief about a state of affairs. It is also considered a directive speech act when it attempts to make the addressee do something whether by stating that directly or by implying a demand for improvement.

Criticism is employed to “give negative evaluation of the hearer’s actions, choice, words and products for which he or she may be held responsible” (Nguyen, 2005, p.7). Criticism is performed in the hope of influencing hearer’s future actions for hearer’s betterment as viewed by the speaker or to communicate speaker’s dissatisfaction with or dislike regarding what hearer has done but without the implicature that what hearer has done brings undesirable consequences to speaker (Wierzbicka, 1987). For Wierzbicka, criticism can be either directive by influencing the addressee for a future improvement or expressive communicating dislike or dissatisfaction.

To achieve politeness, criticism needs to be softened as the speech act of criticism is considered as “an intrinsically face-threatening act” (Min, 2008, p. 74). It is better to be mitigated and expressed indirectly in many cases. Politeness or indirect criticism can be achieved when the illocutionary force of criticism is uttered by means of the performance of other speech acts or any other means that achieve indirectness, so that the speaker’s/writer’s intention is not completely overt. In other words, to make criticism favorable to the

addressee, the speaker/writer may reduce the imposition of criticism by means of indirectness formulas and mitigating devices so as to increase politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Literature shows that mitigation strategies can take the form of internal or external modification. Internal modification occurs at part of the criticism speech (head) act itself (Nguyen, 2005), while external modification does not affect the head act, but rather the supportive moves that come before and after the act occurs. It is a modification made at the level of the head act's context which consequently modifies indirectly the head act illocutionary force (Nguyen, 2005). Such modifications have significance because they soften the negative effects and smoothens the social interaction (Caffi, 1999; Fraser, 1990). The precise nature and politeness functions of both external and internal modifiers are contextspecific, and they may derive their politeness value when employed in a situation or another (Bella, 2011), which makes their investigation in Arabic BRs situational context worthwhile.

Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 68-70) state some options that one may decide on when performing an FTA such as criticism. These options include the following strategies: (1) bald-on-record politeness which is used between intimates, (2) off-record politeness which is performed by means of an indirect speech act, in which the speaker's communicative intention is ambiguous (as in using metaphors, understatements, rhetorical questions and hints), or (3) on-record strategy which allows natural speaking, and the worry about the other's face is little, as in imperative clauses.

Apart from the communication environment (be it official or unofficial), the sociocultural factors affecting

the choice of strategy, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), depends on three factors: (1) social distance (combination of psychologically real factors such as age, gender, and intimacy); (2) relative power, resulting from social and economic status; (3) force of imposition. Brown and Levinson (1987) refer to power as the “degree in which Hearer can impose his/her own plans and own self-evaluation (face) at the expense of Speaker’s plans and self-evaluation” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 77). Therefore, power is an asymmetric social element. Generally, the greater the power difference between the interlocutors, the stronger the force of the imposition on the one with lower status; and the degree of imposition increases with the distance between the interlocutors. In a nutshell, it is believed that factors, strategies and options that affect performing a speech act help determine the strategies and the number of semantic formulae used by a book reviewer.

Trump commits that Coronavirus is pandemic for the first time:

We have just reached a very sad milestone with the coronavirus pandemic deaths reaching 100,000. To all of the families & friends of those who have passed, I want to extend my heartfelt sympathy & love for everything that these great people stood for & represent. God be with you!(Mr Trump said). The previous tweet is the step to gain shift in his speech, he prepares to produce criticism to China by asserting it is pandemic then to talk about China as a source. In a second he tweets: “All over the World the CoronaVirus, a very bad “gift” from China, marches on. Not good!”4:34 PM • May 28, 2020. He moves to criticize China explicitly employing

expressives to declare his attitude employing negative adjectives as “not good”.

5. Conclusion

Trump has repeatedly deflected the blame for the disastrous US response to the crisis, making various accusations against China and the World Health Organization (WHO) including that it tried to block evidence the virus could be transmitted between people. He employs his illocutionary acts explicitly to express his attitude whether with or against China and implicitly to affect audience's opinions to accept his sudden shifts. Trump encodes attack severally to assert that both China and WHO fail to solve the problems. He codes his utterances with more than one illocutionary acts; to describe a reality, to express that he is really involving in the social landscape of his country and to give audience the evident that he is the best to deal with the situation highlighting the impression of his own preferability. He wants to remove the impression of his carelessness about the virus causing the health catastrophe in US. This reflects a clear reality that words can do things.

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