

A PRAGMATIC STUDY OF THE NIGERIA CENTRE FOR DISEASE CONTROL COVID-19 TWITTER TEXT MESSAGES.

Chioma N. Ibe, Ngozi C. Anigbogu & Ijeoma S. Ochiagha
Use of English Unit
Directorate of General Studies
Federal University of Technology, Owerri
Corresponding author's email: chvex2000@gmail.com

Abstract

The emergence of the Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has opened up new horizons of research in different disciplines. Scholars in linguistics have made valuable and tremendous impacts on the language employed for disseminating facts on covid-19. Language came to play a very important role at the peak of the outbreak of the disease by helping the media, particularly on social media (microblogging) platforms (such as Twitter handle, Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram), to disseminate relevant information to the public. In this case, language is specifically designed by writers to ensure professionalism, choice of linguistic and textual styles that must conform to acceptable linguistic principles as well as capture the attention of the target readers. This research studied how language was utilized to create salient awareness in the Twitter messages of Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). The main focus was to study the speech acts of the pieces of information given on this platform from February to April 2021, which constituted the second phase of the outbreak. One hundred (100) Twitter texts were randomly selected from the Twitter handle of NCDC. The researchers studied and analyzed the messages based on Searle's speech act theory. The data were analyzed using both the descriptive qualitative method and the quantitative method. It was discovered that NCDC employed the five illocutionary acts specified by Searle. The researchers concluded that the acts were critical for successful communication.

KEYWORDS: PRAGMATICS, CORONA VIRUS, DISEASE, TWITTER TEXT MESSAGES, NIGERIA CENTRE FOR DISEASE CONTROL.

1. Introduction

According to Asif et al (2020), the word Corona originated from Latin, and it means *crown*. Asif et al explain that the name of the virus named after corona is linked to its shape which is *crown-like*. Based on scientific records, it is believed that the disease may have been transmitted to humans through bats or pangolins.

The first case of transmission to humans is traced to the 1960s in China. The disease is known for causing severe acute respiratory symptoms that may look like ordinary catarrh or pneumonia. The outbreak of a strand of the virus in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, rapidly spread to various nations that it was declared a pandemic. A pandemic is usually declared when a new disease without vaccine spreads across nations. Within five months, a good number of deaths were recorded across nations. This called for an emergency as many

countries declared a total lockdown of activities. People were left to depend on the media for information. Such practices as social distancing, regular washing of hands and wearing masks became new NORMAL practices.

One of the new normal practices that COVID-19 pandemic brought into man's lifestyle was the development of and reliance on online activities rather than physical activities. Consequently, in media, information was passed across to the audience online rather than in print, particularly using social media. Social platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook became the transmission of communication patterns. According to statistics, more people became active users of social media worldwide during the pandemic than before the outbreak.

Twitter is one of the social media platforms that were practically busy. By the end of 2020, it recorded 353 million subscribers ([https:// www.businessofapps.com](https://www.businessofapps.com)). Twitter is a micro-blogging platform where users are either followed or followers. How Twitter works is that the users use the feature tweets to communicate with other users, and the tweet is replied to through another feature called retweeting. (Sidiq and Simatupang 2019: 133). Tweets are online texts or posts which, in most cases, contain complete but abridged information. This study is interested in investigating the Twitter handle of NCDC to identify the types of illocutionary acts used in the tweets. The researchers chose Twitter for their study because scholars such as Wikstrom (2014), Vosoughi (2016), Baranama, Inkpen and Taboada (2018), Sidiq and Simatupang (2020), Essam and Abdo (2020) have all come to terms that communication on Twitter text messages show clearly the connection between language and context that can affect the communication process and therefore, establish phenomena in discourse and pragmatics. (Sidiq and Langing Simatupang (2019) explain further using speech act theories on Twitter). They regard the users who produce tweets as speakers or writers and those who retweet as listeners or readers.

2.1. Pragmatics and Speech Act

Language is used to accomplish diverse intentions. What users do with language beyond what they say is critical to effective communication. Also, an intensive investigation of how words are utilized to express meanings, feelings, and ideas is pivotal for successful interaction. Hence, a productive conversation should hinge on understanding the intentions, target and meaning of words used in the conversation.

Pragmatics, therefore, unfolds and clarifies the information conveyed by different speakers. Mey (1993) rightly asserts that the science of language can be seen in relation to its users as it is used by real live people for their purposes and within their limitations and affordances. The Stanford Encyclopaedia reiterates that pragmatics deals with the objective facts of the speech which include who said it, when it is said, and where it is said. Facts about the speaker's intention, facts about the beliefs of the speaker and those to whom he converses, the focus of the conversation and the beliefs shared facts about relevant social institutions and the effects a person accomplishes by the utterance.

One crucial area of pragmatics, therefore, is speech acts that express language functions, intentions, and actions. Bahing, Emzir, and Rafli (2018) observe language as a system in direct relation to speech acts. According to them, language and speech acts work collaboratively in a functional network system called *an integrated network system*. Hence, the interlocutors state that language works in a network through the cognitive system to produce a concrete, observable, and empirical speech or utterance that functions as a means

of social communication for interaction. Next, the system works in a speech set to produce utterances as a means of functional communication (Bahing, Emzir, and Rafli, 2018).

Speech act is then the target of pragmatics and it is focused on the illocutionary force that involves the function of imagination, manipulation, creation dynamics, and heuristics (Zayed, 2014). In the same vein, Al-Hindawi, Al-Masudi, and Mirza (2014) state that speech act and utterance are derived from the social culture of the environment and thus object of pragmatics.

Therefore, a speech act furnishes us with the means of digging beneath the surface of discourse and establishing the function of what is said (Cook, 1992). It studies how words are used not only to present information but to carry out functions and to consider the degree to which utterances are said to perform locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and/or perlocutionary acts (Norquist, 2020). The paper, therefore, is a pragmatic study of NCDC COVID-19 Twitter messages. It particularly investigates the speech acts in the NCDC COVID-19 messages. To pursue the study, two research questions are posited:

What are the illocutionary speech acts found in COVID-19 Twitter messages?

What communicative functions do they portray?

2.2. Theoretical Framework

The theory of speech acts states that the minimal unit of human communication is not a sentence or other expressions but the performance of certain kinds of acts such as questions, giving orders, describing, explaining, apology, thanking, congratulating etc (Searle, Kirkfer, Bierwisch, 1980). The writers assert that a speaker performs one or more of these acts by uttering a sentence or sentences; but the act itself is not to be confused with a sentence or other expressions uttered in the performance (Searle, Kirkfer, Bierwisch, 1980). This research employed the theoretical insights of Searle (1979) to analyze the NCDC COVID-19 Twitter text messages. Searle (1979) gives taxonomy of illocutionary forces in the form of Representatives (assertives), Directives, Commissive, Expressives and Declaratives. Searle (1979) points out only five illocutionary points that speakers can employ on a proposition.

Vanderkevar and Kubo (2020) explain the illocutionary points in detail. They stress that speakers achieve assertives (representatives) when they represent how things are in the world. The commissives are shown when speakers commit themselves by doing something; the directives point to when they attempt to get hearers to do something; the declaratives are when the speakers do things in the world at the moment of utterances; the expressives show when speakers express their attitudes about objects and facts in the world.

Also, Muller (2016) describes the illocutionary act as the production of a sentence taken under certain conditions and as the minimal unit of linguistic communication. Therefore, the theory of speech acts is a language theory where speaking in a language is considered as performing illocutionary acts with varied intentions.

3. Methodology

The data comprised 100 Twitter messages on the COVID-19 pandemic. The random sampling method was utilized to select 100 Twitter messages from Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). The researchers employed quantitative and descriptive qualitative design to analyze the data collected. Frequency distribution, pie chart, and percentages were used for the quantitative analysis while the descriptive analysis took care of the qualitative design.

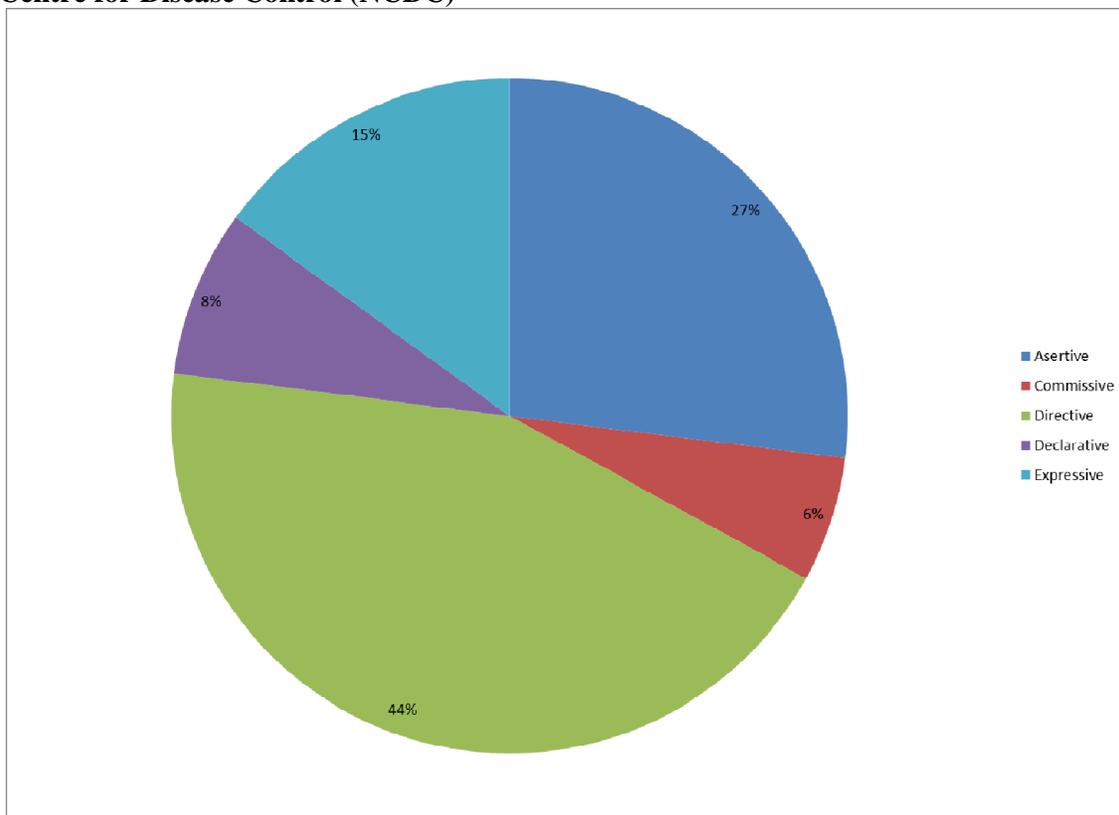
Furthermore, the data was evaluated through the use of speech act theory. Thus, the data were categorized into the five illocutionary points that speakers achieve on propositions namely: assertives, commissives, directives, declaratives, and expressives. Also, the researchers categorized the speech acts into five illocutionary acts using the pie chart.

4. Results of the Analysis

Table 1: The frequency distribution of the illocutionary acts in Twitter messages of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC)

Illocutionary Acts	Frequency distribution	%
Assertive	27	27%
Commissive	6	06%
Directive	44	44%
Declarative	8	8%
Expressive	15	15%
Total	100	100%

Pie chart 1: Percentages of the illocutionary acts in Twitter messages of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC)



The result showed that five illocutionary acts were observed in the Twitter messages of NCDC on COVID-19. Out of 100 tweet messages, the directive illocutionary acts were predominantly represented in the data with 44% while 27% of the tweets studied were

assertive. 15% of the tweets were expressive. Meanwhile, commissive and declarative were sparingly represented in the data with 6% and 8% of the tweets respectively.

From the above result, one can now assert that the directive illocutionary act is peculiar to NCDC COVID-19 Pandemic tweet messages. Also, the use of the Illocutionary acts hinged on NCDC stylistic choices.

4.1. Discussion of findings

4.1.1 Directive

The directive illocutionary acts are directly seen in the NCDC messages as they give salient directives to people to ensure their safety. The tweet directives are all explicitly used to accomplish their intentions and the recipients can infer the intended meaning from the tweets. Some examples are wear a face mask properly, Wash your hands regularly, Observe physical distance, Avoid large gatherings held indoors with poor adherence to prevention measures, Seek medical attention when ill. Disinfect surfaces in your homes, shops, and offices regularly to prevent the spread of infectious diseases in your communities.

The significant finding from the data collected for this research is that the directive illocutionary act is the predominant act in the Twitter messages of NCDC in the face of the COVID-19 Pandemic. This result finding is similar to Bahing, Emzir, and Rafli (2018) who in a study of speech acts of illocutionary force in classroom interactions discovered that the illocutionary speech acts of directives have a high social status. They also report that the use of speech acts is highly determined by the contexts of speech events and the situation around them.

4.1.2. Assertive

The illocutionary act of the assertive was the second dominant type of act observed in the data. The NCDC employed this type of speech act to describe, state, and inform the readers about the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria and in the world. Some examples found in the data are:

There is no doubt that the pandemic has had devastating impacts both direct and indirect on the lives of Nigerians and our economy. It has also created an opportunity to strengthen our health security.

(From @ Chikwe _iheweazu 17 Feb,2021)

Today our national reference laboratory (NRL) management and staff concluded the annual review meeting of the lab's activities for the year 2020 with the support of @ PHE.UK. This aimed to evaluate the laboratory performance as stated in the NRL's quality policy and objectives.

(@ NCDCgov 17 Feb 2021).

Today is day 1 @BayelsaStateGov Health Summit, "Better Health for Air"

(@NCDCgov 18 Jan 2021).

Bringing human, animal, and environmental health together is one way that we can be better prepared for the next pandemic.

(@Chikwe_Ihekweazu 5 Mar 2021)

Following a recent meeting with the # COVID19 genomic sequencing implementation group, 100 samples will be sent to @acegid weekly, to scale up sequencing capacity. Sequencing is important for us to understand the ongoing transmission and the impact of vaccines.

(@NCDCgov 22 Feb 2021).

The survey indicates that the majority of the sampled population is susceptible to the virus infection, which highlights the need for vaccines.
(@Chikwe_Ihekweazu 5 Mar 2021).

The use of this type of illocutionary act in NCDC tweets on the COVID-19 pandemic is in line with the research made by Altikriti in 2011 where he reported that the illocutionary act of assertive commits the interlocutor to the truth of expressed proposition such as asserting, reporting, describing, informing, etc.

4.1.3. Expressive

The expressive acts show such attitudes as gratitude, satisfaction, and happiness. Some examples discovered in the tweets are:

We're very grateful for the strong collaboration with UNICEF, and especially for Dr. Sanjana's support over the last four years and across several outbreak activities.
(@UNICEF_Nigeria's outgoing chief of Health Dr. Sanjana Bhardwa 25 Feb 2021).

We are the state's (Ondo) commitment to strengthening its public health security.
(@NCDCgov citing @Chikwe_Ihekweazu 25 Feb 2021).

Grateful for the support from @PHE_uk through its #IHR strengthening project, as we continue strengthening #OneHealth in Nigeria with @FmardNg @FMEnvng and partners.
(@Chikwe_Ihekweazu 5 Mar 2021).

We thank the sister agency @nimnigeria, the states, and our partner for a successful #COVID19 seroprevalence survey in four states.
(@Chikwe_Ihekweazu 5 Mar 2021)

4.1.4. Declarative

The declarative acts show that the interlocutors do things in the world at the moment of utterance (Vanderkevar and Kubo, 2020). Some examples of declarative acts in the data are:

The #COVID19 vaccination of health workers and others has commenced.

(@NphcdaNG 9 Mar 2021).

Even with the best efforts of @NigeriaGov, we cannot vaccinate the entire country at once

4.1.5. Commissive

The characteristics of commissive acts are also discovered in some of the Twitter messages of NCDC on COVID-19. Some examples are:

We are making in #BuildingBackBetter following the #COVID19 pandemic.

(@NCDCgov 22 Mar 2021).

We will continue to produce situation reports and keep Nigerians informed.

(@NCDCgov 29 Mar 2020).

Thus Searle (1985) stresses that obligations in commissive acts are created in the speaker and the notion in the recipient. The commissive acts commit the speaker to some future actions such as promising, offering, etc.

Furthermore, the researchers observed from the analysis that in some tweet messages, two or more speech acts were interwoven. For instance, it was observed that declarative acts and directive acts, as well as directive acts and assertive acts, were interwoven in these tweets below:

Even with the best efforts of @Nigeriagov, we can vaccinate the entire country at once. We urge Nigerians to continue adhering to safety measures: frequent hand washing, physical distancing, and wearing of face mask, covering nose and mouth.

(@NCDCgov 1 Mar 2021).

The SARS-COV-2 virus can leave on surfaces for several hours. #Take responsibility, avoid or limit sharing the use of personal items this Esther period. Wear a face mask, observe physical distance, and wash your hand regularly with soap under running water.

(@NCDCgov 4 April 2021).

You may come in contact with infected people with no symptoms. It is important you maintain physical distance and avoid large gatherings because you do not know who may have # COVID-19. #Take responsibility to keep your loved ones safe. To limit the spread of COVID-19, avoid physical contact, and do not shake hands or share hugs.

(@NCDCgov 4 April 2021).

Note that from the above tweets, in the bid to give directive, assertive acts were initially used. Most of the assertive acts in this context are intended to inform.

The researchers also observed the combination of expressive and assertive acts in the tweet posts below:

We thank the sister agency @nimmigeria, the states, and our partner for a successful #COVID19 seroprevalence survey in four states. The survey indicates that the majority of the sampled population is susceptible to the virus infection, which highlights the need for vaccines.

((@Chikwe_Ihekweazu 5 Mar, 2021).

Bringing human, animal, and environmental health together is one way that we can be better prepared for the next pandemic. Grateful for the support from @PHE_uk through its #IHR strengthening project, as we continue strengthening.

(@Chikwe_Ihekweazu 5 Mar 2021)

5. Conclusion

This research investigated the Twitter messages on COVID-19 in the NCDC Twitter account. It studied how language was used to create relevant awareness in the Twitter messages of NCDC. Searle's speech act theory was adopted as the theoretical framework. The findings highlighted speech act as the fundamental tool for any successful communication. It facilitates the negotiation of meaning between the speaker and the listener and helps portray the meaning potentials of an utterance. The NCDC Twitter messages predominantly used

directive illocutionary acts for the sole purpose of binding the audience to action. Consequently, the audience feels obligated to do something about the utterance from the speaker. Therefore, using more directives draws the audience closer to an obligation to help put a stop to the pandemic. The assertive type of illocutionary act which was the second dominant act informed and brought the audience to know the activities going on in NCDC to curb the morbid disease. From time to time, the NCDC involves the audience more in their acts by using expressive acts. Most of the expressive acts show gratuity. Therefore as means of communication, language is duly represented in speech by a speech act because speech act is a basic unit in functional communication. (Bahing, Emzir and Rafli, 2018)

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