

A Sociolinguistic Study of Interpersonal Stance in Selected Tweets on the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The global pandemic, COVID-19, has been the central theme of most discourses including the social media discourse. Nigerians, like all other nationals have expressed their opinions in diverse manners regarding this menace. It is against this backdrop that this study investigates interpersonal stance in selected tweets on the COVID-19 pandemic from a sociolinguistic perspective. Using a purposive sampling method, five tweets were selected from the twitter commentaries during lockdown period. These tweets were examined through an adaptation of the analytical tools of Hyland's (2005) Stance Theory of attitudinal evaluation. The findings from the study show that rhetorical devices such as metaphor, simile, nouns and analogy were deployed in the tweets to stir the emotions of readers, create humour, and lessen the impact of the pandemic on the people. The paper concludes that tweets are not just multimedia resources found on the social media; they have meaningful connotations, they are weapons which the oppressed use to fight their oppressors in a social setting where moral decadence has become the order of the day.

Keywords: Interpersonal Stance, Pandemic; Lockdown; Social Media Discourse and Tweets

Introduction

Two interrelated concepts which are central to this study are sociolinguistics and interpersonal stance. Sociolinguistics is a linguistic field which accounts for the interrelations between the phenomenon of language and society (Wardhaugh, 2010). The indispensable means of communication within a society which can come in different forms under the categories of verbal, written and non-verbal is language. Hence, it can be said that the most appropriate manner of establishing interpersonal relationship within a society is through the vehicle of language (Yule, 2005). However, there are specific forces behind the forms of language used in social interaction. These forces are encapsulated in the notion and

description of context, hence the classification of context based on physical, social, psychological, and cosmological dictates (Adam, 2012). Interpersonal stance emerges from the psychological facet of context as it focuses on the place of attitude (toward co-interlocutors or subject matters) in social interactions (Hyland, 2010). This concept which can be traced to social psychology simply describes commitments or attitudes of interlocutors toward a person or a phenomenon.

The COVID-19 global pandemic generated reactions from people all over the world, these numerous reactions were conveyed through diverse linguistic resources and channels. The aim of this study is to examine selected tweets on the COVID-19 pandemic from a sociolinguistic perspective through the deployment of the theoretical tenets of stance theory to evaluate how tweeter users have deployed language to express their ideological stand-point regarding the trend in the global pandemic.

Literature Review

Studies in sociolinguistics which adopt Hyland's (2005) theory of Stance are numerous. Taki and Jafarpour (2012) examined engagement and stance in academic writing using English and Persian research articles. This study is comparative by nature as Taki and Jafarpour investigate whether or not Persian and English academics make use of the same discourse elements for creating interaction with their readers. To achieve the aim of the study, the researchers selected a total number of 120 research articles from two broad fields of Chemistry and Sociology in two languages of Persian and English. They chose Chemistry and Sociology to represent two different fields of Natural and Social Sciences. Also, the researchers collected data from four Iranian journals, namely: *Quarterly Journal of Communication Research* and *Quarterly Journal of Cultural Research*, and 30 Persian research articles in the field of Sociology were selected. From the *Journal of Science and Polymer Technology* and *Journal of SIAU*, 30 Persian articles in the field of Chemistry were selected. The study found that stance markers occurred more frequently than engagement markers. Both Sociology and Chemistry articles in the two languages showed greater frequency of stance to engagement features.

Apart from Taki and Jafarpour (2012), Akinici (2016) embarked on a study of stance markers in research articles written by students. In this

study, stance devices across two parameters: disciplinary differences and academic level of the writer were examined with the emphasis on the disciplines of Civil Engineering and Applied Linguistics. The study found that students employed more stance markers compared to academics. More specifically, students in Applied Linguistics used more overall stance markers than academics, and their use of stance markers in each category out-numbered expert writing. Also, the study revealed that hedges were the most frequently used type of stance across the two levels of writing. Attitude markers in two types of writing were the least commonly used category of stance regardless of level of writing. The study recommended that In order to understand the different uses of stance, future researches should examine additional disciplines.

The area of disparity between these two studies and the present study is their scopes. While Taki and Jafarpour (2012), and Akinci (2016) examined the use of stance in academic writings, the data for the present study is collected from the social media platform, Twitter. Therefore, tweets constitute the major data under investigation. Not only this, the tweets are purposively selected during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the lockdown period. Apart from this, while the two previous studies examined academic writings using hedges, boosters, etc., the present study employs the toolkits of stances which are relevant to attitudinal evaluation— affect, evidentiality and Author's Presence.

Theoretical Framework

Hyland's (2005) stance theory is a psycholinguistic approach to language study; its tenets are affect, evidentiality and author's presence. According to Hyland (2010), interpersonal communication is concerned with the ways through which language users make use of the explicit system of meanings to enter their 'voice' into the texts to be heard by their co-interlocutors. To achieve this goal, language users should be well aware of the norms of the community where the talk exchange is taking place. Since interpersonal communication is born out of socio-psychological dichotomy and Hyland's theory concentrates on the effect of socio-psychological phenomenon on linguistic forms generated in social interactions, the theory is adopted as the framework for this study.

Generally, Hyland (2005) avers that interlocutors can project their position in social interactions through the use of: Hedges; Boosters;

Attitude Markers and Self-mention. This is an approach to Stance. The second approach to stance concerns understanding affect in language. Ochs and Schieffelin (1989) build an interest in research on emotion that focuses on how interlocutors' feelings impact cognition. Hence, they propose a framework to understand how discourse and grammatical structures display affect. Unlike the evidentiality approach, these researchers were concerned with how affect, including the emotions, attitudes, and moods of writers is displayed through linguistic signals. This study adopts the second approach to stance which emphasise the place of attitude in social interactions. Hence, the tenets of attitudinal markers and self-mention which indicate authorial presence as aspects of the interpersonal stance of Hyland are deployed for the data analysis. The attitudinal markers are identified as *affect*.

Affect is concerned with how writers express their individual/professional attitudes(including emotions, perspectives and beliefs) towards a proposition, (Hyland, 2005b);

Evidentiality which is a means of expressing categorical assurance or uncertainty views on propositions was developed by Chafe and Nichols (1986) Evidentiality is concerned with understanding the source of information and the assessment of its reliability (Gray & Biber, 2012)..

Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

This section contains the data analysis as well as the discussion of findings. The data for the study which constitute five tweets were selected purposively. In summary, the first datum emphasises the lessons learnt from the pandemic, datum two states the deadly nature of Coronavirus while data three, four and five present the effects of the pandemic on the Nigerian citizens.

Datum 1:



The attitude of the author is reflected in the tweet above as being negative because the subject of the author's creation, 'man', as used in the analogy is being criticised as being extravagant, and lacking in wisdom. The tweet reflects the attitude of the writer of toward the moral decadence in the Nation, 'Nigeria' which is 'now' exposed, with the trend of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Evidentiality indicates the statement of evidence for a statement which can be reported or embedded in a given text. When it is not categorically stated, the readers or listener have to deploy inference to identify the evidence. Evidentiality is deployed in the tweet through the choice of the proper noun, 'Nigeria' to emphasise the context of the text. This is a form of reference. Not only this, evidence is drawn through the choice of the temporal deixis, 'now' to further establish the credibility and how trendy the phenomenon being discussed is. Also, the analogy of activities such as hotel closure, among others is means of establishing the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The authorial presence is revealed in the tweet through the writer's choice of the adverbial 'now'. Even though the writer has resorted to the use of analogy (in form of a report) instead of being directly involved, the author's attachment to the text is spelt out through an affirmative use of the adverb which reflect time, especially a time that has not lapsed (a present time).

Datum 2:



The topical issue in the tweet is educative/ a form of sensitisation as regards the deadly nature of COVID-19 and how contractible it is.

Considering the tone of the tweet, the attitude of the writer is embedded in two sentences:

“God forbid”
 “Dey your dey”

The first sentence is a form of prayer; while the second is a warning. The attitude of the writer as reflected in the sense the sentences convey is negative toward contracting the virus. However, the writer has displayed his attitude in a less serious manner through the deployment of humour to lessen the impact of the COVID-19 phenomenon on the readers

The negative attitude of the writer in the tweet is evident through the deployment of warning which is stated assertively through the use of declarative sentence forms stated as follows:

“Dey your dey”
 “stay safe”
 “stay at home Nigeria”
 “Lockdown Nigeria”

The presence of the writer is revealed in the tweet through the choice of the indefinite pronoun 'somebody'. This linguistic choice of the writer reflects passive involvement. This is because the tweet is meant to disseminate information (warning) rather than express concern. Also, the writer has made use of prayer: “God forbid”. This insinuates the writer's attachment to the text. This is contrary to the writer's passive appearance as portrayed in the word, 'somebody'.

Datum 3



The attitude of the writer as the text (sentence) depicts is negative. The writer perceives that COVID-19 is capable of depriving members of Nigerian society which “event planners” and MCs represent the means of their daily survival. The negative attitude of the writer of the tweet is further established in sense conveyed by the emoji and pictorial reference on the tweet. The emoji depicts sadness as which is represented in the flow of tears. Relatively, the pictorial reference depicts depression based on the facial expression of the participant. Even though negative, the attitude is presented in a humorous manner

The negative attitude of the writer in the tweet is evident through the deployment of a question form (rhetorical question) and the use of apostrophe (addressing no one) yet, indirectly blaming the COVID-19 phenomenon which is the genesis of the problem. Also, the use of the proper nouns: “Event planners” and 'MCs' further serves as a means of establishing the writer's claim.

The presence of the writer is revealed in the tweet through the choice of question form, even though it is a rhetorical question. Here, unlike in the previous tweets, the writer's direct involvement is obvious.

Datum 4:



The manner of language use in the tweet above depicts mixed attitude, both positive and negative. The positive side is discernible in the writer's list which contains negative social phenomenon and their frequencies of occurrence. On the list, robbery and vehicle accident do not exist, it attracts '0', and crime rate has reduced to a unit figure, '5'. The most frequent occurrence, which represents the negative attitude, is fight between couples. The possible causal factor for this wide disparity is the implication of the crippled socioeconomic situation at the period of the pandemic. Even though this is a social challenge at the period, the writer deploys humour to convey the message. The sense of humour is encapsulated in the introductory statement which is categorically emphasised by the writer—“The Last 48 Hours”

The use of nominals (abstract nouns) to describe certain social phenomenon, time indication, “the last 48 hours”, figures '00', '05' and '3,064' are reflections of the credibility of COVID-19 and its adverse effect on the populace as portrayed in the tweet. The author's presence is conveyed in the tweet through the use of the possessive pronoun, 'my' in “my neighbourhood”. Apart from nominals, the time indication, “the last 48 hours” further establishes this claim.

Datum 5:



Affect:

Like datum 4, this tweet reflects a mixture of attitude. From the text of the tweet, it could be inferred that the writer has a negative attitude towards the phenomenon of COVID-19 but a positive attitude toward the lesson that accompanies the phenomenon of COVID-19. Hence, the tweet has positive + negative humour.

The writer's perception on COVID-19 phenomenon presented in the preceding section is evident in use of parallel structure:

We neglected our hospitals and health sector
Ignored the cries of the doctors and medical practitioners....

The structural parallelism reveals the inner state of mind of the writer as being regret over the actions and inactions of the administrators. This is further established in the writers use of hyponyms in very close successions—"hospital and health sector"; "doctors and medical practitioners". Not only this, the writer's use of rhetorical question "where did this bring us back to?" further solidifies the claim.

The writer's presence is felt through the use of the personal pronouns 'we' and 'us', and the possessive pronoun, 'our' even though these words refer to the people outside the linguistic context, the administrators. Furthermore, the use of biblical allusion, 'Karma' which indicates the writer's belief system shows the authorial presence.

Karma indeed took his time to pay us a visit.

The word, Karma is used amidst an analogical creation, even though an abstract entity, it is personified in the context of use.

Conclusion

So far, from the analysis of the five selected tweets using Hyland's (2005) theory of Stance, it has been found that:

- (i) *affect* reflects negative attitudes toward the phenomenon of COVID-19 more than the mixed attitudes.
- (ii) the analysis of Authorial Presence has revealed that the writers of

the tweet have active involvement more than the passive ones due to the fact that even though the tweets are mostly presented from the third person perspective, the writers are also affected in one way or the other by the COVID-19 pandemic (ailment) and its accompanying socio-economic challenges..

- (iii) generally in the tweet, evidentiality is portrayed through the use of nominal (nouns) to characterise phenomenon (vehicle accident, robbery, crimes, fight between couples, etc.) which are products of the global pandemic, as well as the affected persons in the society (MCs, Event planners, etc).

The aim of this study was to investigate how tweet writers make use of interpersonal stance in writing tweets. Previous researchers have mainly examined stance-taking in published research articles and academic writings. This study is however distinctive in that it examined the use of stance in social media exchanges, especially tweet as regards the trending discourse of the COVID-19 pandemic. Building upon the previous research, this study was concerned with how tweet writers construct stance when they write a tweet to express their positions as regards the global pandemic and its accompanying phenomena such as lockdown and protests. In conclusion, tweets are not just multimedia resources found on the surfaces of the social media; they have meaningful connotations, they are weapons which the oppressed use to fight their oppressors in an ideal social setting where moral decadence and is the order of the day.

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