Austin’s Speech Act Theory on the Language of COVID-19 Affected People: Phenomenological Approach

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Abstract

Purpose: Language changes in unprecedented times leads to the invention of new vocabulary. Written and oral discourse is influenced by worldly events which cause changes in language. The purpose of this study was to examine the role of context in perpetuating particular functions of language. The focus was laid on the perlocutionary force of coronavirus related terms to determine how context effect the language and word choices of the narrator.

Methodology: This research adopted phenomenological approach and applied mixed method research design. Six blogs form Dawn news web were taken as sample where coronavirus survivors, healthcare workers and Pakistani students in China University had narrated their experiences regarding COVID-19 pandemic. Language phenomenon was analyzed by qualitative research design through close detailed document analysis of the blogs. Austin’s Speech acts theory was applied for differentiating the mostly used acts in the language of the narrators. Data was coded initially for arranging the sentences into explosives, behabitive and exercitive acts. COVID related terms were detected for analysis of the nature of the words and to find out similarities across different blogs. Quantitative analysis was carried out for quantifying the amount of the speech act usage and coronavirus related terms.

Findings: The findings showed that coronavirus survivors have performed behabitive acts more than other participants because they expressed their mental state. Healthcare workers performed explosive speech acts for 81 times and survivors performed it for 35 time because they focused more on the factual information, strategies and ongoing processes.

Conclusion: Perlocutionary force of COVID-19 related terms showed that these terms were used for creating awareness in the audience regarding the precautionary measures during pandemic.

Recommendation: Future researches can be conducted to investigate the speech acts of two different blogs to highlight the ideological stances of narrators.

Keywords: Unprecedented times, speech act theory, behabitive act, explosive acts, perlocutionary force

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Language is a social phenomenon and it is not static in nature. Many instances in the language are direct reflection of the ongoing circumstances around the world. Environment affects the thought process and then the writers of the modern world generate new discourses in accordance with those changes. The changes may be due to any unusual event such as war or any exploitation due to internal or external affairs of the countries. The attack on World trade center is regarded as turning point in Pakistan and America’s relationship. This event influenced the language which caused neologism and invention of new words like 9/11 which is related to Wahabi terrorist group Alqaida.

Coronavirus is a new virus that was originated in China in 2019 and is related to the family of viruses as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and some types of common cold. It has affected the personal, social and professional life of every individual. Phenomenology approach focuses on the individual’s lived experience in the world. This research adopted a phenomenological approach and analyzed the language phenomenon in the narratives of the individuals who were affected by this virus. Pragmatics involve the interpretation of meaning between the speaker and listener in the context. Application of Austin’s Speech act theory in usage of COVID related terminologies and associated phrases is helpful in revealing the implicit meaning, attitudes and beliefs of the speaker or writer. Speech acts are the utterances that serve any kind of function in the communication such as greeting, apologizing, requesting etc.

Austin in his book ‘How to do things with words’ distinguished between the performative and constatives speech acts and elaborated that the performatives are used to undertake an action which are either felicitous or infelicitous and constitutive are the statements which are either true or false. He further classified speech acts into three types i.e. locution, illocution and perlocution. Locution act deals with the words that are uttered or written. Illocution acts involve the expletive or implicit intention of speaker or writer. Perlocution acts involve the intended effect of the speech on the addressee. Exercitive speech acts involve the asking, commanding, ordering, suggesting, requesting and forbidding. Behabitive speech act involves pain, joy, like, dislike, pleasure. Explosive speech act involves statement of facts, conclusion, announcing, stating, claiming, reporting, describing. Commissive illocutionary act involves promising (Oishi, 2006).

1.1 Research Questions

1. How does Austin’s Speech act theory demonstrate the differences in the language of coronavirus survivors and healthcare workers?
2. What is the perlocutionary force of coronavirus related terms?
3. How does the context influence the language and word choices of the narrator?

1.2 Research Objectives

- To demonstrate the differences in the language of participants.
- To examine the perlocutionary force of coronavirus related terms.
- To determine how context effect the language and word choices of the narrator.
1.3 Theoretical Framework

Austin’s Speech act theory was used in the research to determine the language of COVID-19 survivors, Pakistani student in China University and experiences of the healthcare workers related to the COVID-19 spread and their advices related to prevention from this pandemic. Austin’s Speech act theory was used in order to explore the frequently used illocutionary and perlocutionary acts in their speech along with the analysis of language change due to unprecedented time. Language is thought to be performative in nature. The researcher has minimized the natural world experience by reducing her own world view and has analyzed every sentence through the lens of Austin’s speech act theory for determining the frequently used speech acts in their language.

1.4 Research Method and Sampling

To explore the emic perspectives of the survivors and experiences of the Doctors with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher adopted mixed research design and phenomenological approach for analysis of the COVID-19 related language. Purposive sampling include online 6 blogs from website www.dawn.com. Mixed method approach is used in which qualitative analysis is carried out to examine different kind of speech acts in selected data to find out the role of context in shaping the language perspective of the people. It has also focused upon the COVID related terms that were previously uncommon in discourse. Whereas, quantitative analysis has quantified the total number of speech acts to identify the mostly used performative act by people during COVID time.

Three narratives were related to the experiences of the coronavirus survivors and two were related to the experiences, suggestions and future recommendations of the doctors and healthcare workers. A driver shared his experience regarding pickup and drop services for the COVID-19 patients. A medical student narrated his experience regarding news of pandemic outbreak while he was in China and has given the suggestions to the Pakistani government and people by appreciating the Chinese policies.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Language being a social phenomenon is usually influenced by the extraordinary events that can lead to the changes at an individual and collective level of language. Analysis of the words, figure of speech and grammar of any text can explain the consequences of any unusual event on the language. Changes in the environment due to COVID-19 or wartime has generated the new words in the language through the process of neologism. Human behaviors are strongly affected by the discourses due to strong ideology and usage of words. Corpus of ‘news on the web’ has shown that words ‘social distance’ and ‘social distancing’ is occurring frequently. Occurrence of social distance is 1854 times and social distancing occurred about 36,044 times between January and March 2020. Increased preferences in the use of –ing form as in noun: social distancing along with the usage of specific noun and verbs with these phrases such as guidelines, recommendations, keep, observe indicate the language changes in unprecedented times. Choices in language is thought to be unconscious but changes and choices in public language is crafted consciously for promoting the ideologies and sense of responsibility among the public through the usage of grammatical aspects and words positioning (Hunston, 2020).
Imposition of lockdown or the smart lockdown was imposed to restrict the spread of corona virus. Public behavior and attitudes play an important role in reducing the risk of death due to this virus. Tweets were analyzed to explore the public reactions which may guide the Public information campaigns. About 3,038,026 English tweets about COVID-19 from March 10 to 23, 2020 were analyzed to see the aspect of gender differences. It was found that females are more likely toward tweeting the corona virus in the context of family, healthcare and social distancing. While men were more likely to tweet the virus in the context of the sports cancellation, the global spread of the corona virus in the world and political reactions. Thus women were seen as sharing disproportionate responsibility for keeping the population safe from the virus (Theelwall & Thelwall, 2020).

Speech acts are the acts that do something with the words. They may be promises, excuses, lies, declarations, requests, apologies, pardons, imprecations like written in any literature. It is a way of doing things with the words. Constative statements are judged by its truth or falsity. According to Austin, to say something is to do something because whenever we speak, we do something. Citation and repetition are two important elements of the felicity condition. Felicity depends on the context and all the circumstances. Locution is an act of saying something in a meaningful way with a certain sense and the reference. Illocutionary acts have certain forces which are supposed to be understood in certain and definite ways. It is the performance of an act in saying something. It is a way the utterance is meant to be taken (Campbell, 1973).

Illocutionary acts are further divided into five types; verdicting, exercitive, commissives, behabitives and explosives. Verdictive involve the judgmental opinions. Exercitives means directives such as giving orders or warning. Commisive involve the promises, declaration or pledging. Behabitives is speech act through which an attitude is adopted and is related to the thanking, resenting and apologizing. Expositive statements are intended to describe something and it involves the affirmation, information and correction. Perlocutionary acts are used to produce certain effect on the hearer or the utterer himself. These are uttered to produce certain consequential effects on the readers or the listeners’ thoughts, feelings or actions. Auston has related the locutionary and illocutionary acts because when we say something (locutionary act), we perform something (illocationary act) (Campbell, 1973).

3.0 ANALYSIS

A blog related to COVID-19 which is named as ‘Painful and tiresome’ — Swat's first recovered patient recalls encounter with COVID-19’ was updated electronically on Dawn newspaper website. COVID-19 survivor narrated his COVID-19 experience and said that he was afraid of everything when he came to know that he had the virus. He made explosive claims related to the hospital administration. Through the behabitive acts, he expressed his feelings related to painful journey and then adopted an attitude of thankfulness after full recovery.

.....was shocked to learn that he had tested positive (Behabitive: Expressing mental state of being shocked)

......it was not only painful but also very tiresome (Behabitive: Expressing pain)

......two days ago he tested negative after which we sent his sample (Explosive: Information)
Khan is now advising others in his community to observe social distancing (Exercitives: giving suggestions).

A medical doctor also confirmed the news of the full recovery of the respondent through explosive speech acts. COVID-19 related terms in the Painful and tiresome’ — Swat's first recovered patient recalls encounter with COVID-19’ are tested positive, novel coronavirus, developed symptoms, COVID-19 positive person, tested negative, isolation ward, social distancing. Guidelines issued by the government, deadly virus. The terms isolation ward, social distancing, guidelines issued by the government are the precautionary terms whose illocutionary force is expository and perlocutionary act is to raise the awareness regarding the adaptation of precautionary measures at an individual level before or after the virus attack. Behabitive speech acts are used frequently along with the minimal usage of exercitives and explosive speech acts.

Narratives of a doctor and a driver against the fighting of COVID-19 situation was published electronically on Dawn newspaper website. The article’s name was ‘Hyderabad's healthcare workers leave behind fear and comfort to fight COVID-19’. In this blog, a doctor and an ambulance driver narrated their stories regarding the experience of the coronavirus outbreak. In the COVID-19 isolation ward at Hyderabad's Liaquat University Hospital, doctor is giving his services as a focal person. He has adopted explosive style in order to explore the dedication of the doctors and their sincerity towards their responsibilities.

Some patients are treating corona diagnosis like a death certificate (Explosive: Information)

We do take precautions while coming into contact with positive patients (Explosive: Information)

Doctor has also adopted the exercitive speech act for requesting the audience to take care them by adopting precautionary measures.

Please take care (Exercitive: Requesting and advising)

A driver has also narrated his story and has shown the dedication towards his responsibility of carrying the COVID-19 patients to the hospital. He has used explosive speech style to deliver the information regarding his routine and experience.

I just wear the protective kit (Explosive: Information)

I wear PPE while driving (Explosive: Information)

Performing duty for the hospital’s isolation ward (Explosive: Information)

Terminological terms related to COVID-19 in the speech of the doctor are COVID-19 isolation, isolation center, coronavirus patients in isolation, pandemic, healthcare workers, standard operating procedures, isolation ward, positive patients, government SOPs, frontlines, screened, quarantine, unprecedented physical distances, safe distance, novel coronavirus, personal protective equipment (PPE), infected patients, protective kit, protective gear, and disposable PPE. The perlocutionary acts of these COVID-19 related terms are to notify the audience about the efforts of the healthcare workers and their strategies of coping with these unavoidable circumstances such as personal protective equipment (PPE), screened, unprecedented physical distances, fight against the virus, precautions, protective kit, protective gear, disposable PPE.
Perlocutionary act of all these terms are to raise the awareness among the readers regarding the persuasive strategies which are used by the doctors and healthcare workers in dealing with the situation. Explosive speech acts are used frequently in this article by the doctor and driver along with minimum usage of exercitive act for requesting and suggesting.

The blog ‘Don't take COVID-19 lightly: KP’s first recovered patient advises after returning home’, is a narrative of a COVID-19 survivor patient in his own words where he has expressed his feeling and asserted the explanation of the entire journey in the hospital. He narrated the pain of the coronavirus symptoms which was raging temperature and bone crushing body aches. But after testing positive, he was shifted to Peshawar’s Police Services Hospital. In his narration, there are mostly behabitive speech acts because he has talked about his mental state.

……this [following news] would often unnerve me (Behabitive: Expressing mental state)

……there is nothing to fear (Behabitive: Expressing mental state)

He has also used the exercitive and explosive style for giving advice and information to the audience;

……Coronavirus should not be taken lightly (exercitive: advising)

……he was shielded behind personal protective gear (explosive: information)

……he was tested for COVID-19 once again (explosive: information)

COVID related terms in the blog are COVID-19 patient, raging temperature and bone crushing body aches, stay inside, tested positive, separate room, shielded behind personal protective gear, virus free, novel virus. The perlocutionary acts of these COVID-19 related terms are to raise awareness of the symptoms of the COVID-19 such as raging temperature and bone crushing body aches. Behabitive acts are frequently used by the survivor for the expression of his attitude throughout this journey along with minimum usage of the explosive and exercitive acts. An interview of doctor was published in Dawn new website named ‘COVID-19 vaccine is no substitute for precautions... ’. Docotr has focused entirely on the importance of the precautions and has given factual information regarding COVID-19 situation in Pakistan. Docotr has used explosive style mainly to give information regarding the experience of coronavirus pandemic. He told about the date of the arrival of first coronavirus patient in Pakistan and imposition of smart lockdown.

……these lockdowns definitely had an impact on controlling (Explosive: Information)

……the first case here emerged on Feb 26 (Explosive: Information)

Doctor has also used exercitive acts for giving suggestion to the government.

……the government, too, should take care that it should be given to those in line of priority (Exercitive: Suggestion)

……a constitutional amendment is required to incorporate the right to health (Exercitive: Suggestion)
COVID related terms in the blog are coronavirus pandemic, standard operating procedures (SOPs), precautions, prevent its spread, COVID-19 vaccine, imposing lockdowns or smart lockdowns, new variant or strain, UK COVID-19 variant, first wave, second wave, Chinese vaccine, front-line health workers, influential people. The perlocutionary force of these terms in the article are to raise awareness about the actions which government has taken in first wave and second wave of coronavirus such as imposing lockdowns or smart lockdowns. Dr. has also used these terms in order to make the audience informative regarding the new variant of coronavirus and how much it is strong than the previous variant. Explosive speech acts are used frequently for giving information alongwith the usage of exercitive and explosive speech acts.

Experience of the Doctor is narrated in Dawn news website named ‘Closed health facilities being reopened as COVID-19 cases surge’. In this blog, it is told that the district administration and Liaquat University of Medical and Health Sciences (LUMHS) management has decided to reopen other spaces for keeping the stable and asymptomatic patients. LUMHS Vice Chancellor assured the public that they are trying their best to tackle the situation.

....we have shortage of nurses but we are trying to tackle (Explosive: Information)

....we are compiling data of recent deaths to determine cause of death (Explosive: Information)

Doctor has used explosive speech act to inform the public regarding critically ill patients.

……they were critically ill patients admitted in high dependence unit (HDU) and intensive care unit (ICU) of COVID-19 (Explosive: Information)

District health office (DHO) Hyderabad has also talked about the attitude of those patients who become normal, stable or asymptomatic. He told that such patients do not leave the beds despite medical advices.

……even normal, stable or asymptomatic patients don’t leave hospital (Explosive: Information)

………often critically ill patients’ management becomes difficult (Explosive: Information)

DC has also talked about the facilities regarding the hospital administrations.

………we have opened Kohsar hospital facility for keeping stable patients (Explosive: Information)

………we will also be shifting undertrial prisoners (UTPs) to Kohsar hospital (Explosive: Information)

COVID-19 related terms in this blog are stable and asymptomatic coronavirus patients, coronavirus patients, COVID-19 patients, first wave of the contagion, active coronavirus cases, home isolation, second wave of coronavirus. These terms are used whose perlocutionary force is to make the audience aware regarding the difficulties faced by the hospital administration due to the attitude of the people who are stable and symptomatic coronavirus patients because they do not leave their beds despite of doctor's suggestion. Explosive speech acts are used for giving factual information regarding the positivity ratio, effects of second wave of coronavirus. COVID related term home isolation is used whose perlocutionary force is to make the public aware patients regarding the adaptation of precautionary measure in public places. In this blog, there are explosive speech acts because the doctors have given information regarding the hospital conditions and the
A final year medical student at Yangtze University in Jingzhou and Wuhan in Hubei province was stranded in the midst of deadly virus and he discussed the journey of self-isolation and tackling strategies of China during the pandemic in an article ‘Confronting coronavirus in China: A Pakistani’s tale’ published in Dawn news web. His speech acts were explosive when he started telling the journey of coming back to life

……a city that went into self-isolation was coming back to life (Explosive: Information)

……you could still see them wearing masks (Explosive: Information)

He narrated the experience of deadly virus news outbreak

……we hadn’t seen a virus spreading so fast ever before (Explosive: Information)

Exercitive speech acts include the advice to the Pakistani people by Shaheer

……all I would like to say to Pakistanis is ‘ghabrana nahi hai’ (Exercitive: Advice)

……to stop the virus is to identify people with positive test results (Exercitive: Suggestion)

……stay at home (Exercitive: Advice)

……we should regularly wash our hands (Exercitive: Advice)

……a mechanism should be devised to make supplies available to them (Exercitive: Advice)

These exercitive acts are indicator of the advices and suggestions which Shaheer gives to the Pakistani government and to the audience. COVID related terms in this article are spread of COVID-19 coronavirus, plague, deadly virus, a lockdown, self-isolation, wearing masks, virus, isolation centres, quarantine centres, positive test results, quarantine points, wash our hands, complete lockdown, fever or symptoms, flu, cough, and fever. The perlocutionary act of these COVID-19 related terms in the blog is to aware the audience regarding precautionary measures such as ‘wash our hands’ and it also intend to make the audience aware about the strategies even if virus get into control such as ‘wearing masks’. As a whole, there are explosive and exercitive acts. Exercitive acts involve the suggestion and advices whose perlocutionary force is to guide government of Pakistan regarding the adaptation of precautionary measures as China has adopted during this outbreak of deadly virus.

4.0 DISCUSSION

In the above analysis, it is being observed that speech acts differ in accordance with the field, area or the genre. Language used by narrators has maximum use of corona related terms, it also shows the language change in unprecedent time because these terms were not used before such as Coronavirus. And this term has many associated vocabularies and the phrases which are attached to it and were never used before.
Table 1: Total speech acts in the blogs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narratives</th>
<th>Explosives Speech acts</th>
<th>Behabitive Speech acts</th>
<th>Exercitive Speech acts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coronavirus survivors</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare workers and Driver’s Narrative</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative of Pakistani Student in Chinese University</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results show that coronavirus survivors expressed their emotions, feelings and pains too in their narrative and told that how they felt at that time. Explosive speech acts in the healthcare workers and Driver’s narratives show that they frequently focused on delivering the information regarding their adaptation of precautionary measures, condition of the hospital’s administrations, new policies and their day to day safety routine. Exercitive speech acts show that they have given suggestions and advice to the public regarding the safety measures which can help in decreasing this deadly virus within a short span of time. Pakistani student in China has narrated his experience during this pandemic period and explosive speech acts are used for informing the audience regarding the lockdown in China and how they tackled all this by providing food and medical facilities to the people at their home. Exercitive acts are mostly used for Pakistan government as an advice and suggestions which can help in improving the situation in Pakistan. Behabitive acts in the narrative of healthcare workers were not related to their own attitude or mental state rather they were used for describing the mental state of the patients who tested positive. But the behabitive acts in survivors narratives are related to their own mental state and their attitude toward this pandemic.

COVID Related Terms

**Variant names for Coronavirus:** novel coronavirus, deadly virus, pandemic, novel virus, coronavirus pandemic, plague, deadly virus, virus, first wave of the contagion, second wave of coronavirus, new variant or strain, UK COVID-19 variant.

**Preventive measures against Coronavirus:** standard operating procedures, social distancing, guidelines issued by the government, precautions, government SOPs, quarantine, unprecedented physical distances, safe distance, personal protective equipment (PPE), protective kit, protective gear, disposable PPE, a lockdown, wearing masks, quarantine centres, quarantine points, control the spread, wash our hands, complete lockdown, stay inside, shielded behind personal protective gear, standard operating procedures (SOPs), precautions, imposing lockdowns or smart lockdowns.

**Coronavirus Symptoms:** developed symptoms, fever or symptoms, flu, cough, and fever, raging temperature and bone crushing body aches.

**Isolation during pandemic:** COVID-19 isolation, isolation center, coronavirus patients in isolation, isolation ward, separate room, home isolation, isolation centre, self-isolation.
Coronavirus Patients: tested positive, COVID-19 positive person, infected patients, COVID-19 patient, tested positive, influential people, stable and asymptomatic coronavirus patients, coronavirus patients, diagnosed for the coronavirus, COVID-19 patients, positive test results, COVID-19 positive person.

Healthcare workers: frontlines, front-line health workers

Table 2: COVID-19 related terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COVID Related terms</th>
<th>Occurrence of COVID-19 related terms in 6 blogs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variant names for Coronavirus</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preventive measures against Coronavirus</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coronavirus Symptoms</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation during pandemic</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coronavirus Patients</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare workers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis of coronavirus related terms shows that the variant words and phrases are used in the narratives which are primarily associated with it. Coronavirus term is named with different substitutable words. Preventive measure against coronavirus is being narrated whose perlocutionary act is to make public aware of these preventive measures in order to deal with this situation. Many words are associated with the COVID-19 term such as isolation, Standard operating procedures SOPs, tested positive, plague, deadly virus, wash hands, home isolation, lockdown etc. This unprecedented time has produced another field.

5.0 CONCLUSION

It is concluded from the above analysis and discussion that COVID-19 pandemic has affected the language and it is seen in the medical field where mostly published blogs in recent times are only related to this deadly virus, its precautions and the symptoms. COVID-19 related terms and associated words with it are analyzed. Phenomenological approach has determined the phenomenon of language change during this pandemic through close analysis of the COVID-19 related terms after coding process. Context has influenced the language and speech acts. Survivors experienced the pain of this virus so they used behabitive acts in their language while the context of the healthcare workers was the hospital in which they were providing their services. They used explosive statements and exercitive act more. It means that context has direct influence on the narrative and language of the individual.

The analysis of the 6 blogs have shown that speech acts differ in terms of the field and context. Comparison of COVID-19 related terms revealed that varied number of words are used to describe the precautionary measures, symptoms and patients of coronavirus. And perlocutionary force of these terms is to make the audience aware regarding the precautionary measures and symptoms of this virus. Explosive speech acts are used by healthcare workers, driver and student because they provided more information and talked less about their mental states. While behabitive speech acts
are used by the coronavirus survivors because they have expressed their mental state and talked about their painful journey during this journey.

Exercitive acts also used more by the health care workers, its perlocutionary force was to make people realize that adaptation of precautionary measure is necessary if they want to get out from this deadly virus. The student has used explosive and exercitive acts because he gave advices and suggestions to people and especially to the Pakistani government regarding the formation of new policies as China has made for tackling the situation. COVID-19 term is referred to from different names such as deadly virus. Symptoms are also given whose perlocutionary force is to make people aware of the symptoms and intended advice that if they get any of these then they should have proper checkup.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Future studies can be conducted to examine the role of speech acts in political blogs and discourses to foreground the ideological attempt of the narrators in manipulating the minds of the readers through the use of language.

REFERENCES


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