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Pragmas-rhetorical analysis to Covid-19 headlines

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1. Introduction

The pandemic of covid-19 has put great pressure not only on the human health system, but the language system as well. As a result, different linguistic changes have emerged, like meanings change and the creation of new words, phrases, or connotations (i.e., neologism). Presenting the headlines of the covid-19 language is the main focus of the current paper. As a dynamic system, language can introduce new ways of expressing, explaining, and referring to things. A language can adapt itself to reflect different changes in life. Basically, this paper concerns itself with the language and style of newspaper headlines to reflect pragmatically on how Covid-19 headlines are introduced. Pragmatics is defined as an act of communication that affects all fields of life. Mey (2001: 6) defines pragmatics as "the study of the way human being use their language in communication". Therefore, pragmatics deals with any premises that can affect the use of language.

A pragma-rhetoric approach is used to analyze the data, which were collected from four different journal websites. With reference to the unique nature of headlines, the paper aims at answering the questions: (1) how is Covid-19 pragmatically presented to the public? (2) what kind of pragmatic strategies or tools are manifested in covid-19-related headlines? and (3) How rhetorical tropes are utilized in news headlines and what was their role?

To answer the above questions and reach the main aim of the paper, the model of analysis used is of two dimensions. The first is the rhetorical appeals ("ethos, pathos and logos") and the second is the rhetorical tropes used in these headlines. As such, a spotlight is given to how pragmatics, more specifically the rhetorical tropes are manifested in these pragmatics and what kind of role they play in painting covid-19 news. It is hoped that the findings of this study will be useful for news headline writers, editors, and pragmatists.

2. Literature review

2.1. News headlines

Newspaper headlines are a powerful subgenre of mass media. This unique type of text can have different functions. Reah (1998:4) defines a piece of news as information about a "recent event" and headlines are the first thing to see in launching a piece of news. For Van Dijk (1988), headlines represent the discourse as a complete source-unit of information. According to Taiwo (2004: 324), headlines are the opening part of news and they are strategically presented to capture the readers' attention. Headlines are strongly related to cultural references. That is being a rich and precise source of information, readers may find it difficult to understand headlines if they are not familiar with the context of the real world and the allusion being issued (Taiwo, ibid:222).

"An abstract of an abstract" is how Bell (1991:105) describes headlines. Thus, they have the function of summarizing the news. This function is fulfilled when the headline highlights the points which are mainly in the story or the article (Al-Hindawi, 2018). One also must take into consideration the importance of headlines as they in fact have the power of stirring up the readers' attention while conveying a message. Such importance is asserted by Taiwo (2007: 244) who describes the headlines as the items that create and sustain readers' views. Telling a story is the main function of headlines, yet this is accomplished by present tense which can arouse the readers' attention (Tuchman, 1978).

In the same vein, Crystal and Davy (1969) state that the brief message revealed in a headline is successful when it provokes the reader to complete reading the news by grabbing his attention.

Claude (1980, as cited in Ismail, 2016) states that headlines are also "clues" helping the readers decode the message with reference to cultural and social perspectives. In contrast, headlines can also function as "riddles" to optimize the relevance of the article to the readers. Van Dijk (1988) states that headlines are summarizing the crucial ideas of a text, therefore they play a major role in comprehending a text.

With the outbreak of Covid 19, journals have launched different special issues and this continued and expanded to include not only health issues but social and linguistic studies as well. These special issues made a connection between the pandemic as a health topic and as a social phenomenon as well. For instance, Doiciar and Crețan (2020) shed light on the impact of the pandemic on the migrant worker who came to Romania when the pandemic started. Among the main conclusion reached by them (ibid) is how Covid is going to increase
social deprivation and poverty. Doiciar and Crețan (2021) also discussed pandemic populism; a political ideology and the rhetoric of politicians during the pandemic. Other studies focused more on the language of the pandemic. For example, Asif, et al., (2021) Linguistic Analysis of Neologism Related to Coronavirus (COVID-19); Treichler’s (2021) COVID: A Pandemic of Metaphor; Manning and Duch’s (2022) COVID-19 Stress and Sexual Identities; Jebbour’s (2022) The Unexpected Transition to Distance Learning at Moroccan Universities Amid COVID-19: A Qualitative Study on Faculty Experience.

3. Analytical framework

3.1. Data collection and method of analysis

Data were collected from Covid-related headlines of (4) online website newspapers from different countries across the world. These newspapers include the New York Times (the USA and North America), The Guardian (the UK and Europe), the Mainichi Shimbun (Japan), and Sabah (Turkey). The total number of headlines is (40/10 from each journal website).

The selected headlines are those published in 2020–2021. Therefore, they are not from an early period of the pandemic and the readers have already established background knowledge about the disease.

A pragma-rhetoric analysis is carried out. Two major components are followed to analyze the data. The first is the rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos and logos) and the second is the rhetorical tropes used in these headlines. The rhetorical tropes are derived inductively from the analyzed data. Figure (1) illustrates the followed model of analysis of the headlines. Quantitative analysis is also carried out to support the pragma-rhetoric analysis and the results were illustrated in Table (1).

3.2. Data analysis and discussions

The analysis of the culled headlines, from a rhetorical point of view, reveals the existence of some similarities among the headlines of different papers. In general, the analysis shows that writers prefer to rely on both logos and pathos in addressing the readers. The quantitative analysis reveals that most writers rely heavily on logos appeals mostly to be objective and for persuasion purposes.

The Mainichi Shimbun (Japan): "Deaths in Spain hit 491, infections up to 11,178"

The Mainichi Shimbun (Japan): "Conflict grows between US and allies over vaccine supply"

In the above example, for the purpose of persuasion, the writer uses appeals to logos. This can be attributed to the nature of the news itself; the virus and its impact on the world is something new and serious, therefore, when tackling it, writers depend on rational appeals like logic by referring to facts, numbers, and real stories. Logos appeals are manifested in the above example by mentioning the numbers "hit 491, infections up to 11,178" and by doing so, the reasoning appeals are manifested.

New York Times: 'The U.S. death rate remains high, even though coronavirus cases are trending downward'

Persuasion can be based on the elements of emotion, even before addressing rational appeals. The writer uses appeals to pathos to catch the reader’s attraction. This is exemplified in the use of paradox "high and downward". The news touches people’s emotions as it tackles something that can be fearful like deaths and diseases, therefore, using pathos was essential in corona-virus news. Using this appeal shows its importance since it makes the headline accepted, then presented, and finally agreed upon.

Sabah the daily news: "Turkish Cargo carries UNICEF-supplied COVID-19 vaccines"

The Mainichi Shimbun: "WHO head wants virus vaccine patents waived to boost supply"

Appeals are used to catch the attention and to persuade. In the above headline, the writer utilizes appeals to ethos to do so. Appeals to the credibility of the sources are a way to confirm the truthfulness of the news itself.

Upon the analysis of the rhetorical tropes in covid-related headlines, the analysis shows the use of different rhetorical tropes. These tropes are illustrated in Table (1).

### Table (1)

| Rhetorical Appeals | Rhetorical Tropes |
|--------------------|--------------------|
|                    | Freq. | %   | Freq. | %   |
| Logos              | 17    | 42.5% | Parallelism | 13 | 32.5% |
| Pathos             | 14    | 35%   | metaphor    | 10 | 25%   |
| Ethos              | 9     | 22.5% | Hyperbole   | 9  | 22.5% |
| Total              | 40    | 100%  | Testimonials | 5 | 12.5% |
|                    |       |       | Rhetorical questions | 3 | 7.5% |
|                    |       |       | Total       | 40 | 100% |

Figure (1). The analytical model.
Defiance" therefore, creating cohesive headlines which are easy to follow and memorize. Equivalent grammatical structures are also seen in:

Guardian Post: "Third Covid wave sweeps across EU and forces new restrictions"

Guardian Post: Covid UK: coronavirus cases, deaths, and vaccinations today

Mainichi Japan: "New York City schools to close Monday to fight coronavirus"

At the semantic level of parallelism, two parts in a text are parallel in one another in relation to meaning. Antithetical parallelism is observed through using contrasts as in:

Guardian Post: "Coronavirus: who will be winners and losers in the new world order?"

Such use of two counterbalanced thoughts is seen in focus-points to be observed.

**Metaphor:** metaphor structures our way of understanding the world. Within this stream, metaphors can be essential tools in pragmatics. The effect of such a tool is seen especially when it breaks the rules or the restrictions of literal meaning to convey the hidden meaning behind using a certain image. This figure of speech involves a comparison between two things by using words that do not literally denote the same thing. e.g.:

New York Times: 'Coronavirus Crisis Awakens a Sleeping Giant: China’s Youth'

Pragmatically speaking, metaphors are used to indicate a hidden meaning rather than the literal one which is being said. The above example breaches the rules of literal meaning. The writers indicate that the virus awakens a serious and giant-like topic.

New York Times: "A New York Doctor’s Coronavirus Warning: The Sky Is Falling"

The word ‘fall’ in its symbolic meaning indicates death or the end as in a tree-leaf falling. ‘sky’ from a metaphorical view can refer to something big or vast. The metaphor of ‘falling sky’ indicates that the crisis is as serious and huge as a ‘falling sky’ that can come up with the end of the world. Such a powerful tool helps paint a direct picture in the reader’s mind and at the same time, they are infused with uncertainty and mystery.

The Guardian: "Birth of a pandemic: inside the first weeks of the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan"

New York Times: 'The Coronavirus Has Put the World’s Economy in Survival Mode'

The birth metaphor in the above example is associated with aspects of starting. When coronavirus is referred to by ‘birth’, this indicates the start or the beginning. This is confirmed by using words like ‘outbreak’ and ‘first weeks’. Thus, when the pandemic is described as being born, this gives an indication of its start. The paradox seen here is that metaphors of birth are supposed to refer to life or a starting point that may refer to something good. However, the birth metaphor, in this case, refers actually to death and this is what is asserted by the word ‘pandemic’. The second example is manifested through a technological term like ‘survival mode’ to accelerate the seriousness of the situation.

**Hyperbole:** This trope is one of the most wildly used figures of speech in both written and everyday language. Being one of the most used techniques of communication in everyday language makes it effective in capturing attention as well as in deliberate deception sometimes. This is also asserted by Leech (1983:146), who described hyperbole as a form of “honest deceptions” because the speaker uses a description stronger than what the state of affairs described.

Due to the terrifying nature of a virus-like Coronavirus, hyperbole or exaggeration is employed to deliver the seriousness of such disease. Words like (4th wave fear/dramatically/bigger spread) are seen in headlines to reflect some facts but in an exaggerated way.

Pragmatically, hyperbole violates the maxim of quality, which is seen pragmatically as a strategy of intensifying the effect.

**Testimonial:** according to Adler (2006) a testimony is "an assertion of a declarative sentence by a speaker to a hearer or to an audience". As a rhetorical device, testimonials play a major role in the validity of the news. The words of famous personals assure the authenticity of the news being polished. Such technique is seen widely in covid-related news. As in:

Mainichi Japan: "WHO head wants virus vaccine patents waived to boost supply"

New York Times: 'a new your Doctor’s Coronavirus Warning: The Sky Is Falling'

Testimonials are participating a major role when it comes to giving validity and shreds of evidence of the topic being discussed. Such authenticity provides a solid background to the news and that is why it can be seen as an effective persuasive strategy.

**Rhetorical questions:** editorial writers employ rhetorical questions for provocation purposes as well as for emphasis. For example:

"Coronavirus: who will be winners and losers in new world order?"

The above question has nothing to do with winning or losing rather than with actually surviving the pandemic. In such a crisis, there is no winners or losers, rather than surviving and finding solutions as it matters all human. Raising such a question, from a pragmatic view, can be seen as an indirect speech act of taking actions and choosing aside.

The Guardian Post: "Fake news in the time of coronavirus: how big is the thread?"

Sabah: The Daily News: "Will taking painkillers interfere with COVID-19 vaccination?"

Such questions were asked to emphasize the necessity of facts and news about the virus and emphasize some medical facts concerning the vaccination. Using rhetorical questions can be seen as more a realistic technique also, this is because one of the strategies of learning and discovering things starts with making questions and looking for answers.

### 3.3 Conclusion

Journalists need to be objective as well as honest. Therefore, they rely on logic and facts, especially with health topics. The findings support the hypothesis that rational appeals are the predominant rhetorical strategies when it comes to health topics and especially the news of a pandemic disease. From a pragmatic perspective, this is manifested by the use of logos appeals. Such appeal, pragmatically, is used to persuade the readers by providing them with facts and shreds of evidence.

The combination of both logos and pathos is essential to reach persuasion. The analysis shows the effective role of the utilization of rational appeals (logos) and emotional appeals (pathos) in headlines in order to be objective (giving facts), which is also one of the main functions of headlines, as well as close to the reader enough.

In the case of ethos appeals, the findings show that such a strategy is effective in, first, capturing the readers’ attention, secondly, they are descriptive and easier to follow and understand, i.e., it is easier to rely on the credibility of the source. It is also worth mentioning that such appeals can be serious manipulation strategies because they can stir the reader’s mind to certain conclusions. Therefore, such variation in using rationality, credibility, and emotional strategies is equally important.

The paper also revealed that different rhetorical devices can be seen in Covid-19-related news like parallelism, metaphor, hyperbole, testimonials, and rhetorical questions.
As a rhetorical device, parallelism plays the pragmatic role of creating redundancy to lead to textual predictability which in turn results in the facilitation of readers’ information mental processing. One of the main functions of parallelism is creating rhythm as well as symmetry. Therefore, pragmatically the analysis shows that parallel structures are used in headlines mainly to make headlines easier to memorize and remember, catching readers’ interest, emphasizing, and persuading.

At the second top used rhetorical device comes metaphor (25%), which involves using a word or expression to describe situations that do not literally denote and is used to make ideas easier to imagine and is also used as a means of exaggeration.

Indirect speech acts are one of the main functions performed by rhetorical questions in headlines. There are two main ways of communication. The first one is the direct speech act which is also the simplest form. Such an act ‘constitutes a matching of structure and function’ such as declaratives and assertions. (Yule, 2000, p. 55). The second is the indirect speech act, where the above matching does not exist (i.e. no match between the structure and the function) (Searle, 2001, p. 31). The findings indicate that rhetorical questions in covid-19 headlines are used indirectly to refer to acts like taking actions and choosing aside. This point is concluded because these questions are inherently indirect since the writers have no real intentions of providing an answer. Solidifying a piece of news can be achieved by using the rhetorical trope of testimonials, using the words of doctors or organizations like WHO gives the headlines a stronger background, and this is verified by the quantitative analysis of testimonials of (12.5%).

The most common trope used by writers, after metaphor, is hyperbole which is used to provoke readers. Pragmatically, hyperbolic expressions reinforce readers’ reactions. Using hyperbole with the rate of (22.5%) shows its task of arousing the readers’ attention by involving overstatements and exaggeration. Such a task (i.e., arousing the readers’ attention) is one of the main functions of news headlines, therefore, hyperbole can be seen as an effective device in news media.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest in this work.

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