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A Multimodal Analysis of Japan's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

With more than 20 million infections worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the world's health care system and various sectors of the economy. Previous studies on the pandemic have focused on finding a cure but with little attention to multimodal studies related to the pandemic. This study conducts a multimodal analysis of Japan's response to the pandemic with a view to scrutinising various modes utilised by Japan to address the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Kress and van Leeuwen's Multimodality theory was used to analyse different COVID-19 news complied on Greg Lam's YouTube channel "Life where I'm from". Language, visuals and audio-visuals were the dominant modes observed in the Japanese COVID-19 discourse. These modes elicited different responses from the Japanese government, media, health workers and the general populace. These responses are proactive measures, communication of COVID-19 preventive measures and a criticism of certain lapses. Language and visuals were used by the Japanese government to take proactive measures, visuals and audio-visuals were used to disseminate COVID-19 preventive measures while language and visuals were used to criticise certain lapses. Findings from this study will generate outstanding responses

towards managing emergencies such as disease outbreaks in future.

Introduction

With more than 21 million infections and 761,000 deaths, the current pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus, referred to COVID-19 has a great impact on the world's health care system and on every facet of the society. According the World Health Organisation (WHO), COVID-19 is a new disease different from other diseases caused by coronaviruses such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). As observed by the organisation, the virus spreads rapidly and outbreaks can grow at an exponential rate. The first case of COVID-19 was identified in December, 2019 in Wuhan, Hubei. China. According to Japanese Statista Research Department, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Japan was reported on January 14, 2020 in a resident of Kanagawa Prefecture who had returned from Wuhan, China. This was followed by a second outbreak that was introduced by travelling passengers and returnees from Europe and the United States between March 11 and March 23, 2020. Since then the number of COVID-19 infections in Japan has gradually increased.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on January 30, 2020 and a pandemic on March 11, 2020. As at 12 noon on December 22, 2023, the number of recorded cases of COVID-19 was 699,962,675; the number of deaths 6,958,458; and the number of recovered and discharged cases 671,292,437. (worldometres.info/coronavirus). As at December 22, 2023, Japan had 33,803,572 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and a death toll of 74,694 as a result of the virus. Because there are no proven vaccines for the treatment of COVID-19, the Japanese government responded to the pandemic by adopting various measures to prevent and mitigate the outbreak. Based on the foregoing, this study assessed the manner Japan responded to the COVID19 pandemic at the initial stage.

Aim and objectives

This study assessed Japan's initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic by carrying out a multimodal analysis of selected news on COVID-19 in Japan with the specific intention to:

a. identity the different modes of communication observed in the discourse of Japan's COVID-19 pandemic.
b. describe the features inherent in the identified modes,
c. describe how the identified modes were used to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan.

Statement of the problem

The COVID-19 pandemic is a recent phenomenon. Available research on it are in the medical field in respect of clinical trials for the development of a vaccine for the treatment of the virus. These studies in addition explored the epidemiology, causes, clinical manifestation, diagnosis, prevention and control of the novel coronavirus. From a linguistic perspective, previous studies such as Eagleton (2004), Washer (2004), Chen (2005), Larson et al. (2005), Wallis and Neriich (2005), Baeh (2006), Chiang and Duann (2007) and Trčková (2015) among others have examined previous epidemics such as Influenza, Smallpox, SARS and Ebola to mention a few. Linguistics and discourse related studies such as Ajayi, and Akinrinlola, (2021), Yu1, Lu and Hu (2021) and Osisanwo (2022) have also attempted a discourse analysis of issues related to the COVID 19 pandemic. Thus, in order to contribute to existing literature on COVID-19, this paper focuses on a multimodal analysis of Japan's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature review of previous studies on COVID 19

Utilizing the database analysis software AntConc 3.2.4w on self-built corpora, Yu, Lu, & Hu (2021) analysed the news reports of different stages on the COVID-19 in China and the UK in *China Daily* and *The Guardian*, respectively, and revealed the discourse characteristics in the two media, together with the discussion on their possible relations to the pandemic-controlling practices. The corpus-based analysis showed that *China Daily* used more objective and neutral words in the descriptions of the COVID-19 and expressed more active attitudes in fighting against the epidemic. As indicated in the study, *The Guardian* used more negative words in describing the pandemic and words with weak restricting force when reporting policies concerning the control and prevention of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yu1, Lu, & Hu (2021) added that the comparison between the discourse before and after the lockdown demonstrated that the descriptions of the COVID-19 in the UK media transformed into a more objective and neutral one than before with an increased use of expressions of restriction and social conflicts.

In another study, Osisanwo (2022) identifies the representational strategies, discourse structures and discourse strategies deployed by selected newspapers in representing COVID-19 and associated participants. Data used for the study were retrieved from selected COVID-19-related editorials from four purposively selected countries and continents across the world: New York Times (USA, North America), The Guardian (UK, Europe), China Daily (China, Asia) and The Punch (Nigeria, Africa), published in the early periods of the pandemic, and precisely from January 1 – March 31, 2020. Guided by aspects of van Dijk's socio-cognitive model of critical discourse analysis on ideological discourse structures, data were quantitatively and qualitatively

analysed. As observed by Osisanwo (2022), the selected newspaper editorials unusually converged to negatively represent the COVID-19 virus. To achieve this, ten representational strategies (like economic cankerworm, threat to humans, common enemy), six discourse strategies (like demonising, criminalising, condemnation) and twelve ideological discourse structures (like Actor Description, Authority, Burden) and different participant representations and roles (like solver, potential super spreader) were identified in the study.

In a related study, Ajayi, and Akinrinlola (2021) investigated the pragma-multimodal functions of memes created and shared by Nigerians on different social media platforms in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. Data comprised ten memes sampled from the numerous memes initially gathered. Data were subjected to pragmatic and multimodal analyses, with reference to Mey's (2001) pragmatic act theory and Kress' (2010) multimodality. Findings from the study revealed that texts and images in the memes combine with the prevailing socio-political and religious contexts in Nigeria to evoke the practs of warning, admonition, information, mockery, criticism, condemnation, rebuke, labeling, accusation and sermonisation.

The foregoing shows that COVID-19 discourse has been commendably engaged. While the purviews of aforementioned studies are relevant to this study, there are marked deviations in terms of scope, objective, theoretical orientation and methodology. However, the studies do not discuss the multimodal features in the COVID-19 discourse. This study fills this gap by focusing on the multimodal analysis of Japan's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical Framework: Multimodality theory

Multimodality theory offers a suitable methodology for examining communicative processes whereby meaning making involves a range of different modes of communication. As observed by van Leeuwen, (2005), Multimodality theory draws on social semiotic theories of communication, but extends the interpretation of language and its meanings to the whole range of modes of representation and communication employed in a culture. This includes methods for analysing visual, aural, and embodied communication such as gaze, gesture, body posture and position. As simplified by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), pictures convey semiotic encryptions dissimilar from writings in their capacity to picture and encrypt social standards, prospects and interactions. With the widespread use of pictorial illustrations through art, the print media and kids' drawings, Kress and van Leeuwen powerfully reinforce the view that pictures convey social concepts with physical, dogmatic and ethnic insinuations. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) drawing insights from Halliday's concept of transitivity process, propose that the analysis of pictures involve the identification of the involved participants, the process or the activity described, the qualities of the

participants and the circumstances in which the action described is being developed. In the same study, van Leeuwen (2006) states further that pictures can realise relational meaning with the following means summarised below:

1. The size of a frame can bring portrayed features closer to the viewer or keep them at a distance;
2. Angles, which can confront viewers directly with depicted participants or represent the relation as more oblique, and which can place viewers either above or below depicted participants; and
3. The gaze of depicted participants, which can address viewers directly, and realise a symbolic "demand" (for sympathy, respect, sexual interest, etc., depending on the accompanying facial expressions and/or gestures) or address the viewer indirectly and create a barrier between the represented world and the word of the viewer.

The implication of all these is that each dissimilar social setting arouses diverse likely meanings and a diverse set of likelihoods that specific connotations could be made using different tools from the syntax of the language involved. It should also be noted that the social semiotic view of Multimodality theory provides the vantage point from which analysts can approach the task of synchronising the process involved in meaning making in a united manner.

Methodology

Kress and van Leeuwen's Multimodality theory was used to analyse a video titled *Tokyo's Coronavirus Timeline (COVID-19 in Japan*). The video is a compilation of different COVID-19 news on Greg Lam's YouTube channel "Life where I'm from". The video was selected because it focuses on numerous news about the novel coronavirus in Japan. It covers a time span of January 16 to May 25, 2020 which is a period COVID-19 was constantly reported in different news outlets and a period Japan began to take proactive measures to minimise the spread of COVID-19. The news was transcribed, critically read and aspects that relate to multimodal analysis of COVID-19 were culled out for content and multimodal analyses.

Data analysis and findings

Language, visuals and audio visuals were the dominant modes used by Japan to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. These modes elicited different responses from the Japanese government, media, health workers and the general populace. These responses are proactive measures, communication of COVID-19 preventive measures and a criticism of certain lapses. These responses are discussed in this section.

1. **Proactive measures**

With the use of language and visuals, the Japanese government responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by taking proactive measures that helped in reducing the spread of virus. One of such measures is the declaration of a state of emergency for seven prefectures which include Tokyo, Saitama, Kanagawa, Chiba, Osaka, Hyogo, and Fukuoka. On April 7, 2020, the Japanese government extended the coverage of the state of emergency to all Japanese prefectures. The declared state of emergency enabled prefectural governors in the designated areas request people to stay at home, order closures of schools, public facilities, build temporary medical facilities, and adopt measures to support medical and food supplies. To prevent further transmission of COVID-19 during this period, with the use of simple diction, the Japanese government advised its citizens to avoid the "3Cs" as a preventive measure to curb the spread of COVID-19 in the country. This measure was visualised by the Japanese government in plate 1 as shown below:

Plate 1

www.youtube.com

With the use of diagrams and simple diction, the visual image depicted in plate 1 above was used to emphasise the importance of staying at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the ideational level, plate 1 presents the 3Cs. The image was used to advise Japanese to avoid the 3Cs. The first C in the image means people should avoid closed places with poor ventilation, the second C means people should avoid crowded places open to the public while the third C means people should avoid close-ranged conversation and close-contact

settings that put people in the range of flying droplets from speaking, coughing and sneezing. As explicated by the Japanese government and health officials, all the three situations portrayed in the image increase the risk of droplet infection, hence avoiding them will naturally decrease the possibility of community transmission.

2. **Communication of COVID-19 preventive and safety measures via images and audio-visuals**

Before the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Japan, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in Japan asked the public to adhere to "coughing etiquette", wearing of face masks and hand washing. This message was delivered with the circulation of visual images. Two of these visuals are presented in plates 2 and 3 below:

Plate 2

www.youtube.com

Plate 3

www.youtube.com

The two images depicted in plates 2 and 3 were circulated by Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare before the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Japan on January 14, 2020. Plate 2 at the ideational level displays a man wearing a face mask in order to prevent numerous people from been infected with COVID-19. Plate 3 displays a woman sitting and a man with flying droplets standing in close range to the woman. The second section of the image displays a woman washing her hands with soap and water after touching open surfaces. At the interpersonal and textual levels, plates 2 and 3 show the preparedness and commitment of the Japanese government towards preventing the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. Most importantly, the Japanese government used the images to ask the public to adhere to safety and preventive measures that will halt the spread of the virus.

The creation of audio-visual is another communicative mode used by the Japanese government and citizens to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. This mode was used to transmit vital information on COVID-19 preventive measures to the general populace. An example of such audio-visual is a remix of "PPAP (Pen-Pineapple-Apple-Pen)" ペンパイナッポーアッポーペン - a single by Pikotaro a fictional singer-songwriter. The original song (Pen-Pineapple-Apple-Pen) was created and portrayed by Japanese comedian Daimaou Kosaka. The video was released as a music video on YouTube on 25 August 2016, and has since become a viral video. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, on the 4th of April, 2020, the song (Pen-Pineapple-Apple-Pen) was remixed to "PPAP-2020". In the remix, Pikotaro pretends to combine his hands with soap, and repeats "Wash! Wash! Wash! Wash!" while pretending to wash his hands. In the end, he tells the viewers to "**P**ray for **P**eople **a**nd **P**eace.

Another audio-visual used to respond to COVID-19 pandemic in Japan is a trailer released by the Japanese government titled "Avoid the three secrets!" 3つの密を避けよう！ The video sensitised the public on the looming dangers inherent if the prescribed COVID-19 preventive measures are not adhered to. To achieve this, the video advised Japanese to avoid the 3 secrets in order to prevent massive outbreaks of the new coronavirus. As visualised in the trailer, viewers were advised to avoid closed spaces with poor ventilation, dense

places where many people gather and close scene where people talk at a close range. Screen shots from the video are presented in plates 4-7:

Plate 4

www.youtube.com

Plate 5

www.youtube.com

Plate 6

www.youtube.com

Plate 7

www.youtube.com

3. Criticism of certain lapses

A criticism of certain lapses is another response of Japan to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is observed in the manner the Japanese media and citizens found fault with the low COVID-19 testing capacity of the Japanese health care system. In this regard, with the use of language and images, the Japanese media reported that the country's hospitals denied testing to patients due to guidelines around handling transmittable diseases such as COVID-19. As reported by the media, there are two flows for being tested. They reported that

if in the previous 2 weeks before symptoms, an individual had been in close contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19, or has been to an area where there was an outbreak, have fever or respiratory symptoms and a temperature of above 37.5 degrees or higher (which is above 99.5 degrees Fahrenheit), that individual could get tested. The Japanese media reported that other categories of people that could be tested include those with flu-like symptoms, temperature above 37.5, extreme fatigue and difficulty breathing. The four days were reduced to two for pregnant or older Japanese with underlying health conditions. These strict procedures were criticised by the Japanese because they incredibly had a difficult time getting tested for COVID-19. Japanese populace further criticised the country's low rate of testing COVID-19 because some of the infected people were asymptomatic and because the period before the onset of symptoms is usually when the virus reproduces most and is most transmittable.

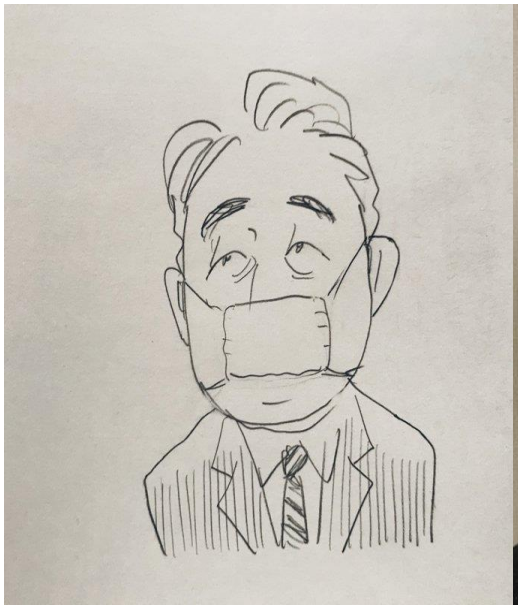
Another lapse criticised by the Japanese is a viral video of Abe-san, the prime minister of Japan who imitated Gen Hoshino, a popular musician's video to show how he was coping while staying home. In the video, prime minister Abe-san was seen relaxing on a sofa with his dog sipping tea and reading, with a message telling people to stay at home. As reported by the Japanese media, this video elicited angry responses from many Twitter users because the Japanese believed their prime minister Abe-san ignored the plight of those struggling to make a living during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The inadequate number of masks distributed to each Japanese household is another lapse criticised by the Japanese. As reported by the media, the distributed masks were smaller than usual, and only two were given to each household regardless of their size. This lapse generated different memes on Twitter. Some of these memes are displayed in plates 8-11:

Plate 8

www.youtube.com

Plate 9



www.youtube.com

Plate 10

www.youtube.com

Plate 11

www.youtube.com

At the ideational level, plate 8 presents two groups of three and four individuals sharing a face mask each. At the same ideational level plate 9 presents a middle aged man wearing an unusually small face mask while plate 10 at the same level presents an unidentified man wearing two face masks- one covering his forehead and the other covering his nose and mouth. Plate 11 presents a family of three in a car. In plate 11, the man and his wife wore face masks while their

child at the back of the car wore no face mask. At the interpersonal and textual levels, plates 8 to 11 were used to criticise the Japanese government for giving each family two face masks without a consideration of their size.

Conclusion

As a result of the contagious nature of COVID-19, different measures were put in place by the Japanese government to prevent its transmission. In line with the objectives of this study, an assessment of the different modes of communication used by Japan to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic was carried out. Analysis reveals that language, visuals and audio-visuals were the dominant modes of communication observed in the discourse of the Japanese COVID-19 pandemic. These modes were used by the Japanese government, media, health workers and general populace. These modes elicited different responses from the Japanese. These responses are proactive measures, communication of COVID-19 preventive measures and a criticism of certain lapses. Language and visuals were used by the Japanese government to take proactive measures. Visuals and audio-visuals were used by the Japanese government and media to disseminate COVID-19 preventive measures while language and visuals were used by the general populace to criticise certain lapses. It is believed that findings from this study will generate outstanding responses towards emergencies such as disease outbreaks in future.

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