Critical Pragmatic Analysis on the Title of Online Rumors on COVID-19

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Abstract: *The rapid development of the network brings convenience to information exchange as well as adds fuel to rumor mongering. During the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020, a large number of online rumors associated with the epidemic also emerged, which penetrated throughout the country at a very rapid rate through microblogs, online forums, social networking sites and other online platforms, causing a significant negative impact. In order to help foster a good online environment, this paper studies the titles of online rumors generated during the epidemic, discusses the characteristics of the words, appellations used in the titles under the guidance of Critical Pragmatics, and explores the reasons why online rumors affect the ideology of netizens. Finally, according to the key words, three types of rumor titles are summarized. They are respectively information type, incentive type and argument type. It is hoped that this study can help people better identify online rumors and build a harmonious network society.*

Keywords: COVID-19, Online rumors, Critical pragmatics.

1. Introduction

In the era of the Internet boom, the network has become a new way of information exchange and dissemination, which leads to an increase of online channels for collecting and releasing all kinds of information. In this context, each person can be a potential audience and communicator, that is, any information that appears on the web may affect anyone who has access to the network. Among them, online rumors, which are prevalent whenever major emergencies occur, are very influential. Online rumors refer to words that spreads through the network media without factual basis, are usually offensive and purposeful. They are mainly coming fast and in a sudden with the occurrence of events such as emergencies, public health, food and drug safety, political figures, subversion of tradition, deviant and others. It is easy for them to cause adverse effects on the normal social order.

The epidemic of COVID-19 that broke out in early 2020 has a great impact all over the world, and related online rumors are also endless. There are all kinds of rumors with enlarged and bold titles circulating on various online platforms. Once the news of various anti-epidemic products, expert advice, and road closures appears, they can quickly spread to various places within a few minutes and influence people to take actual actions, which has a great negative impact on individuals and the stability of society. Based on this, it is of great practical significance to study online rumors to reveal how online rumors affect the ideology of netizens. It is hoped that it can further help people understand online rumors, stay vigilant in front of any online news, and create a harmonious and healthy network environment.

2. Research Background

According to China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), many Chinese scholars in journalism and communication have explored the characteristics, formation and dissemination of online rumors, and found that online rumors formed, mingled with facts and spread reticulately

rather than vertically or horizontally[1-3]. From the perspective of law and politics, some scholars have studied the governance of online rumors, advising to take them separately as private speech and public speech[4,5]. Besides, there are also some scholars in sociology studying the social impact and control strategies of online rumors according to the division between government regulation and market mechanism in the network rumor governance system[6,7]. With these researches, scholars have put forward many governance measures, and some of them have been adopted and put into practice.

However, the spread of online rumors has not faded away. One of the reason is that we have not explored the language features of online rumors themselves, and failed to reveal the language features of network rumors, so as to give ordinary netizens "wisdom eyes"[8]. Rumors stop at the wise. How to make ordinary netizens become prudent when facing with online rumors requires a clear understanding of the linguistic features of them. Fu Cun analyzed the linguistic features of online rumors from four aspects: numbers, vocabulary, sentence patterns and text features, and found that round numbers, words that indicate that the news comes from other channels, and short sentence patterns, are commonly used in online rumors[8]. While Fu didn't show us any examples or data. To provide the study more evidence, Nie Zhuo studied the title of 100 online rumors of health in terms of the punctuation, part of speech, sentence patterns and sentence categories under the help of statistical techniques[9]. Although Nie's study has provided great help in identifying online rumors, there is still a need of exploring the inner features in the language use of online rumors in order to understand why online rumors have such a great impact on people. And it is necessary to have an in-depth study of the relationship and influence between language and social environment.

Jacob Mey once pointed out that the study of language use should also take into account the improvement of human environment[11]. Therefore, researchers should also look

critically at language use and expression forms in society, and focus on the discussion of discrimination and injustice in language[12,13]. Thus, Critical Pragmatics is formally proposed in Mey's book *Pragmatics: An Introduction*[14]. It emphasizes attention to language users in social contexts and the conditions of language use they face in order to reveal ideology and power relations that are not directly reflected in discourse, and covers all critical studies on the relationship between language and social issues[15]. Ideology is a cognitive concept related to the generation and interpretation of language, world outlook and daily thinking[16]. The language or discourse in use is the most significant manifestation of ideology, which can reflect, construct and maintain ideology. In the field of social cognition, ideology is closely linked with discourse, and how to express ideology through discourse is the main research issue in this field[17]. Therefore, this study analyzes the title of online rumors on COVID-19 under the guidance of critical pragmatics, discussing their features of words, appellations and contents as, and making out the communicative intention behind them. It is hoped to help people identify online rumors, and avoid becoming a victim of online rumors.

3. Research Design

3.1 Questions

- (1) What features can be seen from the language used in the title of online rumors on COVID-19?
- (2) What communicative intentions of language users are reflected in the linguistic features presented?

3.2 Method

The author explores online rumors through examples and data, and collects epidemic rumors published on the main social software in China—Weibo as the research corpus, screening, processing, and organizing the text files of the rumors title. Screening refers to removing the text of the rumor content and only retaining the rumor title given by Weibo platform. Processing refers to translating the collected image-type rumors into text. Sorting refers to listing the final rumor titles in plain text, and the semantic analysis system is used to perform word segmentation statistics on the text, and the results are listed in an Excel table.

In this article, inductive method is used to classify the content and lexical features of collected rumor titles, statistical method is applied to count the word frequency and part of speech of the word segmentation corpus and percentage descriptive statistics are used to calculate the frequency of main words. Combining critical pragmatics, a field that examines the ideology and value orientation behind language use in a social context, as an analytical perspective, the author discusses the main characteristics of vocabulary, appellation and content that appear in rumors, and explores how online rumors affect the ideology of online people.

3.3 Material Collection

The “National Rumor Refusal Platform” launched by Sina

Weibo is the country's first network-wide rumor-reporting and rumor-defying platform. Its main force includes 189 official microblogs of online police inspectors across the country and the safety-themed series of microblogs from local public security bureaus in the country. It has opened a convenient channel on Weibo to accept Internet users' reporting and handling of online rumors, providing support for more functional departments to carry out online rumors, and also providing services for the majority of Internet users to obtain information on rumors. Therefore, the researcher used the rumor titles published on the Sina Weibo's National Rumor Refusal Platform as the research corpus. Considering the prevalence and decline period of online rumors as the epidemic broke out to the stability control process, the researchers collected rumors from the beginning of February to the end of May in 2020, and the text corpus includes a total of 443 titles was sorted out, totaling 7822 Chinese characters.

3.4 Text Sorting

The segment system of Chinese ICTCLAS is used to divide the sorted text, and new words such as “COVID-19”, “Huoshenshan Hospital”, and “Bai Yansong” are manually input during the processing. In addition, the results of the word segmentation need to be proofread in conjunction with the whole text. For example, the word “an pai” is used as a verb in “liu zhou zheng fu **an pai** fei ji sa xiao du yao shui” (Liuzhou government **arranges** aircraft to spray disinfectant), while as a noun in “guan yu xin xing guan zhuang bing du de fei yan yi qing gan ran qi jian gong jiao xian lu ying yun **an pai** tiao zheng de tong gao” (Announcement on the adjustment of bus line operation **arrangements** during the period of COVID-19). After proofreading, the author paste the results into an Excel table for pivotal analysis, count word frequency and part-of-speech frequency, and further inductively analyze the words in the title of rumors. In all, 443 rumor titles in the study have a total of 4077 words after word segmentation, which are mainly nouns and verbs and adverbs.

4. Result

4.1 Vocabulary Selection

Language indicates the behavior, and language users transmit meaning through behavioral intention[13]. Language is also the result of choice. The words chosen by language users not only bear certain social functions and meanings[18], but also reflect the ideology and value orientation of the users. Internet rumors are extremely inflammatory. Rumor spreaders are good at using inflammatory words and other lexical means to construct, convey and highlight specific values. The author further analyzes the values and intentions of rumor users based on their choice of verbs, nouns and adverbs.

Ex.:

*Guang zhou yi hu ren yuan **gan ran** xin xing guan zhuang bing du fei yan* (Health care workers in Guangzhou **infected** COVID-19)

*Bei jing xie he yi yuan yi **que zhen** wu han fei yan huan zhe pao le* (A patient **confirmed** Wuhan pneumonia escaped from

Peking Union Medical College Hospital)

A new case of pneumonia has been confirmed in Daejeon, South Pyeongsang Province

He ban lan gen he xun cu ke yi yu fang wu han fei yan (Drinking isatidis root and smoking vinegar **can prevent** Wuhan pneumonia)

Wu han hui lai de que zhen gao Zhong sheng chao dian ti an niu tu kou shui (A **diagnosed** high school student from Wuhan spit on an elevator button)

Suspected cases of Wuhan pneumonia have been reported in Shenzhen and Shanghai

Prevention of Wuhan pneumonia prescription in Guangdong Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine

The use of verbs in information statements in online rumors is similar to news style: imitating news media reports to confuse the public's vision, adopting highly affirmative judgments to strengthen its own objectivity and credibility, and controlling the discourse power. According to the statistics, verbs like "*gan ran*" (infect), "*que zhen*" (diagnose), "*fa xian*" (discover), "*ke yi*" (can) and "*yu fang*" (prevent) are the most frequently used. These verbs are ostensibly descriptions of objective facts, and the audience is the object of the information service. In fact, the audience passively accepts the assertions made by the rumor users on the unverified or fabricated events and is affected by the rumor users' control over the rumor information.

In terms of the selection of nouns, it is in line with the theme of major events, and purposely uses people's attention to connect all kinds of minor or even irrelevant events, so as to attract people's attention and guide people's thinking to specific values. For example, the words "*wu han fei yan*" (Wuhan pneumonia) and "*Wu han hui lai de que zhen gao Zhong sheng*" (high school students returning from Wuhan) deliberately define "*fei yan*" (pneumonia) as "*wu han fei yan*" (Wuhan pneumonia), and associate the "*gao Zhong sheng*" with "Wuhan", subtly making the audience accept this value and equate "Wuhan" with "pneumonia" and "virus".

In use adverbs, online rumors use a large number of partial negative emotional words, such as "*bu*" in "*shang hai mu qian chu hu pai bu rang jin shang hai le*" (People are currently **not allowed to** enter Shanghai except for those with Shanghai cards), "*yi*" in "*14.7% de mao yi gan ran xin guan fei yan*" (14.7% of cats **have infected** COVID-19), and "*jiang*" in "*wu han jiang duan wang*" (wuhan **will be broken network**). Emphasize the events that have happened and will happen, deliberately guide the audience to be nervous, anxious, afraid and other negative emotions, and lead the audience to focus on the seriousness of the event rather than the judgment of the authenticity of the event.

4.2 Appellation

Appellation, in this case, refers to the appellation of people with different identities in various fields in online rumors, which reflects the values of language users and the social communicative identity and status shaped by them.

Ex.:

"Zhong nan shan yuan shi jian yi yan shui shu kou fang bing du" (Academician Zhong Nanshan suggested gargling with salt water to prevent the virus)

"Zhong lao jian yi quan guo ren min zai jia ge li liang zhou" (Old Zhong advised the whole country to stay at home for two weeks)

"shang hai rui jin yi yuan tao pao de wu han huan zhe wei wu han shi wei jian wei ling dao gan bu liu qing xiang" (The wuhan patient who escaped from Shanghai Ruijin Hospital was **Liu Qingxiang, a senior official of the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission**)

"chang sha ren bu zhun jin zhu zhou" (Changsha people are not allowed to enter Zhuzhou)

"da pi liu xue sheng qu dao dong nan ya ru jing" (A large number of **international students** enter China via Southeast Asia)

The titles of "*Zhong nan shan yuan shi*" (Academician Zhong Nanshan), "*Zhong lao*" (Old Zhong), and "*wu han shi wei jian wei ling dao gan bu liu qing xiang*" (Liu Qingxiang, a senior official of the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission) demonstrate the social and political status and create a specific value in their respective contexts. "Zhong Nanshan" was a well-known leader in the fight against the epidemic during the epidemic. Appellations such as "academician" and "old" can reflect that he is a representative figure with deep qualifications, practical work, and worthy of everyone's trust and respect, thus gaining recognition from the audience. And rumor users borrowed the identities of these representatives to construct a messenger identity for themselves, avoiding direct responsibility. Regarding the title of "Liu Qingxiang", the specific organization and position she belongs to are given, and the inequality existing in various classes is used to arouse dissatisfaction among the audience and intensify social contradictions.

There are various forms of appellation in online rumors. However, there are also many appellations whose reference are vague. In these appellations, rumor users only construct identity symbols with unclear boundaries, which implicitly expand the audience's judgment on the appellation group. Terms such as "*liu xue sheng*" (international students) and "*chang sha ren*" (Changsha people) may also be called international students entering a safe place and people passing through Changsha. However, due to its unclear reference, it has led to various suspicions in social communication, which is not conducive to social security management.

4.3 Content

The researchers conducted a brief content analysis of 443 rumor titles collected on Sina Weibo, and investigated users' theme positioning of online rumors related to epidemic. Content analysis adopts quantitative analysis research method. Due to the short title of Internet rumors, the researcher mainly conducts frequency analysis of keywords to explore the theme. The analysis shows that there are three main types: information type, incentive type, and argument type.

Information type, here refers to online rumors that provide false information about the epidemic period, which can be seen from the high-frequency verbs “que zhen” (diagnosed) and “fa xian” (discovered), the ending modal particle “le”; the high-frequency location nouns “Wuhan”, “Hubei”, etc., as well as high-frequency nouns such as “xin guan fei yan” (COVID-19), “tong zhi” (notification) and other key words, mainly including confirmed cases in a certain place, issuance notices, prevention and control events, etc., are the main types of rumors.

Incentive type, refers to online rumors that provide epidemic prevention measures and guide people to take action. It can be judged from the high-frequency verbs “yu fang” (prevent), “jian yi” (suggest), “ke yi” (can) and other keywords, mainly relating to food, medicine, materials, etc., and showing the effect of preventing and controlling viruses. Behind these, there may be related material merchants playing a promoting role in order to seek benefits. Among the rumors studied, there are 93 rumors of this type.

Argument type, here refers to online rumors that attract people’s attention to a certain event or a certain word. It can be seen from the subjective verbs “bie xin” (Don’t believe), “zhu yi” (Pay Attention), and the adjectives “zhong yao” (important), “yan zhong” (serious), “fen nu” (angry), etc. It mainly includes social events and international inequality. There are relatively few rumors of this type, with a total of 64.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of critical pragmatics, this study selects the title of online rumors related to COVID-19 released by the “National Rumor Refusal Platform” of Sina Weibo from the beginning of February to the end of May 2020 as research material, and analyzes the features of various elements in the titles, including their vocabulary selection, appellation and content theme positioning. It is found that rumor users tend to choose verbs with high degree of affirmation to enhance discourse control. In terms of the choice of nouns, from the perspective of the audience, the topic concerned by the audience is connected with a variety of relevant and irrelevant events to form a new conceptual connection (metaphor), leading the audience to specific values. In the selection of adverbs, a large number of negative emotional words are used to exaggerate the seriousness of the event and arouse the audience’s anxiety, surprise and other emotions. In the selection of appellation, different social identities are constructed according to the nature of the event and the purpose of communication to guide the audience to make corresponding responses. In addition, according to the contents, the researchers concluded that the rumor titles can be divided into three types: information type, incentive type and argument type.

From the linguistic features of online rumor titles, mainly from the features of words, this study reveals how online rumor affects the ideology and thoughts of netizens, so as to enhance the ability to discriminate network information and make better strategies to deal with online rumors, providing reference for relevant research.

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