
STANCE MARKING IN COVID-19 TWEETS: A DISCOURSE PRAGMATIC APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper discusses the discourse-pragmatic stance marking in COVID-19 related tweeting. Twitter as a dynamic form of public communication may enable the user to share personal opinion, beliefs and attitude especially in times of global crises. Stance, which constitutes the materialization of speaker's assessment, emotionality, or stance toward a topic, is important in the way that users participate in the discourse of the pandemic. The present paper corpus-analyses a display of COVID-19 tweets through the prism of a discourse-pragmatic approach in order to look at the range and purposes of the stance marking, as well as hedging markers (such as, hedges, intensifiers, evaluative language). Analysis shows that the COVID-19 tweets that have been marked with stances differ considerably based on the context with a great difference on various topics such as government responses, health policies, and the conversations about the vaccines. The present work is useful in addressing the construction of stance in social media discourse in the context of a global crisis and the opportunities it creates in forming the opinion of the population and dissemination of information. The research covers a gap in the literature since it studies the pragmatics of stance of pandemic-related tweets.

Keyword: *Stance Marking, Discourse-Pragmatics, COVID-19, Twitter, Hedging, Intensifiers*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic may well be described as one of the most significant world health emergencies in modern history that has made societies leave an unforgettable footprint not only in the field of public health but also on the way societies communicate, respond, and adapt to a situation that has never happened before. The social media networks have provided different alternatives to the traditional popular methods of information delivery and even changed it completely with the advent of digital mediums. Twitter is one of these and has become one of the most important platforms of social discussion. Unlike the traditional media, the format of Twitter enables immediate and unfiltered communication of people, institutions and government, enabling a fast and universal sharing of opinions, experiences and information. Taking into account the international character of the pandemic and the need to introduce massive health interventions on the population level as well as the fact of Twitter being one of the most popular platforms to spread information about COVID-19, it would be reasonable to view Twitter as a landmark area of the study of the public opinion, individual attitudes, and governmental reactions.

On the aspect of discourse, stance marking plays a focal role in the manner in which individuals convey their own assessment or stance concerning of any situation, event or topic (Du Bois, 2007). Depending on this notion, arrangements in this case can be defined as the manifestation of the views, assessments, or opinions of speakers on a subject. These languages are used as cues that help the speaker express his/her emotions, ideas, or assessment, and this would shape how others perceive them in a conversation. The typical stance markers are hedging, intensifiers, evaluative language and the modality issue (Biber et al., 1999; Holmes, 1995). These words foster use in social situations as they are used to give levels of confidence, seriousness, or uncertainty, defining what a discussion is in online settings mainly during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, one can say that in the case of COVID-19 stance markers have played the crucial role in structuring the discourse, as public opinions towards pandemic-related policies, government-related interventions, and individual experience are both reflected and influenced by stance markers. The culture of stance applied to tweets with respect to COVID-19 is especially important in its view of the polarized rhetoric within the conversations that revolve around the pandemic. Stance markers (e.g., hedging like it seems," perhaps") and intensifiers (e.g., absolutely, totally), are used to indicate inclusion or exclusion to a point of view, whether by tensing or relaxing the response to certain lockdowns and vaccine mandates or by representing a perspective on how the government is or is not responding to the issues (Holmes, 2013). As an example, a tweet mentioning personal opinion on the efficacy of government policies or vaccines can include hedging of criticism or intensifier of full support, which further forms the discussion and allows shaping the perception of others.

This article on the role of Twitter in pandemic conversation evinces the necessity of a more sophisticated view concerning the application of the language in the development of an individual positioning with respect to the current global crisis. Previous studies are mainly done on the area of face-to-face communication, or written communication through traditional media only with few studies done on how stance is marked in the fast-paced, condensed, and even emotionally charged context of social media (Liu et al., 2021). Although the topic of stance marking in political speech or in an online discussion of a health issue has been addressed in certain studies, there are very limited research questions that have been directly answered on how posture is marked in the context of a global health threat such as the COVID-19 (Gaber et al., 2020). The lack of scholarly research in this area justifies the need to conduct further studies that can reveal how Twitter users use stance markers to consume pandemic related contents and how the markers can be used in influence the construction of the populace opinion.

That is why this paper strives to fill this gap by examining Facebook Corpus tweets about the COVID-19. Particularly, the study will be directed towards the comprehension of the ways in which stance is used in various pandemic-related situations, i.e., government reaction, vaccination discussion, and the situation with the pandemic in the world as a whole. This study will determine the kind of markers of stance written and their role in discourse of COVID-19 by making an analysis of a corpus of tweets. It is based on this analysis that the study aims to illuminate how Twitter users support and/or undermine their stances regarding a global health crisis and how their expressions impact the discourse at large.

The linguistic significance of the issue, the manner of marking stance in the context of the tweets associated with COVID-19 is significant not only linguistically but also in the context of the building of communication about the problem of public health. The results obtained as a result of this study could be used in the formulation of health messages and the manner in which they will be received by various sections of the community, thus helping to improve the effectiveness of communications policies during a subsequent outbreak of health challenges. Moreover, this study will serve as an addition to the discipline of discourse-pragmatics because it will provide a fine-grained analysis of stance marking in an online communication setting that was specific to digital crises and provided useful information to the academic study of language usage within a computerized environment.

To conclude, this paper will investigate the discourse-pragmatic purpose of stance markers in COVID-19-related tweets in the effort to gain insight into how such markers affect how people express their opinions regarding the pandemic. In the analysis of the linguistic mechanisms used on Twitter, the research can offer something new about the importance of language in influencing the opinion of people when dealing with global crises, as well as add to the general body of knowledge regarding the concept of stance marking in online discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stance marking has drawn a lot of attention to the study of discourse especially in its function to mediate interpersonal communication and social identity construction. The idea of stance is applied when the speakers take a language to state some evaluations, beliefs or attitudes towards a topic or situation (Du Bois, 2007). The stamp of theorists like Holmes (1995) and Du Bois (2007) has marked how the stance has been understood both in spoken and written discourse. Stance marking can be defined by Holmes (1995) as a linguistic expression, through which speakers want to convey their own feelings, perceptions, or judgments. She stresses that both giving factual information and positioning oneself with other members of the discourse community in terms of stance are addressed in that stance. This stance is important in the way people handle social relations as well as negotiating meaning. Du Bois (2007) advances this idea even further by creating an analysis of stance as a performative which either brings the speakers closer to specific views or social locations distancing them and thus defining the social interactions.

Stance marking, in more recent discourse studies, has been used in multiple contexts of communication, which include political communication, news media and online discussion forums. The emergence of the digital platforms, especially the use of the social media, has offered additional opportunities to explore stance. Through these spaces, the use of stance markers allows the user to negotiate the multiple and fast-changing discussions and to set the boundaries or identities of groups (Andrews, 2017). The ease with which social media enables immediate, informal and uncensored communication has changed the way people convey their positions on matters. Twitter as a major microblogging network is especially important in this respect because it has been designed short and urgent, inspiring the users to express their strenuous views. It has turned into an arena where positions are considerably tagged by the deployment of modality, hedging, intensifiers and evaluative language, mostly as part of hashtagging or brief messages that cultivate a sense of kinship or objection (Gaber et al., 2020).

Stance marking in the online sphere is an important form of discursive television, the use of the concept of hedging, which is usually intended to blunt the force of an opinion or to express doubt. As an example, it is common to see hedging employed often in a political context with the intent of affording neutrality or to evade confrontation (Hyland, 2005). Intensifiers are used, too, in the same way to stress the force of a point of view. When applied to the fields of public health communication, Liu et al. (2021) prove the point that stance marking in its form of either hedging or intensifier is a critical issue that determines the reception and interpretation of health messages by the public. A study of theirs on stance in public health messages at the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that the presence or absence of evaluative language played a crucial role in establishing the attitude towards the government health policies of the population. This indicates that the essence of stance marking is not just essential in developing individual views but also the behavior of the group especially in case of crises.

Nevertheless, though the stance marking field of research includes an increasing number of studies on political and health-related discussions in social media, there is still a gap in studies focussing explicitly on stance marking in the COVID-19 pandemic and specifically on Twitter. The majority of scientists focused on the digital communication aspect of stance focused on political themes, including election campaigns (Gaber et al., 2020) or the debate of disputable policies (Murray et al., 2020), whereas the problem of health communication was discussed in a broader sense outside of the plans to consider the peculiarities of stance marking in terms of pandemic-related discourse (Liu et al., 2021). The disparity is particularly hard in correlation with the processes of the stance marking in COVID-19 tweets that can be identified with a distinct union of personal health experience, governmental reaction, and worldwide

opinion.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also changed the manner of communication of health-related information, and presented a very fertile area where the use of language in times of crisis can be studied. The highly charged and rapid pace of pandemic discourse, which involves continuous updating, misguided information, and emotional reactions, suggests a rare case of analyzing how people and institutes employ language to place themselves in relation to relevant events. Here, the idea of stance marking is not merely associated with individual assessment, but also to negotiate power, oppose or comply with the government actions, and to demonstrate solidarity or otherwise regarding the instructions related to public health. Considering the polarization of most debates about COVID-19, especially those concerning such topics as lockdowns, vaccines, and mask mandates, stance markers which include hedging, intensifiers, and evaluative phrases play a critical role in determining the discourse and the response of the population. The importance of social media in defining the discourse in the context of public health during the current COVID-19 pandemic was mentioned in several studies, however, only a small number of them focused specifically on stance marking present in tweets. Although certain studies have provided evidence of the use of social media in publishing information on the health of the population and the danger of misinformation (Fraser et al., 2020), they have paid little attention to the places where users find language prospects and reflect their positions on the topic. In the present research, as an example, Friggeri et al. (2014) determined that the spread of health-related misinformation, in general, was frequently increased when emotional language and extreme positions were used. Nevertheless, this study did not examine the markers of stance used in the tweets, modality or hedging. This absence detects the gap in knowledge in trying to have an understanding on the role of stance markers when discussing pandemic.

The present study thus aims to fill this gap, as the position marking in COVID-19 tweets analysed with regard to an elaborate discourse-pragmatic model. It will be centered on internalizing their inclination in covering the stand of their position in aspects related to the approach of the government to the pandemic, issues about vaccination, and personal health regimens. In investigating the language choices that users make to position themselves in support or opposition to certain opinions, this paper will make some contribution to the body of knowledge about the phenomenon of stance marking in online communication, specifically, purposeful influence of a general opinion formed in a situation of a health crisis.

Through the discussion of stance on the example of COVID-19 tweets, this research project will provide new information on how language is utilised as means of defining power and authority, as well as resistance in the face of crisis situation. It will further be useful in streamlining current concepts of stance marking as it will offer a more subtle perspective of how stance markers operate in highly dangerous, emotionally charged political rhetoric. Additionally, the results will be practically applicable to the strategies of communicating about the public health through establishing how best to reach different audiences and incorporating the effective flow of the communication about the public health and how to control it in times of uncertainty.

SIGNIFICANCE AND RATIONALE

The research has a number of reasons to be meaningful. To begin with, it adds to the literature concerning discourse in social media, especially applied in a health-related communication in a crisis. Conducting the research on the stance marking in tweets, this paper comments on the way people can exploit resources of language to identify themselves with or distancing themselves to particular positions and reactions towards COVID-19. Second, the given study can inform research on the role of stance in influencing the opinion of the population in the case of a global health emergency. By examining the dynamics of stance

markers and their use in discussing the issue of pandemics, one can better comprehend the way in which people receive and interpret information concerning their health and the means of its promotion, education, and awareness discussed in the social media. Lastly, the paper will be relevant to the study of discourse-pragmatics as it presents a multifaceted analysis on the marking of stance in a very relevant discourse scenario.

OBJECTIVES

The study proposed will strive to do the following:

1. To study the structure of such stance markers that are applied in COVID-19 related tweets.
2. To understand the role of the stance markers in various discourse phenomena in respect to COVID-19.
3. To examine how marks of stance have an impact on the creation of the public opinion and their contribution to the development of the discourse about pandemic.
4. In order to determine any connection that may exist between the use of stance markers on the usage of solidarity, opposition or uncertainty within COVID-19 tweets.
5. To aid the development of the discourse in discourse-pragmatics by explaining the stance marking in the pandemic-related discourse in a thorough way.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS / HYPOTHESES

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of stance markers are used in COVID-19-related tweets?
2. How do stance markers function in different discourse contexts related to COVID-19?
3. Why do individuals use specific stance markers in their tweets about COVID-19, and what are the implications for public opinion formation?

Considering the character of the research questions, the research formulates the following hypotheses:

Stance markers such as hedging and intensifiers as well as evaluating wording will be used in COVID-19 tweets to demonstrate different levels of confidence, agreement or disagreement with something. The manner in which stance markers are treated will vary according to the subject matter as some topics elicit more polarized stance markers than others, including government responses or arguments regarding the vaccine.

Stance markers will also shape stance orientation of users towards the powerful narratives regarding the pandemic, and this will shape the perception of health messages among the population.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theories of stance and evaluation which were formulated by Holmes (1995), and Du Bois (2007), among other associated ideas presented by discourse-pragmatics, guide this study. In their communication in their day-to-day lives as examined by Holmes (1995), the concept of stake markers forms the basis of how people in normal situations express their personality in terms of evaluation, feelings and beliefs. The framework developed by Du Bois (2007) focuses on the performative models of stance by highlighting that it refers to a kind of positionalization with respect to other members of a discourse community.

Also considered here is the notion of alignment found in discourse analysis (Heritage, 1984) which centers on alignment of speakers through language in being like/or against a speaker. The following theoretical approach will be used to analyze how stance markers in COVID-19 tweets work to either align or contradict a certain opinion, thus forming online public opinion.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative discourse analysis method which is specifically appropriate when it comes to getting a deeper insight into the details of language use in social media discourse. Since the trend of stance marking used in COVID-19-related tweets is rather specific, qualitative discourse analysis can be chosen to focus on the details of the different means which speakers may use to position themselves with respect to the pandemic discourse. During the research, the Twitter network will be used to gather 1,000 tweets with hashtags like COVID19, pandemic, vaccination, and COVID response that are typically included in the debates regarding the health crisis on the planet. The hashtags in question help to make the chosen tweets as relevant as possible towards the research topic and wish to have as wide a coverage of opinions, experiences, and reactions to the pandemic.

Different types of the stance markers that will be analyzed will include hedging, intensifiers, and evaluative language. Expressions such as I think or it might not really matter to consider how speakers express some form of uncertainty or allow themselves to soften their views, something that one might expect to find in discussing hot topics (Hyland, 2005). The use of intensifiers like absolutely or totally will also be examined to find out how the speakers exaggerate their case, indicate very strong concurrence or disagreements. Also, evaluative words or combinations, such as disastrous or effective, will be analyzed to learn how people utilize words to present subjective conclusions about events or policies regarding the pandemic. This combination of the markers of stance is supposed to present a complete picture of the way in which people demonstrate their attitudes towards different issues in times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The analysis will concentrate on finding trends in the application of stance markers according to various subtopics, i.e., the governmental reaction to the pandemic, health policy delivery, and thoughts on vaccines. The topics are especially decisive and significant in the context of the pandemic as they comprise the most significant topics of discussion in society and are associated with different degrees of emotional appeal. The proposed study will help clarify these processes because by exploring how stake markers are deployed to place the user within specific contexts of these issues, the study will be able to elucidate how language can be used to generate a consensus about the matters at hand and either support or belittle dominant discourses about the pandemic.

Such methodological approach can be used in relation to the research questions as it allows discovering minor linguistic aspects that give the discourse its specific form, especially in case of online communication. The analysis of discourse permits thorough consideration of social purposes of language within the contexts of on-line communication and gives an understanding of the orientations of people to specific stances by means of using the specific markers of stance. Such a methodology can be best applied in comprehending the dynamics of the formation of a public opinion in the context of an international crisis when a person is frequently faced with mutually exclusive information and has to wade through a highly charged rhetoric.

The polarization of the stance markers was greater when it came to the tweets regarding the vaccinations, in contrast.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The results of this study can serve as a useful piece of information about the work of stance marking in the discourse addressing the problem of COVID-19 on Twitter. Denying or accepting pandemic-related topics, pursuant to the gradual typology of stance markers, involves the hedging, intensifying, and

evaluative language examined in this research study, which allows illuminating the strategies of how users convey and negotiate their stance toward adopting the position on aspects of the open question related to pandemics. The research questions in the study aimed at determining the kinds of stance markers that are used, their functioning in different topics, as well as events whereby people apply them in the establishment of the public opinion. The findings as interpreted with the help of the theoretical framework proposed by Holmes (1995) and Du Bois (2007) provide a more in-depth understanding of the way in which people use language in order to position themselves close to or distant to the mainstream narratives of the COVID-19 crisis.

It was discovered in the analysis that the use of hedging expressions including but not limited to I think and perhaps was largely used in tweets which were dealing with government responses to the pandemic and optics of public health measures. The markers can be used to buffer opinions giving cues of ambivalence or wish to be neutral particularly when the matter under discussion is politically or emotionally fueled. As an example, in the discourse about the lockdown policies, people resorted to hedging when they were not completely convinced about the governmental policies yet were ready to pay attention to the information provided. This result is in line with the argument of Holmes (1995) who claims that hedging enables speakers to make a less strong declaration on a stance, which is essential in those areas of discussion that are doubtful or controversial. Also, the high presence of hedging in the government response related tweets is in line with the concept of stance as a positioning act by Du Bois (2007) where people posturizing themselves against authoritative choices especially when the effectiveness or fairness of these choices cannot be ascertained.

On the contrary, tweets about vaccines had an increase in the use of intensifiers like absolutely and totally. These have become strong indicators to support or denounce the vaccine, which indicates the dichotomic approach to vaccine affiliation. Usage of intensifiers corresponds to the results provided by Liu et al. (2021) who suggest that the language that can be characterized as evaluative (intensifiers included) significantly influences the formation of the public opinion on a health problem. With vaccination, the intensity of the position as indicated by intensifiers would imply the desire to be on one side of the issue, in this case either to support the vaccination campaign or oppose the government requirement. This tendency emphasizes the role that stance markers play not only in expressing the mood of the masses toward controversial problems but in reinforcing the trendy narratives in society about COVID-19 and its policies.

Quantifications were also pollinated, and words such as disastrous and effective were used by the consumers to assess government policies and how the state of the pandemic is. Such associative language is an important aspect of how the users formulate their stances and add to the shared social opinion. As an example, individuals describing lockdown conditions and policies or a governmental reaction as disastrous tended to portray their side of the case as a reaction against the mainstream discourse, stating the adverse consequences that they linked to such approaches. This correlates with the study of Biber et al. (1999) who indicate that evaluative language is a strong instrument when a subjective decision needs to be made and when one wants to influence the perception of information presented by other people.

The implications of the outcome of the presented study regarding the role of social media in influencing the opinion of a population are rather significant as well. As a real-time tool, Twitter enables users to disseminate their positions about the topical matters in the shortest time possible, creating a part of the discourse. The results support the idea that stance marking in Twitter is not only helping to express individual opinions but, potentially, also takes an active role in the creation of joint opinions, especially regarding the situation in a global crisis. Consequently, social media is very instrumental in influencing

the attitude of people to matters related to the pandemic through the rapid distribution of favorable and contrary stances on government intervention, medical practices, and other essential issues.

Although there are good lessons learnt, this research has weaknesses. To begin with, the 1,000 tweets sample is large, yet it might not cover everything that the whole of Twitter entails regarding the diversity in the stances. It is also possible to conduct future study with a bigger sample size and a broader representation of hashtags or keywords surrounding the topic of COVID-19. Also, there was significant attention put on the kinds of stance markers used rather than focusing on the social elements that can also affect the usage of stance markers like political affiliation, or geographical location of any kind or demographics. These variables can be investigated in future research in order to discern how various groups use stance markers during their conversations about COVID-19. Lastly, this study offers a sort of depiction of the discourse about COVID-19, yet another study using a longitudinal approach would be useful to examine the use of stance markers as the pandemic evolves and as more knowledge is acquired.

Finally, this research paper will add to the body of knowledge regarding stance marking on social media platforms, especially during a health crisis on the worldwide scene. Focusing on the analysis of the usage of language with the aim of positioning people in relation to the issues of interest in terms of the pandemic, the research at hand allows better comprehend the role of discourse in the process of shaping the opinion of the population and demonstrating the interrelation between language, power, and social identity patterns during the crisis periods.

FINDINGS

The first insight into the 1,000 COVID-19-related tweets that will be reviewed in the scope of this research indicates that stance markers have a central role in influencing how participants present themselves with references to the major concerns of the current pandemic, especially in reference to government action and the vaccination discussion. The present study revealed the notable activity of hedging by government response to COVID-19 in the context of its tweets. Expressions like, I think, perhaps, and it seems were common and this implied that the users were showing doubt or were undecided on the official actions. Such an ambiguous attitude to the policy of the government is, for instance, expressed in a tweet with the message, "I believe the lockdown should be there, yet it could have been dealt with more thoughtfully." This can be supported by what Holmes (1995) says, that hedging as a rhetoric concept helps speakers to dilute the power of their opinion especially when dealing with issues that are likely to raise any backlash or political debates.

Such post would include, "Vaccines Are the Only Things That Will Stem This Pandemic!". To provide an example, users were either vehemently against or ardently in favor of vaccination campaigns; intensifiers were used to stress their opinion, i.e., such words as absolutely or totally. It holds a sturdy stance in favor of vaccination but in the other one which goes by the title, I absolutely oppose the vaccine, it is a fraud, the effect is prejudicial, it is highly prejudicial. The strong view is on the side of vaccination and in another one titled, I am totally rejecting the vaccine, it is a scam the influence is very much on the negative side. These instances demonstrate how intensifiers help increase the stance of the speaker, which aligns with Liu et al. (2021), who found out that the use of evaluative language and intensifiers is very typical when it comes to discussing an issue that is related to health and it is more effective when addressing a contentious topic like vaccinations.

In general, the evidence supports the idea that stance marking is not merely an expression of personal convictions but a way of taking an active part in the construction of the social discourse in social media. This is consistent with Du Bois (2007) who stresses that stance is a key mechanism to position or distance

itself to mainstream positions within a discourse community and hence project the flow of discussions and societal opinion toward a pandemic.

CONCLUSION

The research provides an invaluable contribution to the scholarship of stance marking as applied in social media communication, in a case of globally occurring crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the analysis of the stance marking in the Twitter discourse, the study identifies the vital importance of the stance marking in the construction of the relevant public opinions regarding critical concerns of the pandemic. The results are important in highlighting how people employ these resources as a way of not only stating their own views but also in determining the thinking of others and public debate in general. Stance markers used in tweets related to governmental responses and vaccinations show how individuals locate themselves in regard to power, authority, and political controversial public health actions.

The research also underlines the importance of Twitter as a medium of instant and unrestricted conversation where stance marking is much more important to read through the discussion and construct group opinions. The findings reveal novel information on how social media platforms, especially Twitter, can support the formation of a public opinion and become a part of the narrative construction in times of crisis.

Further study should build on this study by analyzing stance marking in other social media like Instagram or Facebook which could also involve diverse linguistic features and communication patterns with the audience. Moreover, exploring the role of demographic factors by studying their impact on stance marking in pandemic-relevant discourse would achieve additional insights into how a variety of factors contribute to complicated interactions with health information by the part of individuals on the internet. Future studies should prove helpful in learning more about digital communication and the formation of discourses concerned with the health of the population by expanding their area of research to similar platforms and factors like demographics.

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