The Language of COVID-19: A Theme-Rheme Analysis of the Health Awareness Campaigns

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the thematic patterns of health awareness campaigns made during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim is to scrutinize the types of themes used in such prosocial advertisements by analyzing the theme placement and the elements inside those themes. COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic in 2020 due to which health organizations proceeded to spread warnings and health awareness campaigns. In these circumstances, the language of these campaigns played a significant role in delivering the message to the people. In total, 75 posts were taken from official Instagram accounts of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) between March 21st, 2020 and June 21st, 2020. In this mixed-method study, a quantitative method has been used to obtain the ratio of unmarked and marked themes present in the data, which are further analysed qualitatively with Halliday's (1994) theme-rheme model. We found that the majority of the clauses use unmarked themes, while marked themes are not as frequent. Through the preference of simple Theme over multiple Theme, complex language structure (clause-complex) has been avoided. This shows the awareness of respective organizations regarding the critical role language plays in influencing the audience, especially during a global health crisis.

Keywords: Theme-rheme, SFL/SFG, public service messages, COVID-19

Introduction

Public awareness campaigns regarding the health of the public need to be constructed in an easily understandable way, and at the same time, it gets the right message across to the reader. The present study deals with the themes used in such campaigns, especially for the COVID-19 pandemic. The study uses Halliday's (1994) systemic functional grammar (SFG) theory (also referred to as SFL) with the focus is on the system of functions and the lexico-grammatical choices.

Coronavirus was declared as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2020. With the spread of the virus, multiple awareness campaigns were orchestrated on social media to inform the general public about the health crisis and how they could be safe.

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Rafi (2020) gives clues of an estimate of publishing millions of stories on Covid-19 worldwide. A paper examining the social media engagement of health organizations found that social media platforms can establish meaningful communication with the people in times of global health crises (Guidry, Jin, Orr, Messner, & Meganck, 2017). It was also more critical than ever that awareness campaigns avoid any further confusion, as according to one study in 2020, misinformation regarding the coronavirus had been pervasive on social media (Rafi, 2020).

The current research focuses on the text available on Instagram, which talked about the safety precautions against the virus. This study of language use, as made by responsible organizations attempts to bring forth the positive functions of prosocial advertisements.

Halliday's SFL focuses not only on the meaning of the text but also on the context in which it occurs. "SFL treats language and its grammar as a meaning-making resource" (Ammara, Anjum & Javed, 2019). Unlike traditional grammar, where the unit of analysis is a sentence with subject and object, in SFL, the unit of analysis is a clause. A clause is constituted of three dimensions of the structure, known as "clause as a message", "clause as exchange" and "clause as representation". Each of these dimensions construes a different meaning (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). It is the Theme that acts as the point of departure in the structure of the "clause as a message" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). A 'Theme' inside a clause is a universal feature and is indicated by its position and in the English language, it occurs at the beginning of the clause (McCarthy, 1991). A theme can be considered as the element used by a language user to ground what he or she is going to say. Every language producer makes certain textual choices that are revealed in the form of the Theme of the clause (Paltridge, 2006).

SFG provides a language model that emphasizes the social functions that the language plays (Eggins, 2004). The Theme of the clause can inform us of the message with which the clause is concerned. The part that is not the Theme of the clause is called the rheme, and it is the combination of these two constituents that constitute the message being conveyed. According to Halliday, the thematic structure of a clause carries the line of the meaning that gives the clause its character as a message, which is why it is considered important (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). A theme has a crucial role to play when it comes to the readability and appearance of a text. It is of utmost importance in our everyday communication (Jalilifar, 2010).

Depending on the context, the writer chooses by using a declarative, interrogative, or imperative clause, which also establishes the roles of the participants; whether the participant is giving information/services or demanding it (Forey, 2002). The purpose of an imperative clause is to demand goods and services from the reader, and therefore, such a clause would begin with an imperative/commanding verb that is meant to tell someone to do a certain task. In imperatives, the unmarked theme choice is the verb expressing action and the marked theme choice is the use of an adjunct or 'you' as addressee (Attar, 2015). It is significant to note in which way a speaker or writer chooses to perform a certain function. Writers may lose effectiveness in their arguments due to problems with thematic selections, thematic progression, or both (Jalilifar, 2010). In the case of public service messages, such as the ones being considered for the study, the writer is demanding the change in behaviour/routine from the reader and to follow protective measures against catching

or spreading the virus. In such messages, usually, the writer uses the imperative sentences by using a commanding or a requesting tone. A theme can either be a simple theme, in which there is only one element in the clause, or there could be 'multiple themes' (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). A simple theme always contains a topical element in it. However, multiple themed clauses consist of textual and interpersonal themes other than the topical themes. In the text, the presence of simple or multiple themes can create a different impact. Therefore, the present study presumes the organizations make use of simple language comprising simple theme clauses for making any public awareness campaign effective.

Significance of the study

The study aims to analyse the theme placement in public health awareness campaigns and to investigate the types of themes that have been used to achieve their purpose. These themes are supposed to grab readers' attention, and therefore, it would be insightful to see how these public service messages have been structured. With this focus, our study critically reviews the research on the social functions of the language studied underpinning systemic functional grammar. Looking at the data collected from social media, it would become clear which mood the writer chose and how the Theme of the clauses was used to inform the general public about the health crisis. This would help future researchers in understanding how thematic choices in case of such health campaigns can form or break the bridge between the writer and the reader.

The findings of this study would hopefully contribute to the related literature by elucidating the functions of language, especially during pandemics such as COVID-19, and cementing the argument that the language is not taken lightly when it comes to the advertisements regarding public health. In scenarios similar to COVID-19, it becomes pertinent to use language that is as direct as possible and the researcher hopes to find how the crucial message is spread across the masses in an easily comprehensible way. The research paper is an attempt to contribute to the field of knowledge on the language of health awareness campaigns, especially the ones that have been created during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Questions

- What types of themes are used in public health awareness campaigns by WHO and CDC?
- What message does the theme choices convey about the prosocial advertisements of COVID19?

Methodology

To answer the aforementioned questions, we have used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. Foregrounding clause as message model (Halliday, 1994), the occurrences of themes and theme types are analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. The data for the study consists of posts collected from Instagram. These posts are limited to the ones made by the official account of the WHO and the CDC on Instagram in relation to COVID 19 pandemic. The posts are further delimited to the ones that had precautionary measures written in their captions, as opposed to ones

with attached links. This narrowed down the posts made between March 21st, 2020 and June 21st, 2020. 50 posts are collected from the official account of CDC whereas only 25 posts are collected from the official account of WHO as the latter had lesser posts related to COVID-19 during the selected period. In total 75 posts were collected for analysis.

The filtered posts are collected, transcribed, and then analysed according to Halliday's model of ideational metafunctions of the language (Halliday, 1994) to identify the types of themes that are used regarding the thematic structure that consists of the thematic line of meaning. With the help of the theme-rheme analysis, the themes of all the clauses are categorized into marked, unmarked, simple, and multiple themes. Simple themes and multiple themes are analysed through the identification of topical, interpersonal, or textual elements by following Halliday's (1994) SFL model. Such identification of the themes would give a clear picture of the types of themes that have been avoided or more commonly used. This purpose is achieved through displaying the results in the form of pie and column charts. The unmarked and marked themes found in the CDC and WHO are also compared to see if the results are consistent in both cases. The results further shed light on whether or not the advertisements used simple language to make the message easy to understand for the readers and what mood they chose.

Results and Analysis

To answer the first study question aiming to investigate the types of themes used in COVID 19 health awareness campaigns, we analysed the posts collected from the WHO and CDC's official Instagram account. The occurrences of unmarked and marked themes of these accounts' posts were compared to evaluate the theme choices by the selected organizations. A large percentage of clauses in the collected data consisted of unmarked themes overall. Marked themes were less in number and only a few were identified in single clauses, while most of them were found in clause complexes (See Figure 1).
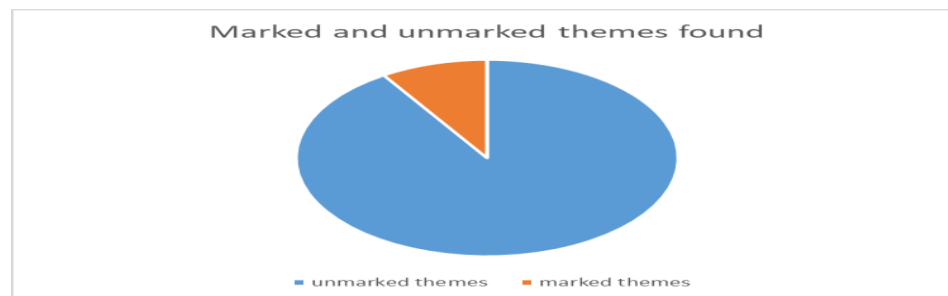

Figure 1. Ratio of marked and unmarked themes

In Figure 2, it can be seen that both the CDC and WHO utilized unmarked themes predominantly, while the use of marked themes was considerably low. The number of posts of WHO was lesser than the CDC, therefore the themes found in the former were also less. To get a clear representation, the percentage of unmarked and marked themes in respective posts was calculated. In CDC, 91% of the themes were unmarked and 9% were marked, whereas the WHO's

posts had 92% unmarked themes and 8% marked themes. The enormous difference between the use of marked and unmarked themes was consistent in the case of both accounts.
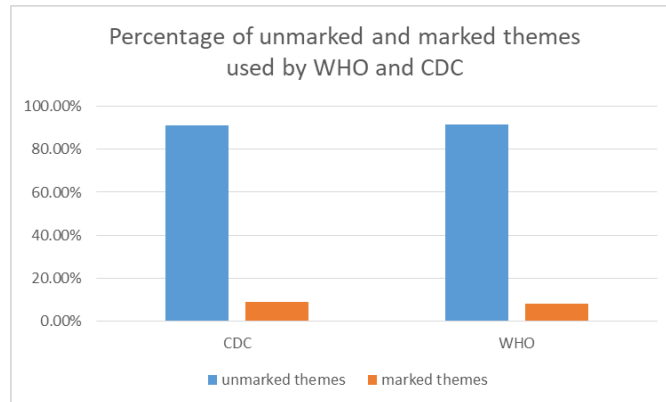

Figure 2. Percentage of unmarked and marked themes

A simple theme in a clause always has a topical element, along with which it occasionally consists of a textual or interpersonal element. In the data collected, the simple themes also either consisted of the topical element with an interpersonal element or a topical element with a textual element, but never both. Textual elements were found occasionally (See Figure 3). A small number of interpersonal themes were found and those too are the yes/no interrogative clauses. It should be noted that the results in Figure 3 show the total number of elements used by both CDC and WHO.
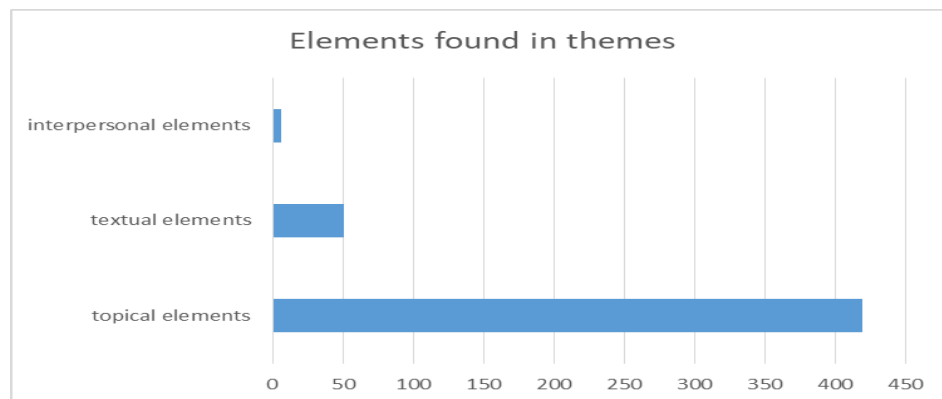

Figure 3. Elements in themes on scale

To investigate the message, the theme choices convey about the prosocial advertisements of COVID19, excerpts from the data have been taken and analysed in this section. This analysis further elucidates the clause and theme types. Table 1 shows a clause complex with two clauses. The first clause has a marked topical theme because it is a circumstance. The topical Theme is the experiential element in the clause and it can be the circumstance, participant or process. It could sometimes be preceded by an interpersonal or textual element but it is always the last element inside the Theme. However, it is not the nominal group doing any action here, therefore, it is

marked. In the first clause, looking at the theme "During COVID19", it becomes clear that the message is about the current situation.

The second clause has an unmarked theme as it is an imperative clause, and consists of a topical and a textual element "and", which is connecting the clause with the previous part. The Theme is simple as it has one topical and one textual element. The textual element "and" only exists to connect the clause to its previous one, showing that the message is related to COVID19.

Table 1. Clause Complex

During COVID19		be active
Topical		
marked Theme		
Theme		Rheme
and	Remain	healthy at home
Textual	Topical	
unmarked Theme		
Theme		Rheme

When the Theme is conflated with the subject and actor in a declarative clause, it is unmarked (Table 2). In a declarative clause, the nominal group acting as the subject is the unmarked Theme. This is a single declarative clause in which the unmarked Theme is the nominal group acting as the subject. The Theme is unmarked and simple which only has the topical element in it.

Table 2. Declarative Clause

It	is the right time to quit smoking for a safer and better health
Topical	
Unmarked Theme	
Theme	Rheme

The basic message of this imperative clause is a command, where the speaker/writer wants the reader/listener to do something (Table 3). This is also a simple theme with just the topical element in it. The Theme is unmarked, as in imperatives, the verbal group acts as an unmarked theme. The command *avoids* in the first example, which acts as a theme here, instantly alerts the reader that the message is in a commanding tone. The second example contains two clauses (a clause complex) the textual element *and* creates coherence. In this imperative, predicator serves as an unmarked theme along using don't.

Table 3. Imperative Clauses

a. Avoid	unnecessary public activities
Topical	
Unmarked Theme	
Theme	Rheme
b. Do not touch	the mask or face during use

Topical Unmarked Theme		
Theme		Rheme
and	**Discard**	**it afterwards**
Textual Unmarked Theme	Topical	
Theme		Rheme

Table 4. Interrogative clause

Do	**You**	**think you may have #COVID19?**
Interpersonal Unmarked Theme	Topical	
Theme		Rheme

In yes/no interrogatives, the first word or the finite operator of the verbal group along with the nominal group functions as the subject, and therefore, is an unmarked theme. The Theme has interpersonal and topical elements because, in yes/no interrogatives, the Theme shows modality as well.

In some cases, a clause complex containing multiple imperative clauses was broken down into bullet points to highlight the Theme in each clause.

To protect yourself:
-keep 1m distance from others
-disinfect surfaces frequently
-wash/rub your hands
-avoid touching your eyes, nose, lips

Table 5: Bulleted Clause Complex

To	**Protect yourself**
Topical Unmarked Theme	
Theme	Rheme
Keep	**1meter distance from others**
Topical Unmarked Theme	
Theme	Rheme
Disinfect	**surfaces frequently**
Topical Unmarked Theme	
Theme	Rheme
wash/rub	**your hands**
Topical	

Unmarked Theme	
Theme	Rheme
Avoid	**touching your eyes, nose, lips**
Topical	
Unmarked Theme	
Theme	Rheme

All of these clauses are straightforward and consist of simple unmarked topical themes because the verbal group is acting as the Theme in each of them.

In some cases, elliptical clauses are used whereby the Theme in the clauses is made clear in the beginning, with the following clauses laid out in bullet form. These elliptical clauses do not contain a theme but only rheme.

This will lead to:

✔ Better infection prevention & control

✔ fewer healthcare-acquired infections

✔ less reliance on antibiotics & more + safer births.

The reader's attention is focused on the unmarked topical Theme *this* and s/he is made aware that the upcoming clauses are an extension of it.

Discussion

Most of the choices for the point of departure are unmarked themes that help in focusing the reader's attention on the subject matter. In any text, the Theme is chosen because of its purpose. The mood is straightforward and matter of fact, as shown by the choice of the themes. The choice of mood also makes the posts objective and factual.

Multiple themes were not frequent which shows the language has not been made complicated in any way. The only reason textual themes were used was to make the text more communicatively effective as this element is used to create coherence and semantic links between the clauses in clause complexes. Interpersonal themes were avoided and it can be seen that their only occurrence is in case of interrogatives in which finite verbal operators are considered as being both topical and interpersonal. However, even in that case, the interrogatives only help in making the message obvious by initially setting a direction the post is going to take.

In some cases, the language was made easier to understand by breaking down the clause complex, by putting the clause with the Theme first, and then writing down the subordinate dependent clauses in the form of bullet lists. These bulleted points are elliptical clauses that do not have any theme in many cases. However, mostly, these bulleted points were clauses that consisted of their themes. Breaking down of clauses in this manner also made the message reader-friendly as the reader may quickly skim and understand the message.

The data collected was expected to consist of imperative sentences. While the majority of the themes used were verbal groups occurring in imperative clauses and commanding the reader on what to do in this situation, declarative and interrogative clauses were found as well. This

illustrates how different styles can be used in such public service messages to make the writing more powerful and engaging. The themes in declarative clauses were regarding the people that were affected by COVID-19 or were at risk. It expounds that the text was constructed around the topic of COVID-19 and the public's welfare.

The results of the analysis were in agreement with the previous findings by Feifei (2009), who found simple and unmarked themes are used more often to express clear opinions. By using simple themes, there is no element of ambiguity or disparity left in the information. The instructions/message are clear cut. Reading the clauses, it is evident what the writer is referring to or what s/he wants us to do in case of imperatives. Ayoola (2015) and Patpong (2009) came to similar findings while analysing the choice of mood and themes in public service advertisements and concluded that simple and unmarked topical themes were preferred when it came to public service advertisements. Ayoola (2015) established writers tend to avoid the marked Theme so the reader does not misinterpret the information and this also corresponds with the current findings of the study. Analysing the English Education advertisement, Hamid (2012) also found the dominant use of unmarked and topical themes, the current data analysis corroborates this. Eggins (2004) also commented that marked themes are unusual as compared to the unmarked themes, which are more typically found, something that is also confirmed by the findings of the current study.

By keeping the clauses and their themes simple, the social media posts ensure explicitness of their stance. Being official pages of two of the most important organizations, it also puts more responsibility on what information they put out and in what way it is conveyed.

Multiple themes can never be as effective in these circumstances as they divert the attention of the reader who would have trouble understanding what the text is trying to say. With all the interpersonal and textual elements in a theme, it would become difficult to identify the point of departure and there is a chance that the reader would skip the message altogether. In that light, it can be claimed that the public service messages did a satisfactory job of grabbing the readers' attention towards the urgency of the situation by using simple themes.

Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate the types of themes used in public health awareness campaigns and how they highlight the seriousness of COVID-19. This investigation of the themes in the selected texts would also clarify if the linguistic choices catered to the readers and their better understanding. The paper focused on these choices made by public service messages, specifically studying the clause as a message in light of the SFL model of theme-rheme structure (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

The purpose is to bring forth the functions of prosocial advertisements regarding COVID-19 and we found that they inform, warn, guide, and instruct the public regarding the health crisis. Analysis of the data showed that linguistic elements, that could make the text difficult to comprehend, were avoided. Unmarked simple themes were preferred in clauses to avoid ambiguity, and textual and interpersonal elements were only used when necessary for cohesion or creating modality. Preference of simple over-complicated language shows the state of urgency and sense of responsibility of the social media accounts of the respective organizations. The analysis

of the data collected from both the WHO and CDC points towards a simple theme pattern, showing that organizations deliberately made these choices to avoid any misinformation that would mislead the people. To make sure that the reader's focus was directed towards the matter at hand, the writers chose themes that were either about the COVID-19 virus or the safety precautions for the people. This indicates that the purpose in each of the posts was to bring attention to the current situation and the counter-measures that people can take in these challenging times.

Limitations and Recommendations

Keeping to the scope of the study, a thorough metafunction analysis was not done. For the current study, only written text was taken for analysis and corresponding images in the Instagram posts were not considered. Furthermore, the data that was collected was the one that was available during a certain period.

Further studies can be conducted where pre-COVID-19 advertisements/campaigns can be compared with current health campaigns to see if the pattern is limited to the latter or if it is generally followed in case of every health crisis. Moreover, a similar study can be expanded to other genres such as newspaper or television-based campaigns regarding COVID-19 by considering elements such as visuals etc. along with the theme-rheme structure for a more comprehensive study.

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