The Representation of COVID-19 in American English and Its Implications in English Education

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an ongoing global disaster, which has caused unprecedented social and economic disruptions all around the world. Throughout the stages of the pandemic more than two years, mass media has played a vital role in circulating much of (mis)information regarding the pandemic. As a part of attempts to record social, cultural, and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, this research aims to pursue a data-based discourse analysis on representations of COVID-19 using data in Coronavirus Corpus developed by Mark Davies. This study examine how various types of texts mediated in English have represented any issues and situations surrounding COVID. We utilize a corpus-oriented discourse analysis framework, which integrates methods of quantity-based corpus linguistics and those of quality- based discourse analysis. The study's implications on English education are also pursued.

Keywords: COVID-19, coronavirus corpus, representations, discourse analysis, corpus-based analysis, English education

1 Introduction

From around Feb. of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has been an ongoing global disaster, which has caused unprecedented social and economic disruptions all around the world. Throughout the stages of the pandemic more than two years, mass media has played a vital role in circulating much of (mis)information regarding the pandemic. As a part of attempts to record social, cultural, and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, this research aims to pursue a data-based discourse analysis on representations of COVID-19 using data in Coronavirus Corpus developed by Mark Davies. This study examine how various types of texts mediated in English have represented any issues and situations surrounding COVID. We utilize a corpus-oriented discourse analysis framework, which integrates methods of quantity-based corpus linguistics and those of quality-based discourse analysis. From quantitative-analytic perspective, this study mainly makes use of tools and functions provided by the corpus site as well as several language-processing programs. On the other hand, for qualitative analysis, we will adopt critical discourse analytic methods. Language serves a powerful role in representing entities, phenomena, and situations. According to Fairclough's (1989) theory regarding critical discourse analysis, discourse is a social practice, which contributes to the establishment and reinforcement of ideologies and power dynamics. Investigating how language is utilized in shaping the situations about COVID-19, this research intends to present socio-linguistic perspectives on the wide range of issues and situations surrounding COVID-19 in American English. This study's implication on English education will also be pursued.

2 Literature Review

Studies related to COVID-19 can be broadly divided into a few categories. The first group includes research of neologism (e.g., Asif et al 2021; Lei et al 2021; Lee 2021; Jung 2021 to name a few). Asif et al (2121), for

example, collected data from a variety of sources and found that the word-formation is made use of in the form of nouns, adjectives, and verbs. They also found that the abbreviations and acronyms are utilized to depict the current situation of COVID-19.

Another group studies focus on the writers' intentions of the COVID-19 related texts, mainly using the critical discourse analytic methods, which include Paez & Perez (2020), Kang (2020), Rieter (2021), Smith & Kabele (2021), and Kim (2021). Paez & Perez (2020) examined how the communication modalities of dissemination, propagation and propaganda are manifested in the COVID-19 pandemic. It also investigated the objectification of the representation of COVID-19 in heroes (healthcare workers), elite villains (pharmaceutical company owners, ineffective governments), common villains (careless people, mindless masses) and victims (the elderly, the poor). In doing so, it offers explanations and hypotheses on the socio-political correlate, the dynamic of common-sense beliefs and their relationship with social behaviour.

The impact of COVID-19 on English education also has actively been explored such as Mahyoob (2021), Al-Zaabi (2021), Ariyanti. 2020, and Kamal et al (2021) to name a few. Al-Zaabi (2121), analyzing 184 students' response to a survey, investigated the students' novel experiences in virtual education and the feasibility of the online methods of learning. Their study revealed that that the main problems students face are technical, academic, and communication challenges and that "most EFL learners are not satisfied with continuing online learning, as they could not fulfill the expected progress in language learning performance." (Al-Zaabi, 2021: 14).

3   Materials and Methods/ Methodology

The data of this study were drawn from the Coronavirus Corpus, which was designed to be the "record of the social, cultural and economic impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) in 2020 and beyond (https://www.english-corpora.org/corona/)." The materials in the corpus consists of a subset of a news corpus and websites containing coronavirus-related issues. Figure 1 presents the profile of the Coronavirus Corpus.
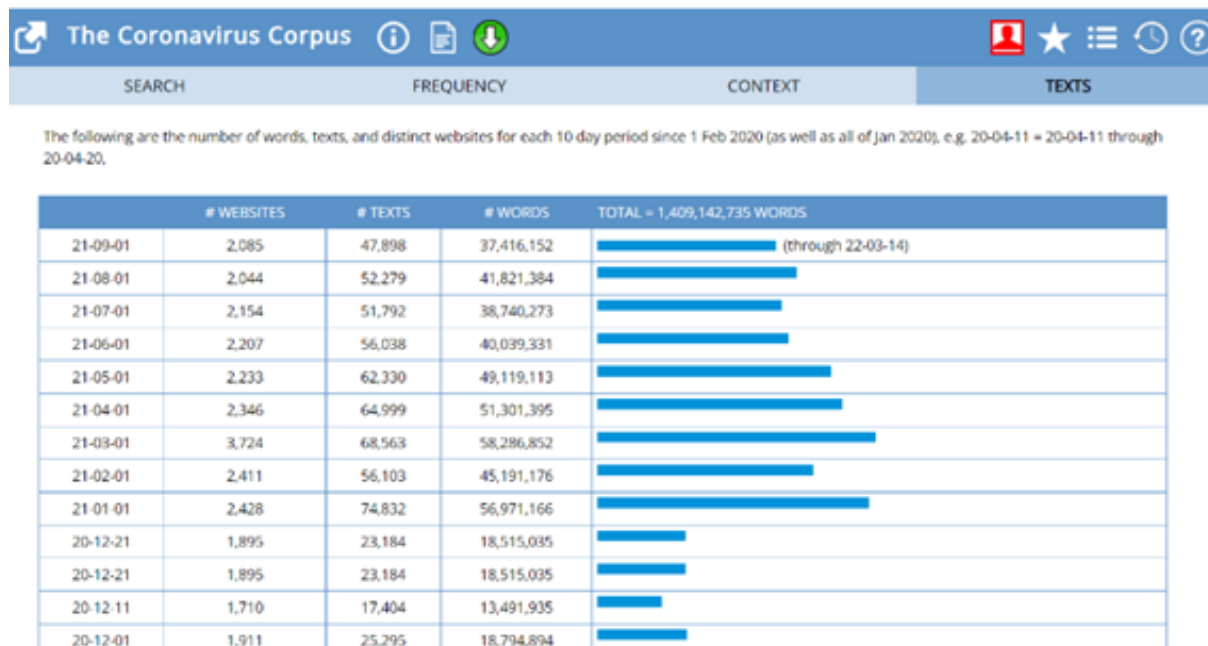

Figure 1: *Information of the Coronavirus Corpus (as of March, 2022)*

The searches were performed with the command expressions "V coronavirus" and typed in to obtain the target forms. This study planned to focus on top 100 such constructions respectively. The search returned a total of 44,700 occurrences of the sequence of a verb and the word coronavirus. The retrieved data were

copied and saved in an excel file to facilitate data search and cleaning. Then the culled items were manually examined to eliminate irrelevant occurrences. Among the collected examples, approximately a third were excluded because they do not conform to the target form as shown in (1).

(1) Addressing the session, Senator Sherry Rehman said coronavirus is a challenge for humanity and that China has taken immediate measures against the outbreak (princegeorgecitizen.com; 20-01-25)

The variants of the same verb (e.g., causes, caused, causing) were merged into one form with their frequency hits combined. The items in the modified list were classified according to the categories emerging from the data. In categorizing the examples, the extended concordance lines were carefully investigated to ensure feasible matchings.

4   Results and Discussion

4.1   Contract/Spreadread Coronavirus

The first common category belonging to this construction comprises a Contract/Spread-related verb and coronavirus (or its associated issues). The most frequently occurring verb is contract as shown in (2) and (3) below.

(2) Officials in Australia said a woman and a male doctor **have contracted coronavirus**, becoming the country's first cases of community transmissions in the country.

(3) It warned professors that if they do **contract coronavirus**, they must use personally accrued sick leave.

Predicates synonymous with or related to *contract* include *get, catch, and acquire*, whose uses are exemplified in (4), (5), and (6) respectively.

(4) Sir Patrick said that around two-thirds of the British population would need to **get coronavirus** for herd immunity to stave off the disease in the future.

(5) People could potentially still **catch coronavirus** without showing any clear signs and symptoms, then pass it onto somebody.

(6) Fortunately, now, the technology exists to ensure that supermarket customers do not **acquire coronavirus** through contaminated packaging.

To identify the entities that perform the action describe by the phrase, V + coronavirus, searches were carried out in the corpus using the collocate function of the site. For this purpose, the relevant phrase was typed in and the category noun was chosen as collocates. In addition, 4 left word span were selected. Table 2 presents the most frequent eight noun collocates of each construction.

Table 1: *Top noun collocates of CONTRACT verbs*

Verbs	Top noun collocates
catch	risk, people, fear(s), chance(s), children, public
acquire	case(s), day, risk, people, state, man, plastic
contract	people, (healthcare)workers, man, staff, person, hospital, employees, (staff, team) member
get	people, children, workers, Americans, population, person, staff, vaccine

The noun *people* was the most frequent collocate noun of all four verb phrases. Other common collocates shared by at least two constructions is the nouns *person, children, man, and workers*. As far as person nouns are concerned, catch and acquire, turn out to be used with more general nouns such as *children, person, and public*, while *contract* and *get* occur more commonly with nouns referring to occupations such as *workers, staff, employees*, and *(staff, team) member*. Noticeable is that the two phrases *catch/acquire coronavirus* feature nouns other than person nouns including *chance(s), fear, case, and risk(s)*, which are illustrated by (7), (8), (9) and (10).

(7) Stuck-at-home consumers and those wishing to minimise the chances of catching coronavirus are opting to shop online instead

(8) The fear of catching coronavirus in school has even prompted some parents to consider keeping their children at home.

(9) There have been two new cases of locally acquired coronavirus diagnosed in NSW up to 8pm on Monday night

(10) There's now a higher risk of acquiring coronavirus from activities that were previously thought to be pretty safe

Also notable is the frequent use of a nearly fossilized three-word expression involving acquired coronavirus, which is locally acquired coronavirus as exemplified in (9) above. This specific collocate accounts for more than 70 percent of the occurrences of acquired coronavirus constructions.

The verbs carry and spread classified as belonging to CONTRACT/SPREAD category turned out to co-occur most recurrently with the nouns shown in Table 3.

Table 2: *Top noun collocates of SPREAD verbs*

Verbs	Top noun collocates
carry	people, risk, children, adenovirus, droplets, patients, staff, vector
spread	people, children, symptoms, fear(s), potential, person, event

While the noun people are the top noun collocate of both verbs, a noteworthy difference between the two lists is the use of adenovirus, droplets, and vector as noun collocates of carry, which is exemplified in (11) and (12).

(11) The adenovirus carries coronavirus genes. Trial protocol: A series of procedures to be carried.

(12) The droplets that carry coronavirus can last in the air for hours, and are too small to be filtered out by air.

In the list of spread virus collocates lie non-agentive nouns such as symptoms, fear(s), potential, and event. A closer look at the concordance line again reveal that the occurrences of such combinations are similar to the examples shown in (7) through (10). The noun symptoms, however, were always utilized to modify other agentive nouns as shown in (13) and (14).

(13) People with no symptoms can spread corona virus if they are infected.

(14) And even those without symptoms can easily spread coronavirus to others.

To sum up, the most common entities that are described to **Contract/Spreading** coronavirus include agents such as people, children, workers, man and person, while there are nuances in terms of the categories of the agents. In addition, some verbs allow for more free association with non-agentive abstract nouns to depict issues concerning **Contracting/Spreading** coronavirus as shown in (7) to (10) above.

4.2   Fight Coronavirus

Most of the verbs in this category are conventionally accounted for in terms of war metaphors. According to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory, an unfamiliar and abstract concept becomes conceptualized with reference to a more familiar and concrete concept for humans to readily comprehend the unfamiliar concept. It is widely known the concept of war has utilized fairly frequently as metaphors

for many human adversities and conflicts. Among them disease and pandemic are recurrent concepts depicted via war metaphors (Hillmer 2007). The Covid-19 pandemic is not an exception to this tendency.

Among the culled data, a significant number of verbs are utilized for the war metaphor. The first group of verbs belonging to FIGHT CORONAVIRUS category include fight, combat, battle, and defeat. The top noun collocates of these predicates are provided in Table 3.

Table 3: *Top noun collocates of FIGHT verbs*

Verbs	Top noun collocates
fight	efforts, strategy, measures, government, lockdown, million, billion, state
combat	measures, efforts, lockdown, emergency, government, plan, bid
battle	world, measures, models, lockdown, business, country, hospitals, fund
defeat	way, government, plans, innovation, societies, efforts, ways, lockdowns

As opposed to the top nouns of CONTARCT/SPREAD verbs, those of FIGHT verbs are highly associated with public entities such as government, world, country, and societies as shown in examples (15), (16), and (17).

(15) It would be better if the **government got money to fight coronavirus** by trimming funding for Trump's most treasured project.

(16) Countries can't simply lock down **their societies to defeat coronavirus**, the WHO's top emergency expert Mike Ryan said on Sunday.

(17) China appears to be further along in **their battle to beat coronavirus**, and may report stronger economic performance in the short run

5   Conclusions

This study investigated the ways various types of English texts represented issues and situations about COVID-19. Using a corpus-oriented discourse analysis framework, this study examined how language is utilized in shaping the situations surrounding COVID-19. One of the main findings of this research is that the entities that contract or spread coronavirus are mainly depicted as individuals such as people, children, workers and employers. On the other hand, the entities that fight and beat coronavirus include public agents such as governments, societies, countries, and their efforts/plans. In summary, COVID-10 is described as being carried by ordinary people and fought by public or collective efforts.

It was invested by a range of studies that online or virtual English education during the COVID-19 pandemic has been great challenges to EFL students. Then using the authentic materials about COVID-19 such as Coronavirus Corpus can be a viable and feasible alternative method to enhance learners' interests in English as the topics appearing in the materials are much more pertinent to their current lives. Also using corpora and their tools will help English learners to cope with advances in technologies in English-related subjects including English education. This study hopes to add a meaningful contribution to that kind of direction in English education.

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