

THE LANGUAGE OF PREVENTIVE HEALTHCARE: CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract. *The paper discusses COVID-19 discourse in media texts of WHO official website published in March-April 2020. The objective of the research is to identify and analyze content, structural, pragmatic and linguistic features of media text with a particular focus on the communicative effect they might produce on the target audience. The authors conclude that WHO coverage of the pandemic is mainly associated with preventive strategies, which comprise a variety of macrostructural elements, pragmatic functions of information and persuasion, colloquial and topical vocabulary, imperative mood for advice and a wide usage of graphical means.*

Keywords: *COVID-19 discourse, WHO, media text, macrostructure, pragmatic and rhetorical features, topical vocabulary.*

On 11 March 2020 at the media briefing on new coronavirus COVID-19 the WHO Director-General used the word ‘pandemic’ [1] to describe the disease previously referred to as ‘outbreak’ or ‘epidemic’. This term marked a new turn in media coverage of the coronavirus infection globally. Since then millions of viewers have been following information on the novel coronavirus mostly via digital media and websites representing official position of healthcare authorities and institutions. This media discourse on COVID-19 is a crucially significant communication area as it has become a potent medium of the coronavirus prevention campaign. Therefore, the language of preventive healthcare can be regarded as a delivery agent for preventive measures to reach a target audience, so the delivery must be fast, accurate and comprehensive [2].

The objective of this paper is to identify and analyze language means used in media coverage of COVID-19 for preventive purposes. The material of the research includes media texts published on WHO official website during March-April 2020. The volume of the data is 50000 printed characters or about 6000 words.

Results and discussion. Basically, there were three groups of parameters which underwent descriptive analysis. We started with

the overview of macrostructure of a text comprising content (a topic and its development) and structure of the content (headings, sub-headings, paragraphs). The next group under consideration was pragmatic and rhetorical functions of a text. The language verbal means fell into the third group of analysis and the final group comprised nonverbal features of a text including various types of graphics (tables, pictures, infographics).

Macrostructure. The data demonstrate that the content of all texts describing COVID -19 are structures as a number of topic directly reflected in the following subheadings:

- 1) Basic protective measures
- 2) Myth busters
- 3) Media resources (updates and briefings)
- 4) Travel advice
- 5) Donors and partners training

As far as we can see, the topics are mainly aimed at common public (1, 2, 4), at media community (3) and at charities (5). The contents of each topic organized in a paragraph structure of a text and explicitly reveal the following key messages:

- basic protective measures give advice on how to protect people from the infection;
- myth busters dispel false ideas about the infection spread, routes of contamination and others;

– media resources provide links to other parts of the WHO site (self-links) or to other reliable website of national healthcare and governmental bodies;

– recommendations or instructions to those willing to donate to antivirus campaign.

Each topic is then structured as a number of subtopics organized in paragraphs and introduced by subheadings. For instance, the topic Basic protective measures is presented as a collection of subtopics describing a particular protective measure, such as Wash your hands frequently, Maintain social distancing, Avoid going to crowded places, etc.

Pragmatic and rhetorical functions. Pragmatic functions of most analyzed texts can be viewed as informative and persuasive purposes. In many texts they are combined as the text persuade the audience to do or not to do something and then explains the reason, e.g.

‘Regularly and thoroughly clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water. Why? Washing your hands with soap and water or using alcohol-based hand rub kills viruses that may be on your hands.’

The pragmatic repertoire of persuasion varies from strong advice to prohibition, e.g.

Maintain at least 1 metre (3 feet) distance between yourself and others. – strong advice

Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth. – strong advice

Hand sanitizers recommended to protect against COVID-19 are alcohol-based and therefore, can be flammable. Do not use before handling fire or cooking. –prohibition

Under no circumstance, drink or let children swallow an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. It can be poisonous. – prohibition

(<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>)

The informative function is performed by explanation and illustration. The question-and-answer rhetorical technique is used to give an explanation.

Language means. The analysis of verbal communicative means has shown that colloquial vocabulary predominates terminology which is natural in this type of text that is addressed to common public and is to be most comprehensive, e.g. pick up virus, kill virus, crowded places, getting sick, cold, flu etc.

The texts also contain COVID-19 topical vocabulary which is constantly repeated from text to text, which makes it easily recognized and understood, e.g. coronavirus, COVID-19 virus, alcohol-based hand sanitizer, mask, physical (social) distance, stay home, close contact, etc.

Another important communicative feature of the text is direct appeal to the public using you personal pronoun, e.g. ‘If you are too close, you can breathe in the droplets, including the COVID-19 virus if the person has the disease’.

The imperative mood is widely used to express advice, recommendation or prohibition. It is important to mention that most affirmative structures (do) are more commonly used than negative (do not), even if the message is ‘don’t do’, e.g.

– Avoid touching your face (= don’t touch your face)

– Keep alcohol-based hand sanitizers out of children’s reach (= don’t give it to children).

This strategy is associated with politeness concept according to which prohibition expressed with negative syntactic structures are impolite, not cooperative and face-threatening [3].

All messages are thoroughly supported by infographics, posters for downloading, tables with statistics on COVID-19, video illustration or explanations. All these are used to make the information both reader-friendly and impressive for the public [4, 5].

Conclusion. The WHO portal dedicated to COVID-19 pandemic has been analyzed to identify communicative features of pandemic coverage. The analysis has proven that communication is done through content and organization elements (macrostructure), pragmatic and rhetoric features and language including graphical means. We have come to a conclusion that ‘protective measures’ topic seems to be the central one. Each advice on a protective measure is repeated up to three times through various language means: topic subheading, a topic development paragraph, a video or a poster. This is done to achieve a maximum communicative effect on the audience, i.e. to inform and to persuade them to follow antivirus advice and recommendations.

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ЯЗЫК МЕДИЦИНСКОЙ ПРОФИЛАКТИКИ: ДИСКУРС ПАНДЕМИИ КОРОНАВИРУСА

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Аннотация. В статье рассматривается дискурс COVID-19 на материале медиатекстов официального вебсайта Всемирной организации здравоохранения (ВОЗ), опубликованных в марте-апреле 2020. Целью исследования является выявление и анализ содержательно-структурных, прагматических, риторических и лингвистических характеристик данных текстов, а также их коммуникативного воздействия на целевую аудиторию. Авторы делают вывод о комплексном характере коммуникативного эффекта, достигаемого сочетанием макроструктурных элементов, информированием и побуждением, тематическим и разговорным вокабуляром, императивными конструкциями как средствами реализации побуждения, а также лингвостилистическими и графическими средствами медиатекстов.

Ключевые слова: дискурс COVID-19, ВОЗ, медиатекст, макроструктура, прагматические и риторические характеристики, тематический вокабуляр.