ORIGINAL ARTICLE

TRENDING PHRASES, NAMES, AND HASHTAGS RELATED TO COVID-19 IN THE PHILIPPINES: THE LANGUAGE OF SOCIAL CRISIS

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Abstract

A language is a coping tool that humans use for different functions in times of social crisis. This short article describes how Filipino phrases, names, and hashtags related to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) developed. Following a qualitative method, it performs a content analysis of online posts archived on Twitter, a widely known microblogging social media site. The discussion of NCOV invented descriptors, COVID baby names, and KokoVID hashtag provided evidence as regards the humorous function, literary characteristic, and emotional tool of language in times of social crisis. It is suggested that further research should be conducted in other contexts to describe how language develops in times of social crisis.

Keywords: Language, Twitter, COVID-19, neologism

Introduction

The COVID-19 will go down the world history as one of the most enormously devastating crises that has impacted all dimensions of human life. Since its emergence and outbreak from China, it has quickly spread around the globe, presenting huge economic, educational, environmental, psychological, and social impacts (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020)[1]. As a response, humans attempt to find all possible different ways to cope with these impacts brought by the crisis.

Language is a tool of human emotional coping in difficult times like the current COVID-19 crisis. Lindquist et al. (2015)[2] cited that a recent psychological constructionist position assumes that language is a central element in emotion. The conceptual act theory posits that a case of emotion happens when information, whether coming internally or externally, is made significant relative to the situation. Furthermore, Carter (1999)[3] explained that verbal play is frequently used by people for humorous purposes, serving also to bring them closer together, and challenging the usual perspectives of matters. He further stated that inventive language does not just have a decorative purpose, but also a functional purpose.

It is a constant observation of lexicography that significant social events in human history bring the language of social crisis. This has never been more real than the case of the current COVID-19 crisis and as humans try to cope up. The new vocabulary has been used to talk about related issues from the serious impacts of the virus to lighter ways to keep entertained at matters around (Lawson, 2020)[4]. The emergence of lexicons, metaphors, neologisms has proven that creativity is a central aspect of language that continuously reconsiders the ways people cope with the situation.

This creativity in language among the Filipinos is evident in many instances from ordinary incidents to significant events like the COVID-19 emergency. Filipino words that have come to significance have been compiled by writers. Monde (2017)[5] observed that Filipinos never run out of ideas to think of creative terms that become a trend. She added that language innovation is an indication that the Filipino language is alive amid the influence of other foreign languages.

Twitter is one of the most known microblogging social media sites that Filipinos use to express their emotions through language. A survey (Statista Research Department, 2016)[6] forecasted that by 2019, the number of active Filipinos on Twitter would extend to 10.4 million. This number can be much higher in the present. On the other hand, an interesting point about Twitter observed is that people tend to direct their thoughts explicitly if they are positive about the issue; they take advantage of symbolisms, references, and inquiries to convey their thoughts implicitly if they are negative about the issue (Gabrielova, 2015)[7].

Studies have been published as regards description and analysis of trending language in microblogging social media sites (Chang, 2011; Lee et al., 2011; Naaman et al., 2011; Lu & Yang, 2012; Aiello et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2013; Zubiaga et al., 2013; Martins & Azevedo, 2015; Vishal & Sonawane, 2016; Giyatmi et al., 2017; Sunthornchuen & Sinthupinyo, 2018; Annamoradnejad & Habibi, 2019; Boot et al., 2019; Rauschnabel et al., 2019; Bashari & Fazl-Ersi, 2020)[8-22]. However, trending phrases, names, and hashtags used online during the COVID-19 social crisis, especially in the Philippine context, has not been explored.

Hence, this paper describes how Filipino phrases, names, and hashtags related to COVID-19 developed.

Methods

Research Design

This paper employed a descriptive research design. Gummesson (1991)[23] defined descriptive research design as a method that intends to describe the characteristics of a phenomenon at a particular given time. This design is suitable for the current study which aimed to describe how Filipino phrases, names, and hashtags related to COVID-19 developed in this particular period of social crisis.

Unit of Analysis

The main unit of analysis involved in this study are posts, captions, and hashtags found in the widely known microblogging social media site called Twitter, which permits users to "index keywords or topics" of their own (Rauschnabel et al., 2019)[21]. These posts, captions, and hashtags are collectively called tweet, a short text limited by only 140 characters (Lee, et al, 2011)[9]. It should be noted that the selected tweets in this study are not necessarily a representative sample of the entire population of the tweets of interest. They are rather purposively selected as a sufficient number to serve the purpose of this research.

Text Processing

Some preliminary steps were performed to search and extract information from a given tweet. Since the target neologisms are already identified, the researcher began by searching them on Twitter with results engine showing a list of relevant tweets. This list of tweets was then reviewed from top to bottom until the results were exhausted. Further steps in the text processing of the selected tweets were adopted. These are: removing unnecessary texts, removing mentions, changing letter cases (Bashari & Fazl-Ersi, 2020)[22], and translating vernacular terms.

Data Analysis

Jupp (2006)[24] defined content analysis as a technique of exhaustive scrutiny of documents created across an extensive collection of practices, taking an array of forms from text to image. This data analysis technique was used in this paper to examine the ideas contained by the tweets selected for this study. A comparison of these selected tweets was made by the researcher to analytically determine their relevance for inclusion in the presentation.

Result and Discussion

This paper focuses on presenting a description of three Filipino neologisms related to COVID-19 that trended over Twitter. Their origins, denotations, examples, as well as their functions as an emotional coping tool, are explored.

NCOV and Valentine's Day

Valentine's day this year earned reactions especially among adolescent "quaranteens" - a neologism blending the words quarantine and teenagers (De Quetteville, 2020)[25]. The start of the overseas spread of COVID-19, which at that time was known as NCOV, coincidentally happened during February. One of the most celebrated social events observed around the globe during this time is Valentine's Day. It was, however, celebrated differently probably for the first time in its history as social distancing measures are enforced because of the coronavirus outbreak.

In the Philippines, the Department of Health (DOH) advised Filipinos to be "less romantic" on Valentine's Day, calling for measures amid the virus outbreak. An epidemiologist of the Department of Health (DOH) expressed that lovers must discipline themselves as a measure against the spread of the virus. He encouraged "outdoor dating" in less crowded settings following the DOH advisory for "social distancing". He added that lovers should also be honest with each other about their travel history and make quarantine procedures if needed (Cervantes, 2020)[26].

As a consequence, many users of Twitter reinvented the meaning of NCOV to relate to the "unromantic" dating scenario. Different expressions emerged to give NCOV different descriptors. A common list of most used phrases shows NCOV as "No Chocolates on Valentines", "No Crush on Valentines", "No Companion on Valentines", "No Chance on Valentines", "No Contact on Valentines", and "No Cash on Valentines".

A Twitter user compiled a list of other possible meanings of NCOV. He included the following: "No Clubbing on Valentines", "No Calls on Valentines", "No Crying on Valentines", "No Clarity on Valentines", "No Care on Valentines", "No Cake on Valentines", "No Case on Valentines", "No Choice on Valentines", and "No Control on Valentines" (User 01, February 14).

People used these NCOV meanings in different ways. As early as the start of the month, a user has tweeted: "Some are scared of NCOV, but others worry about another NCOV: No Commitment on Valentines" – User 002, February 02). Similarly, another Twitter user expressed: "All the single ladies now have NCOV as in No Chance on Valentines" -User 03, February 08). Another netizen posted a day before the event: "Wallet and I are on quarantine due to NCOV - No Cash on Valentines" (User 04, February 13).

The function of language in these situations is to vent out emotions. The netizens expressed their mixed desperation and frustration over having to celebrate Valentine's day less intimately or not at all because of the global coronavirus outbreak. It should be observed that instead of directly attributing the blame to the coronavirus itself, the netizens played with the name. The play of words in these instances is explained by Carter (1999). He stated that "verbal play with language is often undertaken for humorous purposes, serving in part to bring people closer together" (p. 201).

COVID Baby Names

The "coronnials" or the new generation of babies born during and after the COVID-19 period (Ichimura, 2020)[27] will have a distinct identity in the future as the generation born during one of the unprecedented crises in human history. But it seems that some of them especially in the Philippines will have a more distinct identity as they were named after the coronavirus.

It was reported that some Filipino parents found inspiration in the current situation and named their babies after the COVID-19 crisis. Alpad (2020)[28] described this circumstance as an "only-in-the-Philippines" phenomenon. This news sent netizens on amusement as images of the birth certificates of these babies soon surfaced on the internet, legitimizing the news as real.

This was quickly picked up by different local news outlets. Examples are: "Three Filipino babies allegedly named after 'COVID' are the iconic trio of 2020" (Lasic, 2020)[29], "Filipinos Get Creative with Coronavirus-Inspired Baby Names" (Reyes, 2020)[30], and "Another baby named after COVID-19" (Masculino, 2020)[31]. Even international media picked it up and wrote: "The babies named after a pandemic" (Boyle, 2020)[32] posted in Thailand.

In the Twitter world, a user reposted a news link and announced that: "#COVID-19 VIDEO: A baby in the Philippines has been called Covid Marie – a name her parents say is a sign of hope during the coronavirus pandemic" (User 05, April 29). A month later, one of the many users tweeted as two more babies were named after the virus: "There are newly born babies here in the Philippines and they named the babies after the virus. Their names are Covid Bryant and Covid Rose" (User 06, March 20).

It drew many reactions around the world as well. One rhetorically addressed a letter, saying: "Dear Covid Bryant, if Twitter still exists in the future, just know that you went trending when you were born. You were up there with the stars like Oprah. You are a legend" (User 07, March 18). Another user reiterated and poked fun by saying: "Only in the Philippines, parents name their newly born babies COVID. Hoping Covid Bryant and Covid Rose will meet someday" (User 08, March 19).

It can be seen that the netizens used the language to keep spirits high amid the COVID-19 crisis. Some netizens showed their amusement by announcing it on social media in a somewhat literary way. They posted tweets like writing a timely letter or a wishful story. Aside from the entertainment purpose, the literary aspect of the tweets can be viewed from the statements of Tambling (1998)[33]. He pointed out that "all language is literary… because… it can all be read for the guileful, ambiguous and indeterminate uses of language that literature employs" (p. 74).

KokoVID in politics

The COVID-19 crisis is not without the people in the scene who violate rules. A COVID-19 neologism has been quickly coined to call these people as "covidiot" or someone who disregards the public health measures (Lawson, 2020)[4]. Many people from all walks have been reportedly bashed because of their unexpected behaviors during this crisis.

In the Philippines, Aquilino "Koko" Pimentel is a senator who tested positive for COVID-19 on March 25. He said he received the news a night before while he was at a private hospital with his pregnant wife. However, he was considered a person under investigation four days back when he was taken a swab for the COVID-19 test. Thus, by going to the hospital as a person under investigation, he might have violated the rules of home quarantine and possibly exposed the frontlines in the hospital to risks. The senator has quarantined upon medical advice and following the policy (Buan, 2020; Esguerra, 2020; Gallardo, 2020; Lagrimas, 2020; Torres, 2020)[34-38].

However, as the information surfaced in social media, netizens immediately slammed the actions of the senator. As a result, the #KokoVID was quickly used by the Twitter netizens to express their opinions. The hashtag is a contraction of two words: "Koko" from the nickname of the senator and "VID" from the acronym of COVID. This was accompanied by other hashtags such as #KokoPimentel, #COVID19PH, and others that express anger, disappointment, and frustration of the netizens.

For many days, it became a hot topic on Twitter. "I will have a list of politicians and public officials to not vote for in case they run for public office in the future" (User 009, March 24). "Discrimination happens when one sees himself above others and disregards his ethics to fight for his own selfish desires" (User 010, March 25). "No words will be enough to relay my anger, disgust and condemnation for this man. (User 011, March 26). "Thanks to the former senate president whose apology sounded like sorry not sorry" (User 012, March 27). "Yes, investigate breaches. Someone broke the rules, we would not want someone to break rules" (User 013, March 28).

This case gives a view on the role of language as an emotional regulation tool. Most netizens were displeased and enraged by the incident. Others posed moral reflections and future actions about the incident. As seen, people use language to specifically to release their reactions and sentiments in times of crisis that is marred by political issues. Lindquist et al. (2015)[2] maintained a psychological constructionist position that promotes language as an element in emotion. The conceptual act theory further conceived that emotion occurs when a piece of information is made significant relative to the context.

Conclusion

This article aimed to describe how Filipino trending phrases, names, and hashtags related to COVID-19 developed. Through reviews of the recent past events and pieces of evidence archived in the social media, the origins, denotations, examples of these neologisms were explored.

It was shown that NVOC invented descriptors, COVID baby names, and KokoVID hashtag created out of social crisis events have a humorous function and literary characteristic. This paper offers a view as regards the creativity of "ordinary" language that has been often overlooked by researchers in favor of more conventional creative discourse. It is also further revealed that these neologisms have their general function as an emotional coping tool in times of social crisis like in the current pandemic. Thus, this study provides evidence that supports the emerging psychological constructionist position that claims language as a fundamental aspect of emotion.

It should be noted that this paper focused on the Philippine context and mainstream Twitter microblogging social media site. Further researches in the future should explore the neologisms developed in times of social crisis in other contexts. It is also interesting to further probe how these phrases, names, and hashtags directly influence the position of psychological constructionism that claims the language as an element of emotion.

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