The Pragmatic Study of Third-Party Responses to Online Verbal Violence in Public Emergencies

Fan Huo

School of Foreign Languages, Northwest Normal University Lanzhou Gansu 730070

Abstract: During public emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, online verbal violence can often arise, prompting third-party participants in the digital public space to express their opinions. This research focuses on the verbal violence towards COVID-19 patients and takes comments from a WeChat article as corpus. Drawing from judgement resources of appraisal system, this study aims to explore how the third-party respond to online language violence and moral foundations reflected by third-party responses. It is showed that the third-party use relative polite and impolite strategies to make respond. The findings indicate that these responses mainly reflect moral foundations of benevolence and groupism in traditional Chinese culture. By examining the connection between online verbal violence, third-party responses, moral foundations, and judgement resources, this research aims to provide insights for future related studies.

Keywords: Judgement resources; Online verbal violence; Third-party responses; Moral foundations

1. Introduction

The rapid development of the internet and social media in modern society has brought about the issue of online language violence. In recent years, research on online language violence has mostly focused on its usage strategies, characteristics, and causes, while studies on response behaviors are relatively limited, especially regarding third-party responses. This study recognizes that with certain sudden public events, online spaces often witness instances of online language violence, which violates principles of politeness, resulting in widespread public discontent. Internet users express their strong outrage through comments. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an emergence of language violence targeting COVID-19 patients in the online public sphere, with stigmatization being particularly prominent. In response to this, online commenters provide third-party responses from a non-involved perspective, condemning online language violence based on shared moral foundations[2].

2. Theoretical background

The judgment resources of appraisal system represent a new development in systemic functional linguistics. Martin categorizes evaluative meaning into three subsystems: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation[3]. Appraisal system is the exploration and examination of interpersonal meaning within the framework of systemic functional linguistics. It focuses on how various discourses express attitudes, negotiate emotions, and construct values using linguistic resources. Judgment resources, as a resource for explicating linguistic phenomena, explains the moral evaluations made by language users based on morality regarding certain actions, such as whether they align with ethics and morality, reliability, courage, etc. With a focus on the stigmatizing language violence directed towards COVID-19 patients during sudden public events, this study examines the moral foundations reflected in third-party response behaviors from the perspective of evaluative resources in evaluation theory[3]. This study focuses on the stigmatization of COVID-19 patients on social media platforms during the pandemic. It initially started with derogatory terms like "xiaoyangren" and gradually evolved into "liangjiaoyang," "gongyang", and "muyang". The research collected 100 comments, totaling 3681 characters, from an

article published on the WeChat account.

Therefore, this study aims to address the following question:

How does the third-party respond to the online verbal violence?

What are the moral foundations reflected in third-party response behaviors from the perspective of evaluative resources?

3. Results

3.1 Responding strategies of the third-party

According to the corpus, it was found that when third-party responders replaced victims of online bullying to respond, they used two strategies: relative politeness and relative impoliteness. Relative politeness refers to the notion that politeness is not an absolute concept and is influenced by specific cultural backgrounds. Western politeness theories have been controversial since their inception. Politeness is a historical and cultural accumulation, reflecting the values of specific social and cultural groups. It is difficult to determine universally applicable principles of politeness that hold true in all contexts. The politeness principles proposed by scholars do not have absolute universality. The corpus shows that out of the 100 comments, 59% of third-party responses employed the strategy of relative politeness, surpassing the usage frequency of the relative impoliteness strategy. There are a total of 41 comments using the relative impoliteness strategy. Criticism, as stated by Bousfield, refers to "depreciating some actions or inactions of the listener, or certain entities related to the listener's face"[1]. Criticism is a linguistic strategy adopted by interlocutors to achieve certain pragmatic purposes. In impolite comments, commenters may use negative evaluative markers to point out the inappropriateness of others' views and behaviors or express their criticism and reproach. Based on the corpus, this study further categorizes it into direct criticism and indirect criticism.

Example (1): "People have cracked up totally. Using "□" to refer to a certain group of people. What's the deal? What kind of crazy is going on?"

The third-party responds by questioning twice the motives of those who stigmatize COVID-19 individuals by asking two consecutive questions: "What's the deal?" and "What kind of crazy is going on?" The third-party highlights the wrongness and inappropriateness of using the sheep emoticon "□" to refer to individuals, expressing their extreme disapproval and strong rejection of this stigmatizing behavior. It should be noted that referring to refugees as "sheep" or "two-legged sheep" was common during ancient times of war, and they would suffer greatly, even losing their lives. This background information underscores the cruelty and insensitivity of using such language to refer to COVID-19 individuals.

Example (2): "There is no moral bottom line to flirt with, s/he, is just sick, but still our loved ones! Respecting others is the same as respecting yourself!"

Through the use of metapragmatic comments, the third-party highlights the fact that COVID-19 infected individuals are just sick. The personal pronoun "s/he" represents the subject of utterance and refers to infected individuals, arguing that stigmatizing individuals and discriminating against them is an unethical form of flirtation. Patients are innocent and should be respected regardless of their illness. By using metapragmatic comments to defend the victims, the third-party positions COVID-19 infected individuals as imagined interlocutors, giving them warmth and support. Empathy is thus displayed, changing the relational tendency and establishing interpersonal affiliation with the individuals.

3.2 Moral foundations

In the corpus, third-party respondents use different judgment resources, including both negative and positive resources, to evaluate and judge the cyberbullies engaged in stigmatizing behaviors, reflecting the moral foundations held by the third-party respondents. The responses from third parties regarding online verbal violence in this study reflect certain common moral foundations. Haidt & Kesebir[2] proposed five universal moral foundations: ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, and purity/sanctity. The judgment resources in the evaluative system introduced by Martin, based on Western corpora, also differentiate between positive and negative social judgments. Positive resources refer to behaviors that carry a positive meaning, which are admired by people, align with moral standards, and are promoted and praised by society. Negative resources refer to behaviors that carry a negative meaning, which are criticized and condemned by people for not meeting ethical and moral standards. However, these theories are primarily based on Western cultures and may not fully apply to the analysis of Chinese-language corpora. Therefore, combining the specific cultural context of Chinese culture, this study analyzed the collected data and identified two main moral foundations manifested in third-party responses to language violence in online public spaces: benevolence and groupism.

Benevolence refers to caring for the suffering of others, including virtues such as concern and sympathy. It advocates loving others

and fostering love among individuals. Confucianism, as the core of traditional Chinese culture, places great emphasis on benevolence. Benevolence is considered the essence of being human, and it emphasizes moral values, self-restraint through moral norms, and the cultivation of noble moral qualities[4]. The corpus data demonstrates that in response to stigmatizing behavior, third-party responses consistently focus on the experiences and suffering of COVID-19 patients. This reflects the embodiment of benevolence, specifically manifested as sympathy, empathy, care, and goodwill towards the patients.

Example (3): "No man is an island, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the whole. Let us all treat those patients rationally. They are also victims of this pandemic. Learn to put ourselves in their shoes, practice more tolerance and care. Our enemy is the virus, not the sufferers."

In Example (3), the third-party respondent highlights that COVID-19 patients and close contacts are part of the same collective with us. It emphasizes the need for empathy, tolerance, and care for one another's suffering. Only by embracing benevolence can we achieve these ideals. Benevolence refers to caring for the suffering of others, including virtues such as concern and sympathy. It advocates loving others and fostering love among individuals.

Groupism refers to the focus on issues related to the obligations of group members, such as unity, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and vigilance against betrayal. Traditional Chinese moral values fully acknowledge the value and significance of collective existence. It is believed that goodness should be fully practiced in collective life. This value system is not centered around oneself but prioritizes the interests of the majority. In response to the stigmatization of COVID-19 patients, third-party respondents highlight our group identity, reminding those engaging in online verbal violence that both they and the patients belong to the same group. Thus, members of the collective should unite and refrain from hurting or separating each other.

Example (4): "We should stand united as compatriots. Even if someone contracts COVID-19, we should not treat them with prejudice. There is no hurry to turn against each other."

In Example (4), the third-party respondent explicitly uses "compatriots" to establish the collective identity of both patients and those engaged in online harassment. They emphasize their moral foundation through the use of judgment resources such as "should" and "should not."

4. Conclusion

The ethical foundation held by communicators is context-dependent on culture, where similar speech acts may reflect different moral foundations in various cultural backgrounds. This localized exploration, based on Chinese language data, reveals that in the online public space, third-party responses to online verbal violence, regardless of the judgment resources used or their positivity, demonstrate a relatively consistent moral foundation. Specifically, these responses reflect benevolence and collectivism. The purpose of third-party responses is to uphold the moral order of the Internet and promote harmonious online communication. When expressing personal opinions on social media, it is advisable to use polite language to create a harmonious pragmatic effect, thus maintaining a favorable online communication environment. This study connects online verbal violence, third-party responses, moral foundations, and judgment resources, hoping to provide new insights and perspectives for related research.

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