

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Pakistani Masses' Talks about Corona Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to critically analyse the discourse of Pakistani masses' talks about corona covid-19 pandemic. The common masses' talks were selected from different sections of the Pakistani society. The participants included religious scholars, professional experts, and common citizens. The study analysed the talks in the light of socio-cognitive approach of Van Dijk (2009). The study finds out that the discourse about covid-19 pandemic is inherently linked to different mental states and social groups' ideological identification. The analysis shows that on the whole, the citizens of Pakistan have mixed feelings and beliefs about the pandemic. Some consider it a conspiracy against Islam and defy the restrictions imposed over religious gatherings. Some believe that viruses can cause illness but not death as is in the hands of God alone. The repentance to God as a preventive measure and to pass the test in this world was considered important. The experts especially emphasized the social distancing and other precautionary measures to restrict the spread of the covid-19. Some positive aspects of the pandemic identified were to think over our points of view and to reconsider the principles believed by us previously. Most of the talks used the speech acts for persuasion for different ends. Most of the identities have cognitive model behind them.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, covid-19, pandemic, Pakistani masses, talks.

Introduction

The corona virus covid-19 turned into a pandemic at the start of the year 2020 battering the world with 7,997,084 patients and causing 435,662 deaths globally till date. While experts in fields are busy in doing research in finding out cure for this deadly and transmissible diseases (Asadi, Bouvier, Wexler & Ristenpart, 2020), scholars from other fields are trying to find out the implications of the pandemic in other fields. The present study, similarly, is an attempt to analyze critically the discourse during the pandemic. Critical discourse analysis considers discourse a form of social practice by taking into consideration the context of language use (Wang, 2006) addressing

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social problems focusing on linguistics characteristics of cultural and social processes.

The experts' views about discourse are lived ideologies implicitly stated through different language strategies and language choices. Different versions of reality are created which are sometimes compatible with the dominant ideologies of different regions (Galasinski & Jaworski, 2002) and sometimes different ideologies of various groups develop in social structures characterized by competition, dominance and conflict (van Dijk, 1998). Ideologies being shared social representations having specific social functions for different groups make interaction and discourse especially relevant for ideological production and reproduction. Thus, discourse having a special status for reproductions of ideologies unlike other semiotic and social codes allows people to formulate and express their abstract ideological beliefs. Discourse tells or reminds us about our ideological beliefs and ideological socialization develop through discourse largely. In similar fashion, ideology of one group is discursively explained, defended and legitimized to other groups which comes to the surface in interactional confrontations explicitly through discourse. Thus, the expressions of these social consequences in the form of acquisition, confirmation and change of social beliefs is mostly done explicitly through discourse (van Dijk, 1998).

During the present pandemic by covid-19, the role of discourse is extremely important as it can turn the discourse into the discourse of fear or of unity to cope with the pandemic. Media and especially social media propagate and spread rumours and news either to misguide or instigate people (Okuda, 2016). The public opinion is reflected and moulded in a particular direction either through discourse or through media. The confronting group(s) portray one another negatively in the local discourse, through choices of words and other strategies as 'others'. (Tahir, 2013). These out-groups are negatively represented and frequently stereotyped through the inter-relationship of ideology and language (Poorebrahim & Zarei, 2013).

Methodology

The present study used a qualitative approach to collect and analyze the data. The data for the present study was collected mostly in the form of oral texts (talks) from only three sections of the society: the common masses, the religious scholars and the experts in corona pandemic. The researchers only collected the data in the form of interviews/questions responses made by the percipients about corona covid-19. Fifteen participants, including five participants from each section, were selected from these three sections of the society. The researchers analyzed only the verbal production of the communicative

acts, thus only the linguistics (verbal elements) of the talks were analyzed and other challenging elements of the talks were ignored. Only a person's linguistic features in conversation can position that person as powerful or powerless, dependent or independent and authoritative or as one lacking in authority (Bakhtin, 1986). The present study used the socio-cognitive approach of Van Dijk (2009) because discourse and social interaction influence each other. The model is a cognitive interface of mental models, knowledge, attitudes and ideologies (Van Dijk, 2009, p. 64). The shared social cognition and its various forms are taken into consideration in this model.

The cognitive processes involved in interpretation and change in interpretation with historical and social changes are focused here (Fairclough, 2001) because ideology being a cognitive and social conception forms a framework for organizing social cognition shared by a social group (Van Dijk, 1995, pp. 17-18). Ideology works as an interface between the cognitive representation of actions and discourse in line with interest of social groups and societal position and their attitude reflects their ideologies. The focus in the present study was on examining how cognitive phenomena can be related to the structure of the talk in terms of communicative events, situation and verbal interaction and societal structures.

Analysis of Data

The study identified different ideologies and different strategies to create, influence and change some of the ideologies that we carry when we talk with others; our fears or phobias (in more or less intense forms) come to the surface in adverse situations. The common discourse of fear in the present crisis/pandemic awakens these phobias. The following types of fear or phobia, either in their severe or minor forms, were identified in the talks of the participants with respect to the pandemic.

Fear of God

Fear of God, the severest form of which, in terms of intensity and time, is Zeusophobia. This fear causes extreme concerns for things associated to God or church/mosque and religious practices. The fear appears on the surface in the form of worries about uncertainty of events, which are believed to be controlled and determined by God. The fear in the form of belief is commonly believed to be caused by the influence of God in the life of human beings, propagated and ascertained by media, family and childhood experiences and dreams. The common psychological processes associated with this fear include exaggerating and over-generalizing, ignoring the positive aspects of a phenomenon, and having one's eyes fixed only over the disastrous and

catastrophic aspects. The present pandemic cognitively suits the spread of such discourse. Phobias in their mild forms are very common, particularly during early childhood. In times of stress like the present one, people can develop phobias and the already existing fears may increase in severity. The ideologies created and propagated in such times are commonly the ideologies of apprehension. The ideologies of apprehension in the religious scholars' talks are clear indications of this fear in the use of words/lexicalization like *Calamity, annoyance/anger, power, greatness, avenge, death* and *admonition*

“If there is a calamity, like corona, only God can save us.” (scholar 1)

“This is a test and a small sign of annoyance from Allah.” (scholar 1)

“The creator of universe makes death prominent which we have forgotten. When death comes collectively like this, people take heed of it. Such pandemics are called admonition, warning, waking people up, and awakening from negligence by the Holy Quran.” (scholar 3)

“Remember death which is the basic purpose behind such pandemics.” (scholar 4)

These apprehensions in the form of speech acts are all claimed to be admonitions from God's side for human beings inhabiting earth. These apprehensions are inherently linked to *thanatophobia* or fear of death of oneself or losing one's near and dear ones. The roots of these apprehensions lie in the belief that this world is a test centre and life is a test. This extended metaphor for life as test is found in the talks of almost all religious scholars.

“World is not ideal, but an examination/test centre.

Every situation (good or bad) is a type of test after which you will return to us.....” (scholar 2)

The differentiation between the privileged and unprivileged is minimized cognitively because the religious scholars consider both the rich and the poor facing different tests to the same end and the tests are in both pleasant and unpleasant situations.

“This world is made for a test. This is a test of both fortitude and gratitude. Allah grants and looks at the response of the person and snatches away these blessings and looks the response.” (scholar 4)

The overuse of the demonstrative ‘this’ shows the concern about the pandemic and its relevance to and relation with the creator. The same point is stressed by helplessness of man in such situation to open or close the door of blessing for himself or for others. These premises claim and confirms deterministic attitude towards free will and reinforced through the use of the words like, ‘where, who, no one’ and later on replied with words like ‘we/us, I’, representing the *we-*

group and denying the *them-group*. The affairs of the *we-group* are supposed to be totally controlled by Allah and there is no role of *them-group*, at least in the important matters like the decision of death. Any such uncertain calamities are claimed to be from Allah's side which is clear from the use of the proper noun '*Allah*' in the talk time and again. The stick and carrot type of ideologies are developed and conveyed in different statements. These propositions are carried to such an extent that it is claimed at the end that corona cannot kill, but only Allah kills. We find paradox in some of the statements.

"No one dies of corona, only he dies, who is killed by Allah." (scholar 3)

Death is exalted so much that it cannot be believed to be caused by one of the smallest creatures like germs (not living by themselves). This fear (or firm belief) is more prominent in the talks of the common masses. Those having no reference to religious commandments still cognitively refer back to their schemas like that they are safe if they act upon religious commandments.

"This disease will not affect Muslims; we believe in Allah. The non-Muslims are afraid of this pandemic. I don't wear mask and gloves because I have done ablution and I do firmly believe in Allah. We believe that those who come out of their homes in ablution will never get any illness except death." (citizen 1)

Some citizens consider the pandemic a conspiracy against our religion and so the closing of mosques and Khana Kaaba were targeted.

"This is conspiracy against Muslims to and against their beliefs to close the mosque, madrassa, Khan Kaaba" (citizen 5)

"The Government wants to get aid. If we don't go to mosques how will we get healthy?" (citizen 3)

Fear of Viruses and Diseases

The fear of microbes (*bacillophobia* in its severest form) is quite logical, though a bit different from *nosophobia* (the extreme or irrational fear of developing a disease) in the present pandemic. We find such fear in abundance in times of contagious diseases like corona. The socio-cognitive aspects are especially prominent here because in our mental model, we know that social gatherings are the necessary part of the social set-up for fulfilling our needs and cultural expectations. The appeals to suspend our social activities in congregations are made, knowing the schema of the needs of others, for these activities.

“For God’s sake, take this issue seriously.....Those with symptoms should quarantine themselves not necessarily suffering from corona.” (doctor 1)

These requests are coloured with the belief in God and with the doctors’ advice to us to stay at home; particularly, the elder ones with compromised conditions. The optimism is clear from the use of the words like *positive*. The precautionary measures are stressed with the use of the words like ‘not necessarily’. The presupposition that we do not stay home is emphatically highlighted by the swear words *for God’s sake*. The entire talk here is either in the form of imperative sentences or declarative with modal auxiliaries. The start of the sentences with verbs (imperative sentences) is used to make appeal for immediate actions (necessary and useful) during the pandemic. The prescriptions being from doctors are conveyed with the help of modal auxiliaries like *should*.

Cognitive Models behind the Talks

Both the religious scholars and the doctors use the speech acts cognitively to persuade the masses for different purposes. The purpose of the religious scholars is to persuade us for repenting before Allah, in addition to adopting somewhat precautionary measures whereas the doctors’ persuasions are meant purely for taking necessary precautionary measures with a mention of our beliefs in Allah. Both religious scholars and doctors’ talks show restorative ideologies. The religious scholars want to restore the peace of earth by returning to Almighty Allah and the doctors strive to do the same through the adoption of precautionary measures.

“I am always positive; we should believe in God but stay at home to prevent this pandemic.” (doctor 1)

“We should ask forgiveness in his court first.” (scholar 5)

The adjunct function of the clause *I am always positive* before the prescription of the doctor to stay at homes shows optimism at the time of crisis and calamity. The repentance to God on our sins is presented as preventive measures against the disease. The love of God (though infinite in measurement) is made conditional with our repentance over what we have done. The presentation of God as a king (someone having court and power) is used to compel us cognitively to ask forgiveness for our mistakes not fulfilling our duties which over shadows the love of the motherly affections.

We find difference in the cognitive models about the government decisions regarding pandemic in the talks of citizen only. Some favour the government decisions and some are not in favour of the decision of lock down. Some favour the policy of the government and some do not, reflected in their talks.

“The government is doing right.” (citizen 6)

“The government is doing right; we should not be afraid of corona but we should fight against it.” (citizen 7).

“The markets should not be closed.” (citizen 9)

“What is happening? Does corona disappear after 5 pm?” (citizen 8)

The analysis above shows that the most of the participants expressed their beliefs and attitudes about the pandemic overtly in the light of their own cognitive realities and audience expectations. Most of the discourse of religious scholars and some citizens and doctors is highly influenced by the Islamic precepts in a cautious and conservative style to express ideas and attitudes about the pandemic (Scollon & Scollon, 1995) and so, their talks were mostly about where and why the pandemic came. While most of the experts' directness in their talk prescriptions about the pandemic stressed the preventive measures of the pandemic not the heavenly link with it. The present context of the pandemic and the social set up here determine and explain what and how we talk about it. Therefore, the lexical items, syntactic structures and communicative strategies selected by the participants were allowed and controlled by the context and situation and their respective positions in the light of the social structure in the society and the definition of this context (whether the pandemic is warning, natural process or a result of our negligence) was linked closely the cognition and ideology (van Dijk, 2006). Following the same arguments by participants (citizens indirectly saying the same things like religious scholars) show the influence of and controlled power of the discourse pointing out that the cognitive model is affected mostly by cultural (here religious beliefs) and social conventions controlling and moulding communication/discourse about corona pandemic. So, talking to others about a particular and wide spread issue is related to the mental model (cognition) and socio-cultural expectations and norms (Golmohammadi, Suluki, Daneshmand & Salahshoor, 2014).

Conclusion

The present study critically analysed the discourse (talks) of Pakistani citizens. The study analysed the talk in the light of socio-cognitive approach (Van Dijk, 2009). The analysis of the talks show that on the whole, the citizens of Pakistan (common masses and not the pandemic experts and religious scholars) hold mixed feelings and beliefs about the pandemic. Some favour the precautionary policy of the government and some do not, because of their own cognitive models and not because of the social aspect of it. They accept the limited role of microbes in small scale diseases and not in acute

diseases like death. Some citizens consider the pandemic as a conspiracy against Islam and defied the restrictions on religious gatherings in spite of the government's ban. These beliefs are expressed in different assertions made by the religious scholars also. The viruses are supposed to make people ill but cannot kill them. That is why death is considered from the God's side and any type of illness (like Corona) can be caused by germs. The common citizen and religious scholars said so because in their mental, death comes only from God's side and nothing can bring or prevent it; so, calamities like the present pandemic can be prevented according to some Muslims by performing religious practices and other congregational ceremonies. The repentance to God on our sins is presented as a preventive measure against the disease. The love of God (though infinite in measurement) is made conditional upon our repentance over what we have done. According to these religious scholars, every situation is predetermined because conditions are brought/created by Almighty Allah, in the world just to test us.

The virologists, epidemiologists and medical practitioners especially emphasized adopting social distancing and other precautionary measures to restrict the spread of the covid-19 owing to their fear of the destructive capabilities of the microbes. Some citizens, and all religious scholars and experts, had the same mental model about the decision of government about the imposition of the lockdown. The doctors also strongly favoured the government's decision of lockdown.

Some positive aspects of the pandemic identified in the talks of religious scholars and experts include thinking over our points-of-view and reconsidering the principles upheld by us previously. Both the religious scholars and the doctors employed speech acts cognitively in order to persuade masses for various purposes. The doctors lay stress over the prevention of the spread of the disease by adopting preventive measures while religious scholars try to persuade us for repenting before Allah. The pandemic like covid-19, according to religious scholars, remind human beings of their limitations. These limitations are cognitive in nature, and remind us of our helplessness in controlling such pandemics mentally or physically. Their talks did not smack of Sinophobia or anti-Chinese sentiments. The analysis above shows that the most of the participants expressed their beliefs and attitudes about the pandemic overtly in the light of their own cognitive realities and audience expectations. Most the discourse of religious scholars and some citizens and doctors is highly influenced by the Islamic precepts in a cautious and conservative style to express ideas and attitudes about the pandemic. While most of the experts' directness in their talk prescriptions about the pandemic stressed the

preventive measures of the pandemic not the heavenly link with it. The lexical items, syntactic structures and communicative strategies selected by the participants were allowed and controlled by the context and situation and their respective positions in the light of the social structure in the society and the definition of this context. The same arguments by participants in different forms show the influence of and controlled power of the discourse pointing out that the cognitive model is affected mostly by cultural (here religious beliefs) and social conventions controlling and moulding communication/discourse about corona pandemic.

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