

CONTEXTUAL THEORY AND ITS RELEVANCE IN CREATING AWARENESS AND COMBATING COVID-19

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Abstract

Contextual theory of meaning, is a theory that looks at how language used under contexts aid in the interpretation and assigning of meaning to linguistic items. The concept, COVID-19, an acronym for Corona Virus Disease which came into existence in 2019 and hence the '19' added to it, is a new concept which was coined as a result of the disease that attacked Chinese people in December 31st, 2019 as reported by World Health Organization (WHO). Before now, nobody knew about this ailment but it has become a household name because of its deadly nature. After sometime, pandemic was attached to it and it became COVID-19 Pandemic. We have gone through the first phase, second phase and now, a third phase, which has been described as deadlier. All these terminologies came into use because of context. This work, therefore, looked at the context under which various terminologies found since the advent of COVID-19, to see how relevant they are and how they have aided in reducing the negative effects of this disease. To do this, the researchers purposefully selected ten (10) concepts to check if they are contextually based. Three research questions were formulated which aided in the analyses. After the analyses it was discovered that all the words used and are still being used were contextually based. And as a result of the contexts of use, language users have taken cognizance of these words and are observing all the rules and regulations placed on those conditions that led to the evolution of those concepts. As a result of these observance, the disease has drastically reduced. The researchers therefore concluded that context of language use to a great extent determine the type of language to use and the language used under context reflects what was happening at that time. The researchers make bold to say that COVID-19 Pandemic came to be as a concept because of that disease that started in Wuhan China in the year 2019 and became a pandemic when the death toll drastically increased as a result of context of situation. They concluded that, words mean in context of use and recommended that language users and researchers should always create environments for new words to evolve and thrive.

Keywords: Language, Context, Context of Situation and COVID-19, and Pandemic

Introduction

Language is a free gift of nature and as a free gift, humans have put language into different communicative uses. The primary function of language is communication. People through language have communicated different messages both religious, political, historical facts, economical issues, health issues and so on, to others. These communications, the ideas and facts communicated were done within contexts. The language used reflected what was happening hence their classifications into religious, historical economic, political and historical as well as health issues.

The Linguist, Mak. Halliday [1995] categorized the various functions of language into three (3). These are the ideational function which is when language is used for the communication of ideas. This

communication function of language can also be referred to as informational, referential or propositional use of language. Whenever people want to gain information from others, they engage in this form of communication. This informational or ideational or referential function of language is very relevant in the context of COVID-19 Pandemic. A lot of people got to know about this disease through others.

The second function of language is the expressive function. This is about using language to express one's feelings – which maybe anger or pleasure. This type of language use are found in common worships, in literary explorations and when people are quarrelling and cursing and swearing. This function of language is relevant when people who contracted the disease express their disgust about the ailment. And the third function is the textual function which is where language is used in recording facts which could be called up for future use. This function of language is very relevant to this study because the data for the analysis where retrieved from documented materials.

COVID-19 as a concept belongs to health register which is interpreted as 'CO' stands for corona 'vi' for virus, and 'D' for disease. Then '19' is the year of its outbreak. Context to a great extent gave credence to the use of the terminologies that existed side by side with the ailment. Within this period of this disease, other terminologies like social distancing, nose mask, sanitizers, phase 1, phase 2 and phase three, pandemic and many more words which either where in existence but where not being used or entirely new words. The old words became popularized because of context of the disease. The new words were coined through language use based on context. This is to show how important and imperative language is in context.

To further emphasis the function of language in creating an environment of use, twenty contextual items were selected and analysed by the help of the three research questions and the theories of the study. After the analysis, it was discovered that the theories were the best theories to be used in the analysis of language under use or context. Some recommendations were made which included that COVID-19 language and words were used under context. The relevance of those contexts reflected the reduction rate of death recorded because the words used either reflected the causes of the illness or the curative or preventive measures. These measures were strictly followed by language users to avoid being victims of the disease.

The researchers recommended that more works should be done using contextual theory in other genres. They also recommended that contexts of situation should not be neglected by interlocutors because it aids in giving interpretations to linguistic items. This means that, to the linguists who use or appreciate contexts, words do not mean in isolation. Other surrounding words in the environment and the events happening help in the interpretations and meaning of such words.

Conceptual Clarification

The Concept of Language

The definition of language is fraught with many varieties by linguists. According to Carol (1953) in Nwaozuzu (2010), language is a system of arbitrary vocal sounds and sequences of sounds which is used or can be used in interpersonal communication by an aggregation of human beings and which rather exhaustively catalogues the things events and processes in human environment. Language is one of the important aspects of human attributes and its development into a defined instrument of expression and communication is to my mind one of man's greatest achievements. Language has to do with every means of communication in which thought and feelings are symbolized in order to convey meaning. Language involves writing, speaking and even gestures including all types of paralinguistic devices.

Language is also seen as the concrete act of speaking, writing or signaling (Crystal, 2008). He points out that there are other uses of the term language, one of which is in reference to competence and performance. The former focuses attention on the native speakers' ability to produce and understand

sentences which are appropriate to the context in which they occur. This is opposed to performance which refers to the actual use of language in specific utterances.

Language is human's most important assets, their most important tool with which they interact, relate, and adapt in their environment. According to Agbanusi (2011) in Akabuike (2014:45), one basic distinction of rationality, involving clear verbal language is speech. Language is one aspect of rationality that is peculiar to man; it is a human activity. Prasad (2007:2) sees language as a "system of conventional spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings as members of a social group and participants in the culture communicate".

One thing is common in all these definitions – that language is used by humans for communication. The language used during the COVID-19 Pandemic communicated a lot of ideas into human beings. Some of these ideas were either what the sickness is about, preventive measures and curative means. Without language, the awareness would not have been possible.

Context and Context of Situation

The word context is from the Latin word "com-texere". Here 'com' translates to "together" and "texere" which means "to weave" when the words are put together the word context means "to weave together". According to Longe (1995) in (Umera – Okeke: 103) said that the weaving together can occur in two ways:

- a. In terms of any phrase, sentence or passage so closely connected to a word or words as to affect their meaning.
- b. Something which surrounds and influences, such as an environment or circumstances. Based on the above explanation context can be seen as "textual environment" which can be internal or external.

According to Ankvist (1973) in Umera-Okeke (2008: 104-105) context refers to only those features of language in any given situation. Other things in the environment which do not affect language situation and this he called "socio-physical envelope" What affects the writers selection of words are the subject matter, purpose and the audience for which the text is meant. Context is, therefore "environmental factors in any given speech situation which include both the textual and situational features.

Yule (1996) in Umera (2008) identified two types of context. These are: Linguistic context and Physical context. The linguistic context is what Enkvist et al (1964) in Umera (2008) referred to as "textual features" while the physical context was called the situational features" when added together bring about the naming of context as "context of situation".

Malinowski (1946) in Umera – Okeke (2000) refers to context of situation as the environment of the text. This is the pragmatic use of language known as "language in action". A proper understanding of the message of a language is dependent on the knowledge of what is going on. The three features of context of situation are, field of discourse, tenor and mode.

Halliday and Hassan (1985) in Umera (2004) define field as what is happening in the speech situation, tenor is defined as the nature of participants, their statuses and role, and mode as the channel which maybe spoken or written or both. The physical context according to Yule is "the time and place in which we encounter linguistic expression". He gave example using the word POST OFFICE, which is written on a wall of a building, once we see this boldly written our proper interpretation of the words is dependent on the physical location.

Both the linguistic and physical contexts are relevant in the interpretations and understanding of covid-19. A lot of linguistic features associated with the disease came into existence which aided in the

exposure and precautionary measures taken by the populace. Again, some of these linguistic measures were written or spoken or even done non-verbally. For example, before the announcement of the outbreak you hardly see offices keeping buckets of water and sanitizers in front of their offices but in the recent time, when such articles are placed, people don't wait for directions from anybody. They, on their own wash and sanitize their hands. Also, pictures of humans wearing face mask were not common before the outbreak but today, these pictures are everywhere communicating and creating awareness about the disease. The messages that go with Covid-19 were either spoken, written or displayed non-verbally.

Register

Register as a concept has attracted a lot of definitions. All these definitions point to one thing - that language used by people engaged in different jobs or occupation. Before going further, let's look at some of these definitions by some scholars.

According to Pushpinder and D.V. Jindal, register is defined as varieties of language according to the situation. (Pushpinder and Jindal 2012). This definition emphasized language use according to situation. That is to say that the situation determines the type of language a speaker uses. They went further to say that one individual can use different varieties of language depending on the situation. The way a lecturer uses language in the classroom is not the same way, he/she uses it in the home, kitchen, when talking to his wife, her husband and so on. This shows that register changes from one context to another. Sometimes register, style and language variation are described as the same but they are not. Variation and style are broader in function while register is narrower. According to Homes (2013:262),

I have used the term 'style' in earlier sections to refer to language variation which is influenced by changes in situational factors, such as addressee, setting, task or topic. Some linguists describe this kind of language variation as 'register' variation. Others use the term 'register' more narrowly to describe the specific vocabulary associated with different occupational groups". It is this last assumption that the researchers are interested in. Register as regards language use by different professions in this case, medical profession or health care profession.

According to Nwokedi (2013: 194) "Register is a term used by some linguists to organize words in categories, levels or groups. It determines the range of words employed by different persons in their different professions or for their subject matters in specific occupational and social circumstance". Nwokedi classified register into literary and technical registers. According to him, literary registers are those words generally used by speakers or writers or which one comes across in the course of reading common materials such as newspapers, magazines, novels and other materials of public interest, while technical register denotes those words used according to specific profession, occupation, specific topic, field or social circumstances. This definition supports what Homes said about general definitions of register and specific definition.

Pushpinder classified register into two. These are (1) Register according to the field of discourse (or the purpose and the subject matter of communication) and (2) Register according to the mode of discourse. In register according to field of discourse, we see such register of science, law, religion, journalism, aviation, Agriculture, medicine/health, and so on. Here, words used reflect these occupations. In register according to the mode of discourse, we refer to whether the register used is spoken or written or even non-spoken or non-written, that is non-verbal. The COVID-19 register is a combination of both the field discourse and the mode of discourse. These two came together to deliver the message of covid-19 and all the new words that came into the language and that is still coming because the disease is still here with us.

Covid-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 as an ailment or virus came to China with the focus being firstly reported in the city of Wuhan, Hubei province, in February 26th. It was initially identified as a novel Coronavirus, designated

as 2019-nCov. Later, the virus genome was sequenced and because it was genetically related to the coronavirus outbreak responsible for the SARS outbreak of 2003, the virus was named as severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) by the International Committee for Taxonomy of viruses.

The origin of source of the SARS-CoV2 remains unknown, although the initial cases have been associated with the Huanan South China Seafood Market where snakes, birds and other animals such as bats were sold. Considering that many of the early patients worked in or visited the market in contrast to the exported cases, it was suggested either a human to human transmission or a more widespread animal source. A suspected bat origin was suggested after 96% genome sequence identity was demonstrated between SARS-CoV-2 and another coronavirus named Bat-CoV. Rat G13 Isolated from bat species which colonized a province nearly 2000km away from Wuhan. However, evidence of human transmission became strongly supported on January 22nd, 2020 after a visit conducted by WHO delegation to the city of Wuhan. Since the first outbreak in February 2020, the disease spread rapidly around the world. As a result of this wide spread it was declared a pandemic by WHO on March 11th, 2020. There are lots of conspiracies moving around about the COVID-19 pandemic. This is one of them (retrieved from www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov).

Theoretical Framework

The theory used in this work is the contextual theory of meaning propounded by Wittgenstein Ludwig in the year 1974. Wittgenstein is a German analyst who is interested in how words make meaning in context. He is of the opinion that, it is wrong to regard meaning as entities. He later opines that the meaning of any linguistic expression, be it word or sentences is determined by the context in which it is used. This theory is also called the use theory.

Another aspect of the theory is the one which deals with the meaning of words and sentences not as isolated entities but as related to situations of occurrence, and use. One such theory is the field theory propounded by Trier (1931). Field theory is a psychological theory which examines patterns of interaction between the individual and the total field, or environment. The concept first made its appearance in psychology with roots to the holistic perspective of Gestalt theories. It was developed by Kurt Lewin, a Gestalt psychologist, in the 1940s. It explains the vocabulary or lexicon of a language as a system of interrelated networks or semantic field, hence words that are interrelated may belong to the same semantic field. For example medical terminologies, Agricultural terminologies and so on.

Semantic field is defined by Finnegan, E (2012: 542) 6th edition as "a set of words with an identifiable semantic affinity. Other contextual theories deal with the context of words and sentences by the speaker of a language. On this issue Firth (1957) says "Language is only meaningful in the context of situation. It is on this premise that Linguists tried to establish the link between syntax and meaning in context of situation. The king died, is grammatical but only fulfil its semantic function if and only if there is a king. Likewise the words used in this period of COVID 19. These words were meaningful because, they were used under context.

Research Questions

1. What is the relevance of context in the interpretation of COVID-19 concepts?
2. To what extent did the context of situation contribute to the combating of COVID-19 pandemic?
3. Of what relevance is the theory of context to the interpretation of COVID-19 concepts?

Empirical Studies

A lot of research had been done in the area of COVID-19 Pandemic and very many theories applied. Some of these were looked at in this section, the differences were drawn and hence the lacuna filled with the present study.

The researchers began this review with the work of Al-Salma, Saleh and Ahmed S. Haider on “COVID-19 Trending Neologisms and word formation processes in English 2021. They investigated on the nature of the new English words and expressions that emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 Crises. They identified the types of word-formation processes and how they contributed to the emergence of these neologisms in the English language. They made a compilation of 30 COVID-19 neologisms from different sources, like web-sites, search engines, blogs etc. After their analysis, they discovered that word formation processes were 80 varied to cover all possible forms of derivation, including affixation, compounding, blending, clipping acronyms, among others, along with dual word-formation processes with compounding and blending being the most discrete. Their findings also showed that the flux of new terms demonstrated the creativity and vitality of the English language to respond to emerging situations in times of crises. By way of recommendations, the researchers recommended that researchers should carryout more researchers on new that have been transferred to other languages as loan words, lone-translation and loan blends.

In another work by Asiru Hameed T. And Shamsuddeen Bello on “A linguistic and literacy analysis of selected cartoons on the Novel COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria” (2021) looked at how cartoonists have used cartoon as a medium to show case the COVID-19 pandemic and its social realities to the world. They randomly selected 10 cartons/texts from the Facebook pages of popular Nigerian cartoonists/authors between March and April 2020. They adopted two models/theories in their interpretation of the cartoons, which are Suls’s Incongruity Resolution (IR) and structuralism. After their analysis, they observed that the cartoons were not just independent texts or images but that they are products of the Nigerian social condition. Their study also revealed that the cartoonists deployed verbal and non-verbal incongruity to present comical images that show beliefs of Nigerians about the pandemic and the level of the country’s preparedness in flattening the curve of the contraction of the virus in international journal of semiotics and visual rhetoric (2021).

Among these works reviewed none of the writers applied the contextual theory as a theoretical framework and those who did saw the new words produced during this time as creative innovations by the users. The researchers are of the opinion that the context provided the users with these new words and each of the words served a particular context of its use. The contextual theory is quite appropriate for the interpretations of the new words produced during this pandemic. This is the lacuna that the researchers have filled.

Methodology

a. Data collection

The data for the study were intentionally collected from the internet sources and specifically on words both new and old that were relevant to the study. Ten of such words were collected.

b. Method of Data Analysis

The ten words intentionally selected were analysed paying attention on their meanings and the contexts of their usage, the research questions and theory aided in the analysis.

c. Data presentation/Findings

The contextual theory looks at the context of use of the new words, to see if they were actually used in context or out of context, what functions the words performed, whether advice, solution or prevention. The words were presented in a tabular form and divided into words, interpretation/function and contexts. The presentation is represented below;

S/N	Words	Interpretations/Functions	Context of Use
1	COVID-19 (Noun)	This is the infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered Coronavirus. This novel (new) Coronavirus was first reported in China in December 2019. The World Health Organization announced COVID-19 as the official name of the disease in February 2020. Other names used to refer to COVID-19 include SARS – COV-2 and 2019 – COV. It created the awareness of a virus.	The name or concept came into existence in 2019. Before now, there was nothing like such a concept.
2	COVID-19 Pandemic	Pandemic is added to COVID-19 include here because of its deadly nature.	Millions of people were dying everyday so, it is not out of context
3	Infordemic	This is (a portmanteau word from information and epidemic) which is the outpouring of often unsubstantiated media and online information relating to a crisis. The term was coined in 2003 for the SARS epidemic but has also been used to describe the current proliferation of news around Coronavirus of news around Coronavirus	This resulted as a result of news about where the disease came from. Some said Wuhan China, some said it escaped from the lab. Some said it came through sleeping with animals, while others said it was through eating reptiles and birds not cooked.
4	Close Contact	This is defined as being within approximately 6 feet (2meter) of a COVID-19 case for a prolonged period of times; (a) Close contact can occur while caring for, living with, visiting or sharing a health care waiting area or room with a COVID-19 case or (b) Having direct contact with infectious secretions of a COVID-19 case e.g being coughed on.	During the COVID-19 pandemic people were advised not to come or have any close contact with the person suffering from this disease to avoid being infected

5	Hand washing guidelines	Proper hand washing reduces the spread of COVID-19 “Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds especially after you have been in a public places, or after you blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing. If soap and water are not readily available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Cover all surfaces of your hands and rub them together until they feel dry. This advice us to make people not to contract the ailment	This advice was given seeing the rate at which people were contracting the ailment
6	Social distancing	This is acts of remaining out of crowded public places contact with others may occur. “avoiding mass gatherings maintaining distance (approximately 6 feet or 2meters from others when possible”. This is an advice from WHO on the citizen, on the avoidance of contracting the disease.	This was used when it became necessary that people or persons stay away from others to avoid contracting the disease
7	Self-Isolation	This is a self-imposed isolation to prevent catching or transmitting an infectious disease	This is also an advice that people should not be exposed to a crowded area.
8	Elbow Bump	This is a way of conveying celebratory please to a teammate, but now means, a means of avoiding had touching when greeting a friend, colleague or strangers	The context of use changed the meaning to its current meaning.
9	Covidiot (N) Blend	This means someone ignoring public health advice.	This happens when people ignore instructions on the avoidance rules.
10	Zoom bombing (v)	This means ‘hacking and/or interrupting video conferencing on the zoom	Zooming became popularized during the pandemic. Lectures, conferences, defences where held through it. This led to hijacking or interruption.

Conclusion

The concept of COVID-19 was made known to the world through language. Language is a tool in the hands of humans and without human existence would be impossible. Language do not exist in a vacuum. Humans in the society use it to represent all the facets of human endeavours, from political, religious, economical healthwise, sociological issues. In the period of the COVID-19, language is also used to propagate the messages. A lot of new words came into the domain of medicine or health to demonstrate

the saying that language use works under context. The new words invented helped in the creation of awareness which helped in the reduction of the death rate which could have been drastic.

The pandemic is still with us and it is also expected that more new words will continue to flood the environment. Here lies the importance of this work. The context of happenings created and helped in creating new words which were used in describing such events. This is opposed to traditional linguists who believe that word mean in isolation through their definition of parts of speech.

Recommendations

Having looked at the relevance of contexts in language use and meaning creation, the researchers recommend that more words should be invented to describe the COVID-19 pandemic and its preventive measures.

Language users should be conscious to differentiate the meanings of words in isolation and their contextual usages especially in this period of COVID-19, as old words assumed new functions and new words assumed old functions.

Furthermore, language and curriculum developers should draw the line between concepts and their contextual uses. Again language teachers should also teach and reteach, emphasise the differences in concepts and contextual uses. Language theories like traditional grammar and modern theories like functional linguistics should be differentiated.

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