

Language Strategies on COVID-19 Releases of Health Departments in the United States in 2020

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Abstract

This paper tries to look at the language uses and strategies in the official releases of the department of public health about COVID-19 in 2020. Six states in the United States were chosen as samples, with differences in geographic positions, land areas, and population. The research method includes generating data and analyzing language strategies that each health department put into the updated releases in 2020. Language ideologies used on “Wuhan” and “China” would be considered as a specific aspect of research since Wuhan used to be considered as the first place in the world where the virus was discovered. The paper tries to determine the purpose of the health department publishing the releases and the impression they were delivering to their citizens about COVID-19.

Keywords

Language strategies; COVID-19 releases; Health departments; US.

1. Introduction

The beginning of 2020 took people by surprise. In January 2020, the first case of the coronavirus was reported in Wuhan, China (WHO, 2020a). The virus was later named COVID-19. It spread throughout the world rapidly and ultimately turned into a pandemic. Until the day this paper is written, total cases that have or had been infected by the COVID-19 is over 40 million in the United States, from January 21, 2020, when the first case was detected in the United States of America, and the number is still increasing day by day (CDC, 2021).

COVID-19 and the pandemic have changed people's daily life around the country, and the attitude of different states toward the virus turns out to differ from each other. By studying the language ideologies used on the public releases of different states, this paper focuses on the different impressions these states gave about COVID-19 to their people during the pandemic. The great pandemic was an unexpected situation to people across the country, even the globe, and the attitude of different states toward the COVID-19 virus and this pandemic is a brand-new topic to study academically. The COVID-19 pandemic is the longest and most widely spread epidemic after entering the new century, and its challenge is unprecedented. Studying the language patterns during the pandemic enables people to glimpse the historic and epoch-making events in human history.

When the first case was suspected in the United States, the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) announced its first release relating to the coronavirus on January 17, 2020 (CDC, 2020a). Following the CDC, the department of public health in each state announced their releases about the coronavirus in one to two months. There are 50 states in the US, and each state is different in population, geographic position, climate, and economy. Diversity on these characteristics indirectly builds different attitudes of different states toward the virus and the pandemic and eventually reflects on the language use of the public releases. According to Whorf, language is not only a tool for us to read and write; it also determines a native speaker's perception and categorization of experience (Whorf, 1956).

This paper will discuss health departments of six chosen states in the United States on their language patterns in public releases. The six states differ in areas, and geographic positions, with California representing the southeast, Texas representing the south, Illinois representing the middle east and north, Colorado representing the middle west, Georgia representing the southwest, and West Virginia representing the northeast. By looking at the similarities and differences in language uses in these releases, this paper is trying to analyze the language ideologies used by health departments and how they were trying to affect the impression and emotion of people in their states through official releases. The research on Wuhan, China mentioned in the releases will serve as a specific case to look at how different states try to further strengthen the impression of the virus by building up the image of Wuhan, which was once believed as the origin of the virus. Data analysis would be the primary strategy in this paper to study the topic. By analyzing data from press releases on the official website, a connection between language ideologies and inner motives will be built to study the purpose of the states and the impression of COVID-19 given by the states to their people through the press.

2. Language Ideologies on Describing COVID-19

In the early period of the pandemic, the chosen states stress confirming to people that the risk of the novel coronavirus is low. Despite directly announcing the information in the releases, they have also used several language strategies to assist their purpose.

2.1. Ideologies used on Titles: Information Amount and Release Frequency

The first part of looking at should be the title of the releases. The release's title is the first and most evident statement that comes into the audience's view. It has to maintain the characteristic of informing the most important message to its audience and attracting the audience to the entire contents of the article (Peat, 2010). In the beginning months of the pandemic, the information published by the health department in each state seems complicated and cannot be measured in a trait; yet after one or two months, when it comes to March, the form of release titles tends to be stable. There are two main types of titles: one contains the keywords such as "new updates" or "new cases confirmed," referring to the newest information of COVID-19 cases in the states; another includes alerts and policy announcements on COVID-19, usually using a declarative sentence as the title of the article. Due to the frequency of public releases, the information within the title of a release can be different. Four states of six continued to update the newest information about COVID-19 and the pandemic as a nearly daily routine, while Georgia and Texas updated only on specific nodes that an evident change about COVID-19 had taken place in the state.

The four states followed the two sorts of titles, mainly informing the daily updates about new cases and changing policies related to COVID-19. For Illinois, West Virginia, and California, the daily releases are titled with the date or the newly updated information. Although the formation of titles in each state differs, an evident trait can be found tracing the releases within one state department throughout the year. However, there is no evident trait for the title to Colorado at first glance. Almost all updates of CDPHE in 2020 begin with "state" – the entire subjective of the sentence is alternative, from "state government" to "state officers," which can be seen totally as representing the government – with a verb following the subjective, clarifying the primary information in the release; an example for this mode is an article released on July 8, 2020, with a title of "State health department refreshes COVID-19 website" (CDPHE, 2020b). Although the title modes of the four states appear to be different due to the update frequency, the information contained within the title tends to be similar. With daily updated reports on COVID-19, citizens can follow up on the traits of the pandemic in their states. With more information provided by

the government, fewer rumors about COVID-19 would surround people, and their trust in the government would grow stronger because of the detailed information.

Due to an unstable update frequency on COVID-19 releases, the titles of DSHS (Texas Department of State Health Services) and DPH (Georgia Department of Public Health) posts appear differently compared to the four other states. Since the two states did not announce a daily report about the COVID-19-related condition within the state, the information within the title of each report values more. In DPH releases, the titles represent the great discoveries of COVID-19 within the state, including mega tests, animal tests on COVID-19, and vaccination progress (DPH, n.d.). The situation remains the same in the case of DSHS reports: titles represent time nodes related to COVID-19, such as creating a COVID data system and the nation's largest serological testing assessment (DSHS, n.d.). Compared to the other four states, the titles of DSHS and DPH construct a chart of the general development – instead of the detailed timeline – of COVID-19 related affairs in the state.

Although detailed information provided would reduce people's questions about COVID-19, the frequent updates of confirmed cases and even fatality data can cause a panic. Here it is clear to see the different strategies and virus impressions of different states: some states opened the entire database to citizens and updated daily on the newest information. These states want to go frank and gain the trust of their citizens through sharing up-to-date information with the public, while other states tend to provide a general view of the pandemic to reduce panic loss. Both strategies serve the same goal: giving people the impression that the virus is under control and the government departments are trustworthy. Trust from people and the stability of the society is the purpose of the releases listed on the official website of these state health departments. Panic can be caused by uncertainty about the society and government from citizens since the coming of an outbreak of COVID-19 can be predicted following the increasing cases. Releases from IDPH (Illinois Department of Public Health) can be a proper instance, for the daily confirmed case numbers are usually highlighted in the title of each release. On April 4, 2020, the daily increased case of COVID-19 broke 1,000 for the first time, and the trends went up and down for several months (IDPH, 2020c). The highest daily increased case number even exceeds 15,000 in 2020 in Illinois, with 15,415 daily increased cases in total (IDPH, 2020d). Because of an undulating number of cases, the pandemic period has been lengthened and has hugely affected people's daily lives. With no end in sight, panic spreads on this road and causes dangerous behaviors such as panic buying (Fu et al., 2021). It is confirmed that groups of people gathering could cause a severe increase in the risk of being infected by the COVID-19 virus (DHHR, 2020a). Therefore, a stable society with citizens obeying the advice from the government health department can effectively decrease the risk of breakouts on increased cases, and thus improve people's life quality and even get back to the regular daily routine before the pandemic. These releases and the language ideologies put on their aim to reduce the panic and worries of people and help to maintain the stability of the society, keeping away the potential damage of the particular pandemic period as well as rumors that may also cause inconvenience for governments to practice and make the plan for next stage.

2.2. Language Ideologies in First Releases

One ideology they use in the release is direct speech or thought of the officers in the public health department. The direct record of simple narration in the press tends to present a neutral viewpoint, yet it may also embed implications of the inner motive to the audience (van Krieken & Sanders, 2016). Most information in these releases is written in an indirect mode of narration, while the critical declarations made by the professionals about COVID-19 are quoted directly to distinguish. The reason to directly cite the utterance of these professionals can be determined to connect with the actual concentration of the releases – to calm people down and keep the panic within limits. When looking at the direct mode discourse quoted in the context,

the similar contents mainly focus on notifying that there should not be any worries about the coronavirus and that “the immediate health risk” is still low (DSHS, 2020). In addition, in the first releases about novel coronavirus in each state, the speaker of the direct narration is mentioned and emphasized with their identity. These information providers are commissioners of state health departments or professional experts in epidemiology; for example, in the first release posted by DHHR (West Virginia Department of Health & Human Resources), the officer and commissioner of DHHR’s Bureau for Public Health acted as an information provider, providing the information about current work they had already done and were going to do about coronavirus (DHHR, 2020a). In the releases of CDPHE (Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment), the name and position of the spokesmen are even bolded, making the emphatic meaning abundantly clear (2020a). The frequent mentioning of officers or experts contributes to declaring authority to the audience so that they trust and listen to them (van Dijk, 1993). With the trust of their citizens, the states can carry out the policy of preventing the novel coronavirus and other COVID-related issues that need the comprehension and support of the citizens.

However, despite the aim of calming down the panic and suspicions, the order of contents in the announcements and advising discourse appear to be different in the statements of chosen states. Some states tended to put the message that the risk of the coronavirus is low for now in the initial one or two paragraphs. One example is the release from CDPHE; in its first release about COVID-19, they stated in the first paragraph that the current risk for the virus in the state is low, making it evident for the audience to capture the information at first glance (2020a). Furthermore, the statement of low risk is put at the end of the last sentence of the paragraph. It is another language strategy used to state important information. People tend to read the first and last words of a paragraph firstly, and therefore it is adequate to deliver the most significant message to the audience by stating it at the beginning or end of the paragraph (Khalil, 2020). The reason to put this information in front is understandable. Under most circumstances, especially when it comes to a possible epidemic throughout the state, the country, and even the world, panic is a hidden danger to the government since people will not rethink what they are going to do before having actions such as panic buying (Fu et al., 2021). The panic would cause chaos to the government and lead the situation out of control. Therefore, putting the message that the risk of the virus is low at the beginning of the release stresses the idea of the department that the situation is under control and there should be no extra worries about the virus.

Although the final purpose of each state to announce the information to the public is to calm people down and decrease the risk of underlying chaos, some states did not put the claim of low risk in the beginning; instead, the message is embedded within the context, and other information is put front. In the declaration from the public health department of Georgia, California, and Texas, the declaration of the low risk is put in the third paragraph, under two paragraphs of other information. There are also similarities between the time and situation when both press releases were published. Both releases from California and Texas were published after clarifying the first confirmed case within the state, different from other states such as West Virginia and Colorado. The two states mentioned above announced their first release relating to the COVID-19 before the appearance of a first confirmed case in their states, with the word “possible” or “potential” within their announcement (CDPHE, 2020a).

Georgia announced its first report on coronavirus on January 27, 2020, a few days after the first confirmed case was found in the United States (DPH, 2020). In the two paragraphs before the declaration of coronavirus as a low risk, the contents are mainly about the current situation of coronavirus within the country and the state. Since Georgia did not have their first confirmed case in January 2020, the release serves as a comfort to the citizens and a suggestion to people in need. In that case, the release is an alert to call on people's attention to prevent the virus and

urge people to put down their worries about the virus so that a further panic may not happen. The first two paragraphs describe the novel coronavirus to its reader, with the definition of "from Wuhan, China and present with fever and respiratory symptoms" (DPH, 2020). Although it is late confirmed that, according to WHO, Wuhan may not be the actual origin of COVID-19, Wuhan was the temporary concentration for coronavirus at that time (WHO, 2020b). Unlike CDPH (California Department of Public Health) and DSHS reports discussed later in the paper, the tone of DPH's first post related to COVID-19 is entirely gentle, remaining some leeway in the utterance. At the end of the first paragraph, DPH claimed that the situation could change (DPH, 2020). Although they had listed current elements found in COVID-19 patients and implied an origin for the virus, the DPH cautiously managed their words so that they would not have to change too much on the declaration of COVID-19 when an outbreak came. Therefore, the first release of DPH contributes to answering questions and reducing worries; it also alerts people about the virus and shows them that they have completed their responsibility of announcing to people the fact. However, the circumstances differed in California and Texas, where the first cases were confirmed when the release was announced.

The confirmation of a definite case can bring more panic to the people since it is a piece of valid evidence that the virus is spreading throughout the state; the fact of having the virus and the confirmed cases would stand out and take the sight of the people, even if a declaration of low risk is shown at first. Also, the subsequent processing of the confirmed cases and the prevention of upcoming increasing cases are cared more by the citizens, for it will influence their lives in the following months. Therefore, instead of bland confirmation from the government department claiming that the risk is low, the opening statements from California and Texas are formed by the processing scheme about the confirmed cases and the potential breakout of more cases. Nevertheless, although the situation of the two first releases from California and Texas is quite the same, the specific language strategies they used are different.

When looking further into the statements made by the two states, different strategies are put to achieve their ultimately same goal. In the release from CDPH, the first confirmed the first two cases in the state (2020a). It would be terrifying for people to learn that the virus is circling them, yet without an official confirmation, the rumors can only cause an even bigger panic. Therefore, the CDPH chose to state the truth initially and fulfill their obligation of bringing the correct truth to their citizens (van Krieken & Sanders, 2016). When it comes to the DSHS release, the information from its first two paragraphs is approximately the same as the CDPH one – to tell people the actual situation of the confirmed cases and the process of how it is confirmed. In the next paragraph – the second paragraph of CDPH and the third of DSHS, both contexts used the direct mode of narration, citing the statements made by a professional officer in the state health department. Directly quoting the utterance brings a sense of objectiveness and reality, which helps gather the audience's trust (van Krieken & Sanders, 2016). The contrast of the two statements appears in the content.

In the CDPH post, the officers' tone sounds neutral and objective, with only an implication on their purpose. The CDPH mainly focused on the effort they had contributed and plans on dealing with the pandemic; the core of the quotation is about what they were going to do and the reason for their action – to protect the public health of California (CDPH, 2020a). Again, the essential message of the whole paragraph is placed at the paragraph's end. The ultimate purpose of this release is to deliver the actual real-time situation to the audience and give a calming pill to the citizens. After stating the existence of the first confirmed cases, which would terrify people, the next thing on the schedule is to demonstrate the positive attitude and some actual methods on the novel virus to eliminate the rumors and avoid a potential panic.

The DSHS release used a different strategy compared to the CDPH one. The commissioner, Dr. John Hellerstedt, clearly stated that "having a COVID-19 case in Texas is a significant development in this outbreak" (DSHS, 2020). At first glance, admitting the reality of an outbreak

happening in the state may be terrifying. Before, it might be rumors or imaginations, but with the confirmation of a government officer, it became a truth, a truth that an epidemic outbreak was happening. However, this statement serves as a concession to the second part of the statement, confirming a remaining low risk of the virus and an overview of the following epidemic prevention. The concession strengthens the latter part of the message and helps to eliminate the fear after reading the confirmed outbreak. With an evident schedule of what to do next, the confidence in the health department is once again built, eliminating the fear of facing a novel virus that can be dangerous. The use of concession is also provocative to people since the word "significant" and "change" set a rising and confident tone to the paragraph (DSHS, 2020). It gives out a solid impression to the audience that although the novel virus may break in in full fury, the government and the health department have made a plan and are prepared for a battle. The strength from the official site is an effective way to calm people down and achieve the goal of marking the novel virus as something that people should not fear.

Both CDPH and DSHS tried to pacify people to reduce the potential loss due to panic, yet they chose two different strategies to realize the goal. One reason for the difference would be a time difference in the releases. The first release of California was published on January 26, 2020, while the first release of Texas was on March 4, 2020. There was a one-month gap between the two releases, and the situation about the virus had changed within the country. In March, there were already 53 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including one dead case (CDPH, 2020d). Although there was only one confirmed case in Texas, a further breakout was already expected considering the situation of other states. Under the circumstances that the confirmed cases were increasing in states throughout the country, a panic was underlying. The first DSHS COVID release faced a more difficult situation than the CDPH one, and citizens were holding more worries about the virus and potential losses. In that case, objective statements and future schedules about COVID-19 would not be enough; people were already worried about their health safety (Kaur et al., 2021). At this time, a strong claim full of emotions does a better job than an objective statement: it soothes worried people and builds a base for their confidence when facing something unknown, including COVID-19 and their future with the virus (Biria & Mohammadi, 2012).

2.3. Image of Wuhan in Releases: A Specific Case

The year 2020 passed under the shadow of the pandemic, with the beginning of detected cases of COVID-19 first found in Wuhan, China. Five of six chosen states have mentioned "Wuhan" at least once in their press releases, usually in the description of the coronavirus. No matter how many reports are updated by the health department, the search result of "Wuhan" in the chosen states disappeared around the end of February 2020. The first release among the chosen states to mention "Wuhan, China", is the release from IDPH on January 24, 2020 (IDPH, 2020a). The first releases of the other three states – Georgia, California, and Colorado – are a few days later than Illinois, yet around the same time, when CDC first announced a confirmed case of COVID-19 in the United States on January 27, 2020 (CDC, 2020b). As mentioned above, Wuhan was the first place to discover and confirm the existence of COVID-19, and thus people from Wuhan were the focus of the health departments of each state at the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the CDC confirmed the person-to-person phenomenon was happening in the United States, all cases found in the US were considered travel-related, especially Wuhan-related (CDC, 2020c). Despite the limitation of worldwide information and researches, mentioning "Wuhan" in the report also serves as a language strategy to calm people down. The unknowns cause much more panic than the known objects, and this rule also fits the origin of the coronavirus (Fu et al., 2021). Since most people in the state may have no information about the coronavirus, giving a clear definition of it can effectively answer their worries. Thus,

implying the origin to be Wuhan, China is a way to pacify people and divert their attention to consider the virus imported from foreign countries.

Also, confirming to people that the one and the only place that needed to be careful about is like a light in the night to the citizens – when mentioning the novel coronavirus, they can connect it with some already-known name and existence, instead of worrying as headless flies, feeling confused and later grows into a panic. If the government did not focus the "origin" of COVID-19 on Wuhan, citizens would worry that the virus was everywhere around them or ignore to keep distance and report suspicious cases to the health departments. The former situation would lead to a potential panic, making it harder for the health departments and the state government to concentrate on surviving the pandemic; the latter also interfered with the work of health departments and other related government departments on testing and confirming the existing cases. Either hypothesis may bring unstable factors to the COVID-19 epidemic prevention, which is the worst thing to imagine for the state health departments. To states which had already had a confirmed travel-related case in late January 2020 – Illinois among the six chosen states – informing Wuhan as a focus for the coronavirus is an alert to state citizens, for there has already been one case within the state. Thus other people who had been to Wuhan in recent weeks were also suspicious of infecting the virus. To other states that had not confirmed any cases of coronavirus – at that time – pointing Wuhan in their releases is an alert message sent to people, as well as a comfort: worries were not necessary at that time, since further investigations had not been done yet; Wuhan was the only dangerous place connecting with COVID-19, although the situation might change – and the situation did change within days, as CDC confirmed a community infection of coronavirus in February (CDPH, 2020b).

Despite the states that only mentioned "Wuhan" once – Colorado and Georgia in their first releases about coronavirus – both Illinois and California mentioned Wuhan three times in their releases, yet both stopped reporting about Wuhan after February. Compared to their first releases, the last release about Wuhan in both states did not focus on this city – it was placed far behind the main paragraphs in the contents. In the IDPH report, "Wuhan" is merely describing the travel history of a confirmed case (IDPH, 2020b). This IDPH release focused on two recovery cases from COVID-19, and Wuhan was no more the focus since local cases were increasing and had exceeded the travel-related cases (CDC, n.d.). In the CDPH case, "Wuhan" appeared in the sixth paragraph, demonstrating the reason for a previously confirmed community transmission case (CDPH, 2020c). The government departments no longer need to place Wuhan as a shield to their prevention work: since the first confirmed community infected cases, the increase of local cases had become a much larger problem to solve instead of travel-related cases. The government had to focus on fixing the community transmission in the states, which transmits faster in a wide range of people.

Except for the five states which had mentioned "Wuhan" one time or more in their press releases, West Virginia did not mention any situation as well as cases related to Wuhan. There could be two reasons: first is that these travel-related cases from Wuhan appeared in larger states that maintain large cities with international airports such as Los Angeles and Chicago, putting them in the first line of defense. However, West Virginia is a small state in the northeast, and thus its chance to have a travel-related case is much lower than states as California and Illinois. The first reason leads to the second one, for the first COVID-19 case confirmed in West Virginia was on February 26 (DHHR, 2020a). On the same day, a local community transmission had already been confirmed in California, and the focus of prevention in most states was no longer on Wuhan and its travel-related cases (CDPH, 2020b). There was no need to alert people to be cautious of travel-related cases from Wuhan and China, and thus there was not a single release mentioned about Wuhan on the official website of DHHR.

From the different strategies and conditions about Wuhan mentioned in the releases of different states, one aim is apparent to see – taking Wuhan as a shield and providing a focus for

the public so that the society can remain stable, and the prevention work may continue. As time went by, Wuhan was no longer needed as a shield to the health department; they had to concentrate on the local transmission cases, and thus Wuhan gradually disappeared from official releases of state health departments.

3. Conclusion

Press releases from the state health department acted differently within the different states of geographic position, land area, and population. However, all roads lead to Rome. After examining the language ideologies used in the first releases, it is clear that the purpose of the releases points in the same direction: to soothe the citizens, reduce panic, keep the society stable, and lead the concentration of the COVID-19 prevention work.

Due to the diverse situation on testing and geographic position, the date of a first confirmed case in each state differs from the other. Even the mode of infection of the first case would also be different. Unlike other states, the first confirmed case in West Virginia was not related to traveling abroad, according to the press release on March 13 (DHHR, 2020b). What is more, the time difference of the first case determined the attitude of the states toward Wuhan, China. To states that had confirmed COVID-19 cases in the early period – before February – Wuhan was highly regarded as an origin and the key to observing the trends of cases, for it is found that the first cases were travel-related to Wuhan. Other states – especially state in the west and south – followed the steps and put “Wuhan” as the prominent object for epidemic prevention. To these states, “Wuhan” was described as a dominant reason for the virus and acted as a shield to announce a temporary safety and a concentration point to advise. This language ideology of putting “Wuhan” in the highlighting positions of the releases helps the government reduce panic and keep the society stable. However, when most cases changed from travel-related cases to local community transmission cases, Wuhan was no longer needed as a shield to help build the concentration of the government. In some states, it was never mentioned, while in some other states, it appeared at the bottom of the article and gradually disappeared.

Within the critical first releases about COVID-19 to the public from the state health department, different language strategies were used to pacify people. All six releases used a direct mode of narration claimed by professional officers or experts within the contents, clarifying a temporary low risk of coronavirus. However, some states implied a possible further change in the situation, whereas others claimed confidence in defeating the virus. This may also be due to a time difference. States with early moves on preventing the virus tend to announce the fact objectively so that people can be pacified by the neutral tone of the statement and stay calm. Nonetheless, to late-discovered states of the first cases, the situation changes. The daily increased cases inclined rapidly, and a distrust of the government was underlying due to this situation. In that case, people need a booster to rebuild the confidence of fighting the pandemic so that panic would not happen and current conditions would not deteriorate. Language strategies are also used in the titles of the releases throughout the year. Some states updated daily reports on the newest information and data to the public. Since the information was updated frequently, there is no need to put much information in the titles – only words such as “daily update” or “increased cases” on a specific date would be enough to learn what they want about the current situation quickly. This method shares data with people to gain their trust, yet since there were too many articles in the database, some critical announcements may be melted and neglected. Other states did not update daily; instead, they only updated on specific nodes when great discoveries and changes took place in the state. In that case, the title of these articles is usually delivered in complete sentence to include as much information as possible in the title so that the readers can get the information at first glance. It is more precise for people to read

in this mode, yet without a frequent update, citizens could not acquire the latest situation of the pandemic in the state, which would lead to a potential panic of information transparency.

Through studying the language ideologies used in the press releases in different states of the US, the purpose and leading policies of these states on COVID-19 and the pandemic stand out and are clearer to disclose. The underlying meanings and implications appear by studying language, and the connection of language and other fields is established (Whorf, 1956).

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