Pragmatic issues and implications of Trump's calling 'Chinese and Wuhan Virus'

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ABSTRACT

Donald Trump is known as a controversial and divisive figure through his sharp utterances. With the advancement of technology, linguistic phenomena travel faster than ever, and this could have serious consequences for the lives of people across the border. In early 2020, while the world has been trying to put all the endeavors to combat the coronavirus and not putting too much attention to the pandemic origin, Trump repeatedly mentioned "Chinese virus" and 'Wuhan virus'. Being aware that such a short statement could bring a disproportionately huge impact on society, particularly Asian-Americans and/or Asians, this qualitative research aims to discuss pragmatic issues that appear in Donald Trump's public statements and the implications for society. The analysis shows that Trump's racist statements encompass 4 linguistic features which include speech acts, reference, strategic maneuvering, and implicatures. His statements flouted two of four basic facets in respect of the nature of any conversation, namely the facets of quality and manner. Concerning the social implications, the use of racist terms is not only corrosive for the global audience, but it specifically scores racial slurs and physical abuse towards Asian Americans.

Keywords: pragmatics, Donald Trump, racism, Wuhan viruses

I. INTRODUCTION

A presidential speech easily captures people's attention for its controversy and uniqueness in delivery. A superpower that a president of a nation holds takes control of a number of parties and, according to Liu (2012), has a strong political tendency with rigid logic and arousing force. The impacts of a presidential speech vary depending on many factors, such as how one uses language in communication. However, in the worst case, it may have a big consequence of war or separation between people who agree and disagree with his/her notions.

The advancement of technology accelerates the implications of presidential speeches both nationally and worldwide. Nowadays, everyone across borders can be the audience and witness a presidential speech of any country and give responses to it through social media in no time. The consequence becomes more inevitably massive. The United States specifically occupies the forefront of international attention because of the massive influence of American culture on the world's creative industry, including media, cuisine, popular culture, business practices, technology, and political techniques, as well as other countries' economic dependency on it (Munawar, 2018).

As the 45th President of the United States, Donald Trump is widely perceived as anybody's business in world affairs. His profession with the highest political position in the country makes any speech of him collectively heard and variously interpreted. Realizing that the United States is a dominantly influential country, the logical expectation is that the president fully recognizes and continues the efforts to lessen tension or conflicts among countries (Wilson, 2015). The presence of a president, in the end, is hoped to help set both its people and the universe at peace.

However, human beings are uniquely distinct from one another. Factors that are under the categorization of the internal/external of a human most likely influence one's linguistic behavior (Mirhadizadeh, 2016). The feelings of fear and confidence, and genetic influences are examples of internal factors, whereas

social interactions are external factors that come from outside the individual. Those can be different for each individual, but their common attribute is that they are based solely on circumstances outside of the control and influence of the learner. Those factors play roles in the formation of a person's communicative ways whether one could be a divisive figure through sharp utterances on social media, direct speech, and live press conferences.

In early year of 2020, the ongoing novel coronavirus, which was first detected in Wuhan, China in December 2019, has become a worldwide and highly infectious pandemic. While the world has been trying to put all the endeavors to combat the virus and not putting too much attention to the pandemic origin, Trump deliberately called the novel virus with a name that has been globally criticized. During the press conference held at the White House on March 20[th,] 2020, Trump repeatedly mentioned "Chinese virus" which referred to as a novel coronavirus in his note, the word "Corona" had been crossed out and replaced with "Chinese" (Chiu, 2020). Although the World Health Organization officially has dubbed the illness COVID-19 or coronavirus, Trump throughout his presidency insisted to rename the pandemic. The US State Department urged the Group of Seven members, which also includes the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Canada, to include the phrase "Wuhan virus" in a joint statement. As reported by Marquardt and Hansler (2020), in the proposed draft statement, the United States also blamed China for the pandemic spread. This short word choice could lead to serious conflict, discrimination, stigmatization, and racism towards Asian Americans who reside in the U.S. and Asians generally.

In the time period between March 13 and September 15, 2020, Trump contextualized the use of similar terms: China flu, China plague, Chinese plague, Chinese flu, Chinese virus, and Kung flu. Those terms were mentioned in as many as 38 speeches from his presidential election campaign, 28 talks at presidential events or meetings, 47 public interviews, 37 press conferences, 35 tweets, and seven re-tweets (Kurilla, 2021). During that time, the terms denoting a rather fuzzy concept increased social polarization.

Utterances can contain either implicit or explicit meanings for many different purposes. In the nature of human language, according to Leech (2016), individuals will never really understand a language if they do not understand how language is used in communication. The meanings of utterances can be learned with attention to the context in which the utterances are made which is known as pragmatics (Allan & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Yule & Widdowson, 1996). In light of this, pragmatics is the basis of knowledge to dig out the motives or reasons for one saying a thing and to discover one's intended meanings, assumptions, purposes, or goals, and the sorts of actions through the conversation contexts.

Interaction could build contexts. To generate specific meaning, human interactions, for example, an interaction between a speaker and hearer are needed. Moreover, distinctive characteristics and backgrounds of every individual, such as gender, religion, ethnicity, occupation, and education, are likely to be the trigger for someone to produce different opinions and interpretations from one another. The aforementioned cultural, social, and interpersonal contexts are important to pragmatically analyze the meanings behind sentences. Andersen and Aijmer (2011) also assert that the role of pragmatics in a language is essential to critically examine how language functions in society work to perceive its various uses and manifestations (2001, p. 320) both for positive and negative purposes.

Therefore, it is hoped that through pragmatics people can recognize and become more aware of interactional meanings and certain states of affairs, such as social injustice, discrimination, and rudeness expressed in utterance among others. As Yule claimed that pragmatics refers to a study of meaning as communicated by a speaker or a writer and interpreted by a listener or reader (1996, p. 3), it implies that Pragmatics can also be considered to be a study of contextual meaning as it covers the interpretation of people's utterances in a particular context and on how the context influences what one has said.

Considering the recent controversial matter, this present paper mainly discusses the news reports and analyzes them from a pragmatic point of view. Moreover, Trump's racist statements disproportionately affect society, particularly Chinese Americans and Asians. In particular, it extends the discussions of the following problems:

- What are pragmatics issues that appear in Donald Trump's public statements?
- What are the implications of Donald Trump's public statements?

II. METHODS

This research used a qualitative approach as it is not limited to investigating what, where, and when, but also critically why and how an issue can happen. This research aims to address questions concerned with developing an understanding of pragmatics and experience dimensions of a human's speech and social worlds. The source of the data is Donald Trump's utterances taken from Youtube when he was the president of the United States.

Good qualitative research is whether the research participants or authors' subjective meanings, actions, and social contexts, as understood by them, are illuminated. Therefore, the analysis is heavily based on the researcher's interpretation and perspectives through the theoretical lens used. The research elucidates the topic and pragmatic theoretical framework to find out the pragmatic issues and implications behind Donald Trump's utterance.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The discussion is based on Donald Trump's utterances during his public speech where they can be analyzed through the lens of linguistic pragmatics. The first section answers the first RQ and explains the pragmatic issues brought on by Trump's controversial statements through the lens of Al-Hindawi and Mohammed's theories of pragmatics. The second RQ, which is about the linguistic implications, is analyzed in the second subsection.

1.1 Pragmatics Issues

Al-Hindawi and Mohammed assert pragmatics issues as specific strategies to understand pragmatic features and to perceive how issues are conveyed through language (2018, p. 166). Pragmatics encompasses 4 language features which include speech acts (SAs), reference, strategic maneuvering (SM), and implicature. In this paper, the writer elaborates on all four pragmatics issues since they are corresponding with controversial news reports of Donald Trump who referred to the novel coronavirus as the 'Wuhan virus' and 'Chinese virus'. Those pragmatic issues are speech acts (SAs), reference, and strategic *maneuvering*.

2.1.1 Speech Acts

Engagement in any communicative encounter entails the use of speech acts/SAs (Al-Hindawi & Mohammed, 2018). Moreover, Searle (1969) mentions that racist or sexist speech is a form of offensive speech that constitutes an intended action, such as persuading, scaring, ordering, warning, or promising (p. 54). However, if the hearers get offended or hurt, the SAs then can be claimed as a perlocutionary act. Searle introduces five macro-categories of SAs. The five categories according to Searle (1976, p. 17- 20) are: "commissives (the speaker is committed to doing something as in promising), declarations (the speaker's utterance causes an external change like declaring war), directives (the speaker gets people to do something such as requesting), expressives (the speaker expresses his feelings and attitudes like criticizing) and representatives or assertives (the speaker informs others about the truth as in affirming)".

Van Dijk adds that directive acts as command and orders are usually used by the powerful to tell others to do or not do something (1993, p. 100).

Looking into what Trump had done in the press conference at the White House on March 20th, 2020, Speech Act is one of the obvious pragmatic issues that emerged here. His repeated replacing diction of the coronavirus with the "Chinese virus" is a form of offensive speech as it alludes to a certain race in a shabby connotation. As his Speech Acts may hurt and offend a particular group of people, especially Chinese Americans and Asians, he could be claimed to be doing a perlocutionary act.

Furthermore, responding to the news report of the US State Department, through a draft statement, urged the Group of Seven to include the phrase "Wuhan virus" in their joint statement, three of five macro-categories of SAs come under. Those are (1) declaration, in which the draft statement proposed by the US State Department caused an extensively external change and response like implicitly declaring conflict among nations and races; (2) directives, in which the US draft statement requested the Group of Seven members to use "Wuhan virus" as the replacement of the term coronavirus in a joint statement and used its political power in the international coalition to penning the G7 draft; and (3) expressives, in which the draft also expressed a vexation feeling and blamed China for the pandemic's spread.

2.1.2 Reference

According to Crystal (2003), reference is a broad research topic with a vague border where the meaning is relative to a specific situation (p. 231). This pragmatics issue occurs when a speaker notifies a piece of information about a particular object and requires definite descriptions, demonstratives, pronouns, and deixis or indexicality (Korta and Perry, 2011). Deixis is a study of deictic expression in language and deals with the semantic area, for instance, personal (you, me), spatial (this, that), temporal (present, past), social (Mr., My Majesty), and many more. Those specific denotations are employed when the status of the interlocutor (e.g. power, age, and position) is recognized. Someone, for example, may say 'that person' in referring to a person who is standing very closely with him only to indicate a power gap or the feeling of disrespect. In revealing racism through language, Van Dijk claims that referencing has a notable role (2004, p. 44). Calling someone by a specific attribute is showing how someone's ideology or point of view actually works.

The fact that Trump sturdily named 'Chinese virus' has proved that referencing is playing its part. It specifically occurs amid the outbreak to escalate attacks on China over the pandemic's spread in the United States. Nevertheless, World Health Organization officials warned against calling coronavirus or COVID-19 the 'Chinese virus' as Trump has done, that the virus knows no borders and ethnicity and fatally it could unintentionally lead to racial profiling. Trump's venture to alter the information about this particular virus (the pronoun and deixis) may also take effects on how people respond to both Donald Trump as a president and Chinese people. Moreover, the stigmatized specific attribute is also showing a disharmonious connection between these two nations which is most likely caused by a certain political factor.

2.1.3 Strategic Maneuvering

To maneuver is to manipulate a particular event to capture an intended goal in a skillful or cunning way (www.collindictionary.com). Strategic maneuvering is a combination of reasonableness and effectiveness. Eemeren (2010) conveys reasonableness as "using reason in a way that is appropriate in view of the situation concerned" (p. 29). While, effectiveness has something to do with rhetoric (e.g. metaphor, hyperbole, pun, presupposition) as well as persuasive technique (p. 29) to strengthen argumentations. A racist, for example, may maneuver a situation like how location or ethnicity is attached to a disease to make stigmatization.

<u>Excerpt 1</u>
"Trump: It's not racist at all. It comes from China, that's why."

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2CYqiJI2pE

In the real case, Trump's racism against a particular group of people, in this case, Chinese manifests itself via his statement. Besides, he has made use of reasonableness in order to drape his intention over the repeatedly racist statement about the term "Chinese virus". Moreover, there is a sense of accusing Chinese or Asian of being infectious though he defended that it is not racist at all as China was where the virus first came from. The statement above is a strategic pun making it clearer that his racism is also shown by utilizing strategic maneuver.

2.1.4 Implicature

Implicature is an additionally conveyed meaning (Yule, 1996, p. 35) by which the original version of an utterance is decorated with or even violating particular aspects in regard to language. Conversational implicatures are occurred due to the violation of fundamental maxims. Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) mentions four basic facets in respect of the nature of any conversation where the speaker has to comply with quantity, quality, relevance, and manner maxims in his or her talk.

The maxim of a quantity refers to when one tries to be as informative as possible and gives as much information as is needed. The maxim of quality addresses one who tries to be truthful and does not give false information that is not supported by evidence. The maxim of relation is when one tries to be relevant and says things that are pertinent to the discussion. The maxim of manner goes to one who tries to be as clear, as brief, and as orderly as possible in his or her talk, and where one avoids obscurity and ambiguity. Furthermore, figurative uses of language such as metaphors and hyperboles are the results of flouting maxims. According to Grice (1989, p. 34), a metaphor is an instance of violating the maxim of quality, while hyperbole is the result of flouting the quantity maxim.

In case of Trump's statements calling coronavirus with 'Chinese or Wuhan virus' are also considered to be conversational implicatures. His statements have been flouting at least two fundamental maxims as proposed by Grice (1975), namely the maxim of quality and manner. Little do people care about the origin of the virus and know exactly whether Trump's statements are valid and truthful. One major thing to notice is that Trump has never equipped himself with any supporting evidence that coronavirus originated from Wuhan China as he repeatedly mentioned on several occasions or at least he has not made a public statement or a clarification over this controversial issue. Thus, the writer claim that his statements flout the maxim of quality as Trump intentionally gives information without evidence that is cannot be accounted for.

In relation to the first maxim, Trump's statements also violate the maxim of manner as he leaves obscurity and ambiguity amidst the society due to the unclear supporting statements and zero evidence over his frequent practice of calling 'Chinese or Wuhan virus'. Therefore, it proves that there is a time when both the maxims of quality and manner are broken by the same factors.

1.2   The Social Implications

Conflict is a ubiquitous matter in everyone's life. Thus, it is important to be able to examine how language functions in social work and to perceive its various uses and manifestation (Mey, 2001, p. 320). Language has a role in shaping conflicts to unfold and resolve (Taylor, 2014), however, the presence of pragmatics offers help to recognize discrimination, rudeness, sarcasm, or injustice within words.

As a president of a superpower nation, Trump is expected to be fully aware of how to establish good communication in order to minimize or even annul harm in the middle of a health crisis situation. The only way is that filtering and consciously considering the word choice or dictions of what is going to be conveyed in front of people and media. However, what Trump and US State Department have done – calling the novel coronavirus with 'Chinese virus' and 'Wuhan virus', is worsening the situation instead. The use of those phrases can be claimed as racist as 'Chinese' and 'Wuhan' are basically related to a specific race. According to Fredrickson (2002), racism is used "loosely and unreflectively to describe all the negative hostile feelings of one group toward another and the actions emerging from such attitudes".

Furthermore, Fredrickson also refers to racism as human differences or negative perspectives of one group against another (2002, p. 6). Therefore, Donald Trump's proposed phrases will most likely increase discrimination, xenophobia, and racism towards Asian Americans particularly Asians, and put them in a marginalized group amid this disorderly panic condition. As a consequence, the anti-Chinese sentiment among Americans is being intense these days.

This controversial statement leads to various reactions from different societies. As social media users, there were around 500,000 hashtags with #covid19 showed anti –Asian hate, yet the anti-Asian bias occurred in half of more than 775,000 hashtags with #chinesevirus (Kutzman, 2021). One study also found out there were nearly 700,000 tweets containing 1.3 million hashtags in the week before and after the president's reference to the "Chinese virus". The contrary statements were also uttered by public health experts concerning this may spread anti-Asian worldwide. They mentioned avoiding using locations or ethnicity for the disease (Rogers, 2020).

Verbal and physical attacks linked to coronavirus fears are emerged in the United States (Chiu, 2020) and Asian Americans are the endangered ones. Meanwhile, Trump's frequent practice of calling the 'Chinese virus' or 'Wuhan virus' will ratchet up tensions and hostility between the United States and China. Furthermore, the chosen term is also fueling hatred and prejudice of the global audience who are non-Chinese if the number of racial slurs and physical abuse incidents is increasing.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

According to the discussion above, the writer can draw a conclusion that pragmatics is the study of invisible meaning which means the intended meaning is not necessarily written or spoken. In order to dig out the substantive intentions, one must be able to understand the pragmatic features to perceive how issues are conveyed through language. Moreover, one needs to rely on the use of pragmatics to consider a wide variety of shared assumptions, presuppositions, and expectations when they are communicating with the interlocutor or listening to a speaker.

Pragmatic phenomena can be discussed in the pragmatics issues which include speech acts (SAs), reference, strategic maneuvering (SM), and implicature (Al-Hindawi and Mohammed, 2018). In this paper, the writer elaborates on all four pragmatic issues corresponding to the controversial issue of the US State Department and Donald Trump's increasingly frequent practices of calling the coronavirus the 'Chinese Virus' and 'Wuhan virus'. The use of these two terms is not only corrosive for the global audience, but it specifically scores racial slurs and physical abuse towards Asian Americans in the United States. One important thing to note is that the virus does not consider any border nor care about race, ethnicity, skin color, and how much money we have. It can attack anyone regardless of someone's identity anytime and anywhere.

Therefore, it is important to be careful in language use and diction as they lead to the profiling of individuals associated with the virus. All in all, it is hoped that through pragmatics people can recognize

and become more aware of interactional meanings and certain states of affairs, such as social injustice, discrimination, and rudeness expressed in utterance among others. Most importantly, people will also know how to minimize or even annul the negative consequences of intentional language production.

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