Pragmeme, adaptability, and elasticity in online medical consultations

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ABSTRACT

Although doctor-patient communication is an important part of medical discourse, the question remains as to how the paradigm operates when communication shifts from face-to-face interactions to the digital environment. This study investigates how Taiwanese medical doctors explored situational affordances when engaging in online medical consultation (OMC). Based on satisfaction ratings provided by online inquirers, this study also examines the contributing factors for a favorable or unfavorable reception of a reply in OMC, adopting the conceptual frameworks of pragmeme theory, adaptability and elasticity of language use. It proposes a model for analyzing acts performed in the pragmeme of OMC, and reveals how high-performance cases were characterized by a set of discourse features (e.g. a fitted question-answer match, personalized information for a specific inquirer, appropriate stretching of speech act range and of language) different from those found in low-performance cases (e.g. a question-answer mismatch, general public health information not tailored for individuals, no or little stretching of speech act range and of language). Furthermore, the study reveals how strong adaptability is achieved by an overall tendency to explore situational affordances and overcome situational constraints while weak adaptability is characterized by a tendency that stresses constraints without appropriately utilizing affordances. One implication is that medical communication does not have to be categorical — elastic information could be more effective.

1. Introduction

Research into medical and therapeutic discourse has contributed significantly to the developments of conversation analysis and pragmatics (e.g. Heritage, 1997; Heritage and Lindström, 1998) and discourse analysis (e.g. Labov and Fanshel, 1977; Sarangi and Roberts, 1999). With the prevalence of technology-mediated communication, emerging health communication is taking advantage of social media and mobile platforms (Chou et al., 2013). As such, various types of online health communication provide fresh data for the studies of emerging and evolving health communication. Among them is online medical consultation (OMC, hereafter).

Significant to online health communication are issues concerning language and discourse in the online environment. Some studies addressed how non-professional peers offered advice in Online Support Groups (OSGs) that deal with different

health topics and problems (Morrow, 2006; Stommel and Lamerichs, 2014). They showed that advice was given in different forms in this online environment, e.g. storytelling (Veen et al., 2010), use of the *if-then* formulation (e.g. *if you eat a varied diet, then there shouldn't be any problems*) (Sneijder and te Molder, 2005: 678), and unsolicited advice (Vayreda and Antaki, 2009). Some other studies examined online written interactions between health seekers and medical experts. For example, Locher (2010) analyzed how medical professionals mitigated their expressions of advice giving by using indirectness and hedging. Pounds (2018) investigated the discourse features used by medical experts in a UK healthcare site to achieve a patient-centered communication style, which is characterized by empathetic expressions and mitigated advice-giving. Zummo (2016) argued that online doctor-patient communication is affected by the medium itself and is not always like typical doctor-patient communication expected in a clinical setting.

The existing studies of OMC have brought new insights into health communication in the digital age. However, there exists a significant gap in the literature: the data these studies drew on were mainly from Europe and from English-speaking countries and little research has been conducted into the discourse of OMC written in Chinese. In order to bridge the gap, this study uses authentic data from an OMC site based in Taiwan. The website is so designed that health seekers who consult their chosen medical doctors online can also rate the replies they receive on a five-star scale. Although most of the inquirers did not choose to evaluate the replies they received, some did so. Among cases that were rated, we can distinguish high-rated ones (4 or 5 star rating) from low-rated one (1 or 2 star rating). The availability of such evaluations makes it possible to collect empirical data that may constitute high- *vs*. low-performance OMC cases. By adopting a pragmatic approach, this project aims to address the following three research questions:

(1) What specific communicative behaviors can be identified in the collected cases of OMC from a pragmatic perspective?
(2) Are there any discourse dimensions that distinguish high-rated cases from low- rated ones? If so, what are they?
(3) What situational affordances do doctors explore over the Internet to overcome the constraints of OMC (e.g. no physical examination conducted)? That is, what discourse features contribute to empowering physicians' adaptability to OMC and enhancing their interactions with inquirers?

The inquiry is expected to contribute to pragmatic research into OMC in Chinese, building a better understanding of what would affect the reception of online medical advice and shedding light on what communication style would enhance or hinder OMC interactions. We adopt a pragmatic perspective that integrates three key concepts: pragmemes (i.e., generalized situations where interactions unfold) (Mey, 2001; Allan et al., 2016), adaptability (i.e., the interlocutor's ability to adapt to communicative needs by using language appropriately) (Verschueren and Brisard, 2009) and elasticity of language use (i.e., stretching language on a continua between being cooperative and competitive, firm and flexible) (Zhang, 2011, 2015). These concepts are useful because they connect language use on different levels, ranging from a macro level (a broad viewpoint that considers situations where speech acting is performed), through a meso-level perspective that examines how interlocutors mediate between situational affordances and constraints, to a micro level which looks at words that contribute to making statements flexible. Furthermore, this is an empirical study, adding an evaluative dimension to pragmeme theory, as its data were collected from authentic OMC interactions rated by inquirers. It argues that an account of OMC encounters using the adopted concepts sheds light on the macro-, meso-, and micro-level use of language.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 elucidates the adopted concepts. Section 3 explains details regarding data collection. Analyses of selected OMC cases are presented in Section 4, followed in Section 5 by a further discussion of discourse features exemplified in high-rated and low-rated cases, respectively. The insights and contributions of this study, together with suggestions for further research, are given in Section 6.

2. Theoretical foundations

2.1. Pragmeme and pragmatic act

A *pragmeme* is "a generalized pragmatic act" – "a general situational prototype, capable of being executed in the situation" (Mey, 2001: 221). The notion is intended to bring society into the focus of speech acting rather than treating sentences as necessarily able to perform specific acts irrespective of the situation. A given pragmeme can be actualized by concrete individual pragmatic acts called "practs". "The instantiated, individual pragmatic acts, the 'ipracs' or *practs*, refer to a particular pragmatic pragmeme as its realizations" (Mey, 2001: 221; emphasis original).

The notion has been developed and enriched by subsequent studies. For example, Capone (2005) defines pragmeme firmly within a socially-oriented framework: "[a] pragmeme is a situated speech act in which the rules of language and of society synergize in determining meaning, intended as a socially recognized object, sensitive to social expectations about the situation in which the utterance to be interpreted is embedded" (p. 1357; see also McHoul et al., 2008). Capone (2018) further argues that a pragmeme is not "a generative device that creates texts but needs pragmatic interpretation, such as top-bottom inference" (p. 89). Because speaker and hearer, their relationship, and the situation vary from case to case and from society to