

Pragmatic Functions of Discourse System Constructed by New Media in Public Health Emergencies—Taking *Shanghai Fabu* as an Example

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This paper aims at studying the pragmatic functions of the discourse system constructed by the official version of Wechat, the *Shanghai Fabu*, when the city was challenged by the outbreak of COVID-19 since 2020. On the basis of analyzing the content and word frequency, the article tends to explore the pragmatic functions of the discourse, such as the emotional function, political function, and behavioural function, so as to provide relevant reference for the effective construction of discourse system and improvement of the new media's role in response to public health emergencies.

Keywords: new media, discourse system, pragmatic function, public health emergencies

Introduction

From the perspective of linguistics, the research on news reports in crisis communication mainly focuses on three parts: the application of language in emergency resolution of crisis events, the metaphorical use of public health news reports, and the discourse analysis of crisis news reporting as the process of communication. Discourse analysis was first proposed by Harris, an American structuralist linguist, and later became a method of systemic functional linguistics to study the relationship between discourse and reality in real context. As a research method of linguistics, the combination of discourse analysis and journalism and communication originated from the Dutch scholar Van Dijk. He points out that news is also a kind of discourse. Since then, news analysis has ushered in a new research idea and method. Discourse analysis in crisis communication news reports mainly takes the discourse or some discourse structures of relevant discourses in crisis event news as the research object, analyzes the problems that affect language communication in the process of dialogue with the audience, and puts forward corresponding suggestions for improvement. Taking the contents, rumors, and slogans of the press spokespersons in crisis events as the research objects (Wang & Hou, 2012; Peng, 2020) analyze the potential discourse structures from multiple perspectives.

The construction of discourse system by new media and the exertion of pragmatic functions in public health emergencies are of great significance for effective response and management of crisis (Yan, 2023). In the

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construction of discourse system, the new media platform can make good use of linguistic features of a language and employ various metaphorical methods to disseminate information in real time, and integrate multi-channel information, so as to provide and highlight timely, comprehensive, and accurate information (Ye & Gao, 2023). In light of pragmatic functions, new media plays a role in providing channel for emotional catharsis and emotional support, guiding and monitoring public opinion, promoting the participation and interaction of netizens, so as to help the public bravely face and effectively prevent and control the epidemic.

Shanghai Fabu is a new media platform launched by the Information Office of the Shanghai Municipal Government in 2005. It is known to the public as the official WeChat of Shanghai Municipal Government, which aims to provide citizens with authoritative, timely, and convenient government information services. The number of eight million followers brings *Shanghai Fabu* to the forefront of government new media nationwide. It not only provides the latest policies and news issued by various government departments, but also releases practical information about urban transportation, public services, social life, and other aspects, and answers questions from citizens.

Research Content and Method

This paper collects data from the articles published on *Shanghai Fabu* during three landmark periods of the Coronavirus pandemic to study the construction of the discourse system of *Shanghai Fabu*.

The first phase is from January 19 to February 20, 2020. At the end of 2019, pneumonia of unknown cause was found in Wuhan, and an outbreak occurred in January 2020. On January 19, *Shanghai Press Conference* published an article on the epidemic for the first time, which was entitled “Shanghai Should Strengthen the Screening of Suspected Cases and Actively Prevent and Control COVID-19”.

The second phase is from March 1 to June 1, 2022. Since March 2022, a new round of COVID-19 broke out in Shanghai. As a public health emergency, it has brought great challenges to Shanghai’s anti-epidemic measures and public opinion environment.

The third phase is from December 7 to December 31, 2022. On December 7, 2022, the release of the new ten national epidemic prevention and control measures marked a new phase of China’s epidemic prevention and control policy.

A total of 446 articles directly related to the epidemic were collected from the *Shanghai Fabu* official website through Spyder software, and the data were analysed by means of Origin 2021 and SPSS 26 software. This paper combines the case study with data analysis and word frequency statistics to analyse the features of the discourse system in terms of content and word frequency, and examine the pragmatic functions in light of emotional functions, political functions, and behavioural functions.

Features and Pragmatic Functions of the Discourse System Constructed by *Shanghai Fabu*

Features of Discourse System Constructed by *Shanghai Fabu*

Content features. *Shanghai Fabu* divides the content of its articles into different sections with the symbol “[]”, and mostly publishes and disseminates images and texts in different sections highlighted by simple words or phrases, such as “[最新] Latest”, “[便民] Convenience”, “[注意] Attention”, and “[探索] Exploration”. These sections are not fixed; instead the platform would adjust the sections according to the development of the epidemic to maximize its functions and bring convenience to the public as much as possible.



Figure 1. Section frequency distribution of three phases.

Through the analysis of 446 articles related to the epidemic released in Shanghai during the three phases, which belong to different sections, a pie chart as shown in Figure 1 is obtained.

It can be seen that the top five sections in terms of the number of articles during the first phase are “[提示] Tips”, “[聚焦] Focus”, “[最新] Latest”, “[便民] Convenience”, and “[注意] Attention”. “[聚焦] Focus”, “[最新] Latest”, and “[注意] Attention” directly offer the latest information to the public, while “Convenience” and “Tips” aim at giving help to people who did not have a clear picture of the epidemic.

In the second phase, the top five sections are “[提示] Tips”, “[最新] Latest”, “[探索] Exploration”, “[便民] Convenience”, and “[天气] Weather”. During this period, people had experience of fighting against the COVID-19 and the situation in Shanghai was relaxing. The different districts in Shanghai may have flexible policies, which are introduced in the section of “[探索] Exploration”. The section “[天气] Weather” came back, the section irrelevant to the COVID-19, which indicates that the life is coming to normal.

In the third phase, the top five sections are “[提示] Tips”, “[最新] Latest”, “[服务] Services”, “[便民] Convenience”, and “[天气] Weather”. During this period of time, people needed medical help from the professionals, so a new section “Services” appeared and introduced the services relating to medical help.

It is noteworthy that each section is entitled with a simple word or phrase, such as “[提示] Tips” and “[最新] Latest”. With the help of the simple and understandable vocabulary in the title, readers can quickly capture the key information and click the article to read according to their own needs, which can greatly soothe the people’s anxiety during the special period of time. Each section publishing and dissemination method can improve reader’s reading experience, increase the transmission effect of information, and also improve the readability and operability of information, providing readers with more comprehensive, convenient, and targeted information services.

Word frequency. By analyzing the frequency of keywords that appear in the three phases’ articles, we can get in Figure 2.

In the first phase, according to the analysis of the “Tips” section, the main keywords of the article are “Shanghai”, “epidemic prevention”, “measures”, “policies”, and “guidelines”. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the COVID-19 has been a major public health emergency with the fastest transmission speed, and the widest range of infection. Therefore, the relevant information at this time is conducive to stabilizing people’s minds.

In the third phase, the words with the most relevant occurrences are “safety”, “good”, and “Shanghai”. The word frequency which has close relation with epidemic prevention decreased significantly. It can be seen that at this phase, the articles published in *Shanghai Fabu* paid more attention to the guidance of medical services and the adjustment of people’s mentality.



News reports on the current new coronavirus epidemic not only serve as a dialogue with potential audiences, but also reflect the credibility of the national language and help to build the image of the government. It has achieved very special pragmatic functions, such as policy communication, public opinion collection, public service, interactive communication, publicity and promotion, emergency notice, image building, data support, and other aspects.

In real communicative situation, different discourses may be designed and realized for different pragmatic functions. As a platform managed by the government to help people deal with the unexpected emergency, the *Shanghai Fabu* has deliberately constructed discourses to successfully achieve emotional, political, and behavioral function, which is conducive to strengthening the connection and interaction between the government and the public, and improving government efficiency and public participation.

[Latest] Wear *white armour, come forward*, and *thank you* for building an *indestructible line* of defense in the battle of Shanghai.

This is an article that pays tribute to medical staff. The terms like “armour” and “indestructible line” indicate medical staff’s strong role in fighting against the epidemic, which may serve as the confirmation of their irreplaceable contribution and reveal people’s confidence on them. Medical staffs are highly encouraged. Meanwhile, the term “thank you” helps the common people voice their appreciation for the medical staff, which greatly strengthens the bond between them. By describing their touching stories during the epidemic, the article conveys positive emotions and achieves positive emotional function.

Political function. Political function refers to the political stance and policy tendency chosen by the media when reporting public health emergencies, either support or criticism of the government or the evaluation of response measures. Political orientation can influence the public’s cognition and evaluation of the government, promote the government to take effective measures to deal with the epidemic, and supervise and evaluate the government’s decision-making, which is conducive to maintaining social stability and justice. During the epidemic period, articles published in *Shanghai Fabu* were relatively neutral in their political orientation, focusing on disseminating positive information and the work and measures of the government and relevant departments to promote social stability and maintain social order.

Example 2: 政府及有关部门出台防控措施报告, 防止外来输入, 防止内部反弹, 积极促进生产生活常态化!

Report on the prevention and control measures issued by the government and relevant departments, prevent import from outside, prevent rebound from inside, and actively promote the normalization of production and life order!

This article objectively interprets the current epidemic prevention policy, which is in line with the view of political communication theory; that is, political orientation is an important factor in the dissemination of political information, and should remain neutral and objective to promote the public’s understanding and recognition of political information. People’s comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the work of the government can promote social cohesion and centripetal force, which is conducive to the response to and control of the epidemic.

Behavioral function. Behavioural function refers to the behavioural initiatives and suggestions conveyed by the media when reporting public health emergencies, such as asking the public to maintain social distancing and calling on all sectors of society to donate epidemic prevention materials. During the epidemic period, *Shanghai Fabu* published articles with a positive behavioural orientation, such as calling on everyone to abide by the relevant regulations and measures of epidemic prevention and control, and jointly defeat the epidemic.

Example 3: 来沪返沪人员必须遵守疫情防控要求, 不得阻挠、拒绝相关人员返乡。

People coming and returning to Shanghai *must* abide by these epidemic prevention and control requirements, and *must not block or refuse* relevant people to return to their communities.

In the article, the editor repeatedly uses the modal verb “must” to directly tell the public what should be done and what should not be done. It serves as the guideline for people’s behaviour. As the official platform, it is very authoritative. The publication of such articles conforms to the behavioural communication theory. That is, the purpose of communication is to influence people’s behaviour and make some changes to achieve the desired purpose.

Conclusion

In public health emergencies, *Shanghai Fabu*, government WeChat public account, makes full use of linguistic theory to enhance the influence and value of government WeChat through a series of positive emotional incentives, and enhances the public’s awareness and willingness to participate in emergencies. This communication mode based

on the construction of discourse system can help to reduce panic and misunderstanding, shape political identity, promote good interaction and cooperation between the government and the public, and provide important support for the handling of public health emergencies.

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