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THE RACIST PANDEMIC
A Semantico-Pragmatic Study of the Anti-Asian Overtones in COVID-19-related Twitter Discourse

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Abstract – 2019 saw the emergence of a new human pathogen, SARS-CoV-2, which causes a disease currently known as COVID-19. There are, however, other names which expose the Asian origin of the virus. These ways of reference – although discouraged by the scientific community – still remain in frequent use in various COVID-19-related discourses. Such names explicitly point to the geographical place of origin of the virus, but at the same time are likely to provoke associations and solidify pre-existing stereotypes about Asians as well as strengthen misconceptions about the virus itself. The intention of the use of terms such as *Chinese virus* may be purely referential, but they are, nonetheless, marked with accusatory or downright racist overtones. The present paper is maintained within the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework (van Dijk 1993), as CDA aims specifically to examine the ways in which discourses shape power relations, maintain social stigmas, perpetuate stereotypes and widen inequalities. We use CDA as a framework for conducting a semantic analysis of expressions such as *Asian virus, Chinese virus*, *Sinovirus* or *Wuhan virus* used on Twitter. Specifically, we intend to select the usages that are unequivocally intentional and whose aim is not only to emphasise the geographical origin of the virus, but also to justify blaming China for the global pandemic that SARS-CoV-2 eventually has caused. We have found that potentially harmful names such as *Chinese virus* have been used intentionally and are accompanied by even more blatant cases of defamatory and accusatory language targeting the Chinese. It is even more significant, as the proliferation of anti-Asian hate speech has culminated in a serious aftermath in the form of anti-Asian violence, especially in the US.

Keywords: COVID-19; Twitter discourse; Critical Discourse Analysis; meaning potentials; polarising discourse.

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic at the turn of 2019 and 2020 has changed the world as well as the ways in which we think and talk about it forever. The pandemic has been widely discussed in the mainstream and social media alike and led to a gradual evolution of a new language with unprecedented increases in the use of expressions such as “social distance” or “economic lockdown” as well as the creation of brand new neologisms (or

"coroneologisms"), such as "covidiots", "covidients" (Asif et al. 2021; Roig–Marín 2021). It has also led to an avalanche of internet comments and social media posts, some of which containing what may be considered hate speech. In the present paper we attempt to take a closer look at one social media platform in particular – Twitter. We focus on one aspect of harmful language use and hate speech aimed at the Asian community, i.e. the problematic ways of referring to the virus used in the context of tweets. We specifically analyse tweets containing expressions such as "Chinese virus", "Asian virus", "Wuhan virus" and "Sinovirus" in order to evaluate the intention behind these particular naming choices. We investigate selected tweets using Critical Discourse Analysis methodology (van Dijk 1993), coupled with findings from the research on pragmatic effects related to activation of specific meaning potentials (Norén and Linell 2007). We claim that numerous tweets which contain expressions such as "Chinese virus" exhibit also other linguistic strategies whose aim is to present a derogatory image of the Asian community. With this in mind, the article is meant as a contribution to the already existing body of research on COVID-related hate speech towards the Asian ethnicities by offering another analytic, semantic perspective grounded in the CDA framework.

2. Social media reflecting public opinions

The role of social media in general, and microblogging platforms, such as Twitter, in particular in gauging social opinions and sentiments cannot be overestimated. Multiple scholars including linguists and social scientists have recognised the usefulness of researching social media discourse in probing attitudes towards current social and political affairs as well as other pressing global (or local) concerns. For instance, Altoaimy (2018) investigates the role Twitter played in the debate of women's right to drive in Saudi Arabia and found it to be a consequential platform for expressing and shaping opinions on this topic. Calabrese et al. (2020) use Twitter as a window to the public's perceptions surrounding CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing technology. Bhatt and Pickering (2021) study public perceptions about Nepalese National Parks as they are expressed on Twitter. Gonsalves et al. (2021) focus on women's experience of cardiovascular disease exploring #MoreMoments cardiovascular disease awareness campaign. Osterbur and Kiel (2021), in turn, analyse Twitter discourse of the American Jewish communities. Demata (2021) examines the former US President Donald Trump's tweets about the construction of the wall on the US-Mexico border. These articles represent just a sample of a fast-growing body of research on the expression of public sentiments and opinions in the Twitter discourse.

In the present paper we focus on a subgroup of articles which deal with the expression of public opinion concerning COVID-19 pandemic found on social media in general and Twitter in particular. Unsurprisingly, research on this topic is growing and spreading almost as fast as the pandemic itself. For instance, Budhwani and Sun (2020) research social media data and claim that referring to the virus in inadvisable ways (i.e. as "Chinese virus" or "China virus") has the potential to create and perpetuate a stigma around it. They observed the rise in tweets containing "Chinese virus" and "China virus" after the reference made by US President Donald Trump on 16 March 2020 in which he used the term "Chinese virus". "The rise in tweets referencing 'Chinese virus' or 'China virus,' along with the content of these tweets, indicate that knowledge translation may be occurring online and COVID-19 stigma is likely being perpetuated on Twitter" (Budhwani and Sun 2020). Their data collection method enabled them to extract only those tweets in which non-scientific and stigmatising terms are used and in this way they "collated a sample of tweets that represented the intent of using 'Chinese virus' in place of a scientific alternative, likely indicating deliberate stigmatization". Dubey (2020) points to the increase of hateful comments targeting the Asian community in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic. He investigated the growing numbers of cyber racism incidents by assessing emotions and sentiments expressed in a corpus of 16000 Twitter posts and found that "the majority of the analyzed tweets were of negative sentiment and carried emotions of fear, sadness, anger, and disgust. There was a high usage of slurs and profane words. In addition, terms like 'China Lied People Died,' 'Wuhan Health Organization,' 'Kung Flu,' 'China Must Pay,' and 'CCP is Terrorist' were frequently used in these tweets" (Dubey 2020). Thus, it can be concluded that – like in the case of Budhwani and Sun's research findings – cases of deliberate hate speech are rife in coronavirus-related tweets. Another study by Lwin et al. is also "aimed to examine worldwide trends of four emotions—fear, anger, sadness, and joy—and the narratives underlying those emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic" (Lwin et al. 2020). They analysed over 20 million tweets containing keywords such as "Wuhan", "corona" and "covid" and found the gradual shift of public emotions from fear to anger over the course of the pandemic. Olza et. al. (2021) provide the background of the #ReframeCovid initiative whose aim is to collect alternatives to war metaphors for COVID-19. They summarise its development and provide the main outcomes, drawing attention to the importance of metaphor selection (as part of general language use) in framing sensitive social issues. As mentioned by Dubey, Twitter has been analysed as a reflection of public sentiment concerning not only coronavirus pandemic, but also previously encountered health issues:

> Sentiment analysis of tweets has also been used to determine the general population's perspective on different diseases. Sentiment analysis of Twitter

> posts has been carried out to study the topic coverage and sentiments regarding the Ebola virus (Kim, Jeong, Kim, Kang, and Song 2016). This study separately analyzed two media sources (i.e., Twitter and news sources). Similarly, a study was conducted to examine the key topics that influenced negative sentiments on Twitter regarding the Zika virus (Mamidi, Miller, Banerjee, Romine, and Sheth 2019). Sentiment analysis was also done to analyze tweets by patients who were affected by Crohn disease, to gain an understanding of their perspective on a specific medical therapy (Roccetti et al. 2017). (Dubey 2020, online)

The way in which the coronavirus pandemic is represented, described and discussed by Twitter users undeniably deserves closer attention. Not only is the pandemic itself a phenomenon that stirs emotions and shapes attitudes, but its multiple repercussions do so too. The pandemic has influenced, for example, social attitudes towards foreigners in general and people of Asian descent in particular. It has led to considerable criticism of the functioning of national health systems, as well as reignited the discussion around vaccination. It has exacerbated political frays and deepened social and political divisions intra- and internationally in many countries. Finally, it has led to a proliferation of discourse produced in traditional as well as new media. Without a doubt it is important to understand the public perceptions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, its causes and consequences. And it is precisely this pandemic-related discourse that we pay closer attention to in the present article, focussing especially on the language Twitter users employ in order to refer to the virus.

3. Why Twitter?

It seems that Twitter (possibly due to its stress on brevity and pointedness of the messages posted) is especially conducive to malevolent language creativity and deliberately offensive language use including, what may be considered, hate speech. This has been recognised by Twitter users as well as Twitter scholars and consequently led to a change in character limit from 140 to 280 (implemented in 2017). For instance, Boot et al. (2019) investigated Dutch language messages posted on Twitter pre- and post-character-limit-change. They conducted general language analysis, specific token analysis as well as part-of-speech analysis of selected posts and found that "online language producers adapt their texts to overcome limit constraints" (Boot et al. 2019, p. 1), by, for example, using more textisms, abbreviations and slang expressions as well as modifying sentence structure in order to save space. Overall, they have found that doubling the character limit, apart from introducing specific changes to the language strategies used, has led to the decrease in the need to compress messages and consequently to the increase in the formality of the

language used on Twitter. Thus, it turns out that when users have more space to express themselves, the language they use tends to be more civil and polite. In a similar vein, Jaidka et. al. having analysed more than 350.000 political Tweets have recognised that "doubling the permissible length of a tweet led to less uncivil, more polite, and more constructive discussions online" (Jaidka et al. 2019, p. 345). At the same time, they observe that Twitter users are generally "unlikely to indulge in reflection" or construct coherent arguments to substantiate their claims and online discussions on Twitter (especially those concerning pressing political and social issues) are often toxic and uncivil (Jaidka et al. 2019, p. 347). Thus, the impact of brevity of form on the uncivility of the message might have been reduced with the introduction of 280-character limit, but nonetheless pointedness and curtness remain characteristic of the language of Twitter posts. Another aspect of most online communication in general, and Twitter language in particular, that lends itself to expressing thoughts and opinions in a very direct, often inconsiderate or blatantly hateful way is its anonymity. Twitter users do not need to reveal their true identity and can use whatever nicknames they wish instead. Asher and Noble (2019) state that online anonymity makes hate speech producers more protected and their victims – more vulnerable. Specifically, they investigate neo-Nazi hate speech online and conclude that there seems to be no shame associated with voicing racist, sexist, homophobic, and misogynist views online due the "pseudoanonymity" that social media platforms afford their users. It is also worth noting that controversial and inflammatory comments (which are often anonymous) gain most popularity and as a result lead to desensitization of the general public to hate speech, harmful rhetoric and blatant fake news. Anonymity not only creates the feeling of impunity, but potentially has broader detrimental reverberations in online as well as offline communities. Mondal et. al. having analysed posts on Twitter and Whisper, also recognise the dark side of social media and the fact that they "have become a fertile ground for inflamed discussions that usually polarize 'us' against 'them', resulting in many cases of insulting and offensive language" (Mondal et al. 2018, p. 110). Due to the gravity of the problem, there has been a growing number of attempts at automatic detection of hate speech on Twitter (Pereira-Kohatsu et al. 2019; Pitsilis et al. 2018). Thus, Twitter data seems best fit for the purpose of the present article.

3.1. Harmful naming practices

Despite World Health Organization's recommendations concerning naming of the virus issued in February 2020, there has been a lot of, often malevolent, linguistic creativity in this respect. The potential problems related to using politically-charged or even openly xenophobic expressions as names of SARS-

CoV-2 have been already recognised (AlAfnan 2020; Brown and Marinthe 2021; Budhwani and Sun 2020; Chen et al. 2020, 2021; Gee et al. 2020; Hswen et al. 2021; Su et al. 2020; Tabri et al. 2020; Xu and Liu 2021; Ziems et al. 2020). Ziems at al. (2020) study anti-Asian hate speech as well as counterhate speech on Twitter in the context of the pandemic. They show that online antisocial behaviour such as hate speech, abuse, and trolling is socially contagious. Chen et al. (2020) attempt to analyse real-world usage of the Chinese virus on Twitter and separate neutral usages from deliberately harmful ones which intentionally attach ethnicity to the virus. Their results suggest that "while the term 'Chinese virus' could be interpreted either as neutral or racist, its usage on social media leans strongly towards the latter" (Chen et al. 2020, p. 1). Likewise, Budhwani and Sun (2020) claim that "referencing the novel coronavirus as the 'Chinese virus' or 'China virus' has the potential to create and perpetuate stigma" (Budhwani and Sun 2020, p. 1). Despite the widespread (and mostly commonsensical) awareness of numerous problems and potential consequences of ascribing ethnicity to the virus, many people, including high profile politicians, did not shun the controversial terms. On 18 March 2020 President Donald Trump posted the following tweet (on his official verified Twitter account @realDonaldTrump which was banned on 8 January 2021 due to violation of Twitter's Glorification of Violence Policy), defending his use of Chinese virus:

> It's not racist at all. No, it's not at all. It's from China. That's why. It comes from China. I want to be accurate.

This line of defence has been common, especially among right-wing politicians and members of President Trump's administration, as well as all avid defenders of free speech rooting against excessive "political correctness". Even such apparently harmless usages are, however, prevalent in ideologically-laden discourses and activating this "geographical" meaning is only a pretext to more accusatory narratives.

4. Theoretical discussion

4.1. Pragmatic strengthening of meaning potentials

In light of the above, it is clear that words do matter and the ones we select to describe a given phenomenon, on the one hand, frequently expose our ideological stance, but on the other, may lead to shaping others' opinions about the matter. By choosing certain words we control others' attention (e.g. by choosing the word *Chinese* when referring to the virus we divert other's attention onto China) and can steer their interpretation through emphasising

selected aspects of a word or expression. By using a certain word or expression we give licence to (almost) any of the interpretations warranted by multiple meaning potentials (Norén and Linell 2007) residing in every word and expression. For instance, Prażmo (2017) investigates the use of *Polish concentration camps* and similar expressions in WW2-related discourse. She claims that there are two main functions with which such expressions are employed: (i) they serve as mental shortcuts used by the speaker who assumes a certain level of historical knowledge on the part of the hearer and relies on the correct activation of a proper meaning potential residing in the word *Polish* (*Polish concentration camp*, i.e. a camp located on the territory of Poland, rather than, for instance, organised by the Polish); (ii) using an expression such as *Polish concentration camp* may have a deliberately misinformative purpose and aim to cast historical blame for creating concentration camps on Poles. This aim is achieved if the hearer lacks adequate level of historical knowledge and relies on the purely linguistic interpretation of the word *Polish*. The most likely semantic potential to be activated is that corresponding to the prototypical meaning which, in turn, is based on the reader's experience.

Augustyn and Prażmo (2020) investigated different interpretations that are warranted by multiple meaning potentials residing in compounds such as *Chinese virus*. They can be roughly defined and categorised in the following way (Augustyn and Prażmo 2020, pp. 223-224):

(i) virus originating in China (and spreading from there all over the globe);
(ii) virus affecting only (or primarily) the Chinese;
(iii) virus created in China and spread intentionally by the Chinese (the Chinese government) in order to disrupt the global economy and defeat the (US-style) capitalism in the world;
(iv) virus created in China and unintentionally spread by the Chinese because they did not manage to handle it efficiently and keep contained in their laboratories;
(v) virus whose control is the responsibility of the Chinese and the Chinese government, because it has originated in China;
(vi) virus as a metaphorical representation of the Chinese, the Chinese as a virus spreading throughout the globe.

The fact that linguistic items are semantically underspecified and acquire their final meaning only in the process of pragmatic enrichment is well known (Prażmo 2017). More complex items, especially created in the process of conceptual integration, have a potential to possess even more meanings. The main point of focus of the present article is, however, to investigate the notion of deliberateness in choosing to activate some semantic potential over others.

4.2. Ideological square

Van Dijk's notion of the ideological square (1998) has already been employed as a methodological tool in language and translation studies (Daghigh et al. 2018). The ideological square can be applied to all levels of discourse organisation, including the lexical level. It consists of examining the ideological orientation of a given discourse by analysing it against several parameters. In this way it explores the polarising tendencies of discourses structured upon Us vs Them dichotomy. Different linguistic strategies are aimed at achieving one of the four broadly defined goals (van Dijk 1998, p. 267):

(i) Expressing or emphasising positive information about Us
(ii) Expressing or emphasising negative information about Them
(iii) Suppressing or deemphasising positive information about Them
(iv) Suppressing or deemphasising negative information about Us

Such an outright omission of potentially relevant information (positive information about Them or negative information about Us) or deliberate "overcompleteness" of information i.e. the inclusion of information that is not indispensable in a given context (negative information about Them or positive information about Us, or differently put "information that negatively reflects back on outgroups" and positively on ourselves) is found in e.g. press reports on crimes which include the (often irrelevant) information about ethnicity of a criminal or omits it when it is potentially relevant. Another aspect worth mentioning here is the modification of the degree of specificity in regard to positive and negative information about outgroups and ingroups.

> These may be quite general and abstract (as in topics), but also very low-level and detailed. The ideological conditions and consequences are the same. Biased discourses will tend to be very detailed about Their bad acts and Our good acts, and quite abstract and general about Their good acts and Our bad ones. Although the precise mental consequences of levels of description are not known, it seems plausible that their results are more or less detailed models of events. (van Dijk 1998, p. 268)

Another continuum that needs to be taken into account is that of explicitness vs implicitness. Different kinds of information are either expressed explicitly (if they are desirable from the ideological point of view) or left implicit. This often pertains to causes and consequences of events as well as the notion of blame and responsibility. Referring to the ideological square model, it can be stated "that implied information is not explicitly asserted, and hence not emphasized, and will therefore typically be information that needs to be

concealed in the interest of the speaker and the ingroup. This is especially so when the implied information cannot be readily inferred from socially shared knowledge" (van Dijk 1998, p. 269). Thus, leaving some information implicit seems to be especially powerful in shaping opinions about matters which are vastly unfamiliar or new, or about which there is insufficient social knowledge. In such context there is a lot of room for (mis)interpretation, which may result in activating different semantic potentials of given words and expressions which potentially leads to the distortion of facts (Prażmo 2017).

According to van Dijk, other semantic relations that play a role in ideological discourse creation are generalisation, specification, example, and contrast. They can be especially transparent in e.g. prejudiced stories about ethnic minorities in which individual instances of individual behaviour are generalised to the whole group, or blatantly prejudiced general descriptions are "evidenced" by reference to specific anecdotal examples. Similarly, "group polarization may be discursively emphasized by typical semantic and rhetorical contrasts" (van Dijk 1998, p. 270) in plain juxtapositions of Us vs Them as well as expression such as *I have nothing against X, but…*. Van Dijk also emphasises the role of lexicalisation in ideological discourse creation, i.e. the selection of words which carry specific semantic loads or associations. He claims that, for instance, *freedom fighter* vs *terrorist* is an example of ideologically biased lexicalization. Similarly, we argue that *Chinese virus* vs *SARS-CoV-2* pair falls into the same category.

All these strategies, as well as multiple others, not mentioned in the present article, serve as tools which lead to a construction of different ideological stances in discourse. To recapitulate, "lexical and grammatical style is one of the most obvious means speakers have to explicitly express or subtly signal their ideological opinions about events, people and participants" (van Dijk 1998, p. 272). The same fact applies to grammatical structures (e.g. active-passive voice transformations) or word order which place participants at various levels of prominence hiding or highlighting, in this way, their positive and negative features, depending on the ideological perspective. Thus, it is at all levels of language organisation and at every aspect of style where we find traces of ideology. As van Dijk boldly states, "social discrimination is thus implemented directly by those who control the style of text and talk" (van Dijk 1998, p. 272).

5. Methodology and data

The present study is maintained within the methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis. More specifically, van Dijk's notion of ideological square (van Dijk 1998) is employed as the main analytical tool. We explore a selection of Twitter posts in order to uncover language strategies

responsible for the creation of polarising discourse. According to the notion of ideological square, the polarisation between Us and Them can be construed by means of emphasising what is positive about Us while deemphasising what is positive about Them, as well as deemphasizing what is negative about Us while emphasizing what is negative about Them. This is achieved through the use of various linguistic strategies. We consider the activation of selected meaning potentials residing in words and expressions as one of those strategies too, so we also draw on Norén and Linell's notion of meaning potentials (Norén and Linell 2007) to provide a more thorough perspective.

In this article we offer a qualitative study of selected expressions in context. We use a self-compiled corpus of tweets posted between 1 January 2020 and 27 September 2021 by English-language users. We manually search this corpus of tweets tagged with the following tags: #Chinesevirus, #Asianvirus, #Sinovirus and #Wuhanvirus in order to analyse the use of selected expressions (*Chinese virus, Asian virus, Sinovirus, Wuhan virus*) in context. Even though we search through a copious corpus (of thousands of publicly available tweets) this study is not a typical corpus-driven quantitative study, but primarily a qualitative study of a sociolinguistic problem that has arisen in the wake of the global pandemic. The problem of naming and referring to the virus (with all the possible consequences that it entails, from shaping opinions, through spreading ideologies, to inciting criminal behaviours) is thus illustrated in this paper with selected examples extracted from Twitter.

Links to cited tweets have been shortened using a free online URL shortening programme (https://www.shorturl.at/) so as to ensure the anonymity of Twitter users. Nonetheless, the links provide access to publicly available contents where identity of the users is disclosed.

6. Analytical investigation

6.1. Material analysis

In what follows we analyse a selection of tweets in order to illustrate with concrete examples how ideologies are created and spread with reference to the notion of ideological square. Original spelling has been maintained throughout. Tweets have been anonymised, although they can be authenticated by tracing the links (to publicly available Twitter posts) provided.

In many tweets, the Twitter users expressed their anger at different international bodies, including WHO, dissuading people from using geographical (and hence, potentially stigmatising) names for SARS-Cov-2

(esp. expressions such as *Chinese virus*). In such cases, Twitter users often offered what they believed a logical chain of rational arguments along the lines:

(1) I prefer the name nCoV over ARD actually.. I just dont know why they didnt call it Wuhan virus. They called Ebola virus after the Ebola river..They called MERS because it originated in the Middle East. Why cant they call it SinoVirus? shorturl.at/ksMTY
(2) #WuhanVirus #ChineseVirus #SinoVirus A person from China is considered Chinese. Goods manufactured in China are Chinese goods. A virus discovered in China is a Chinese virus. Be clear: Chinese is an ethnicity, not a race! Use correct terminology if you accuse someone! shorturl.at/kFIS7
(3) No you can't say Wuhan Virus or China Virus. We're calling it COVID but If you travel anywhere overseas and you have a headache or had one too many coffees you have Havana. yup that's your tummyache reason. Buenos noches bebe shorturl.at/fCKN6

However, the most common way to intentionally introduce discriminatory overtones in the Twitter discourse is by expressing negative information on Them (here: China). This is often emphasised through the use of specific hashtags:

(4) Never forgot, this virus came from China! Do not allow them to change the narrative! #ccpvirus #poohvirus #xiflu #xitler #wuhanflu #wuhanvirus #chinavirus #chinesevirus #sinovirus #xitlervirus #CCP #CCPBioterrorist #CCPnazis shorturl.at/eEJK5

The polarised discourse is clearly strengthened here by the following hashtags: #CCP (Chinese Communist Party), #xitler, #xitlervirus, #CCPBioterrorist, #CCPnazis, which carry a strong negative, and importantly already well entrenched, axiological charge invoking historical figures (Hitler), parties and political ideologies (Nazis, communists,) or current serious social concerns (bioterrorism).

Sometimes the negative stance towards China is construed by employing expressions emphasising, or simply exaggerating, other negative features and apparent disgusting habits of Them:

(5) You people at WHO do realize that, they're not saying it to be racist, but rather to get the point across that it originated in china due to poor health conditions when it comes to preparing and eating disgusting meals. Not to mention it is more catchy to call it the Kung-Flu shorturl.at/asIJQ

(6) Everyone knows this came from China originating from their disgusting eating habits and horribly cruel food preparation techniques. Don't tell me not to say so you faceless globalists. shorturl.at/pHOQS
(7) These bat eaters will have to pay the price for this wuhan virus. You cannot escape. Karma will catch you one day.shorturl.at/jkrDQ

The negative image of China is also often constructed through its juxtaposition with other non-democratic regimes. However, interestingly, in this case the tweet's authors simultaneously emphasise some positive aspects of the other regimes (thus the strategy of painting a positive picture of 'Us' may be regarded as realised here indirectly or implicitly – as 'We' are logically assumed to be better than both the Chinese and the other agents mentioned in the tweet). Consider the example tweet below:

(8) China refuses virus Inspector's to enter the country. Even Sadam Hussain let WMD Inspectors in! Does that tell you something? shorturl.at/knsyB

The strategy of expressing the negative information about China may also be implemented through enumerating the positive benefits the agent (China) gains in the situation which has been universally (globally) recognised as negative:

(9) China is the origin of Covid. Yet, the Chinese gov refuses a scientific inquiry on the virus. China is also the greatest benefactor from the worldwide pandemic. My conclusion, China is the virus that should be neutralized.#Covid #china #chinesevirus #thechinavirus shorturl.at/ehqK2
(10) SINOPHARM Vaccine for profit follows SINOVIRUS. It's good business to China and their GDP grown by 18.5% by selling Vaccine and Mask shorturl.at/axQTW
(11) It was a bio warfare. Not a single bullet fired but every growing and developed economies in world suffered except china. They even bought stakes in companies down due to covid during this time. This was planned manufactured virus by china in lab. UN must isolate china. shorturl.at/ntvLV

A somewhat similar rhetorical depreciation is achieved through apparent emphasis of a positive fact, in this case the implication that China made a huge progress in increasing the quality of its export products. Such tweets, as the one below, often have sarcastic overtones:

(12) Chinese may make substandard inferior quality products, but they most certainly raised the bar in producing most sophisticated virus, the Chinese virus. #China #COVID19 #chinesevirus #covidvariants shorturl.at/dlpA6

The same effect is attained through apparent praise expressed with regard to the Chinese citizens:

(13) If Chinese guys manafactured this wonderful [icon of a virus] why steal the credit, give credit where it is due #Chinesevirus #Sinovirus China themselves called #Wuhanvirus shorturl.at/ejmrE

The metonymic shift from the country as a whole (or its government) to its people, as found in the tweet above, potentially increases the intensity of inherent racism or defamation, making comments such as these more acute and personal. Compare the above example with the two tweets presented below, in which the narrower scope of selection of the subject (Communist China – i.e. the communist government, and Xi – i.e. President Jinping) decreases (less in the first case and significantly more in the second) the potential negative reception of the Chinese people themselves:

(14) Communist China spread the Wuhan virus, and they must be held accountable. shorturl.at/sxQR3

(15) How can the world forget the Xi virus with which Chinese internally and world at large are suffering in every possible way.... Calling it by any other adjectives would be an insult to Xi himself. shorturl.at/bmzHW

The negative information about China may also take form of ridiculous accusations levelled at the Chinese, veiled in irony, or rather sarcasm. The accusation strongly implies that the Chinese wanted to distract the global opinion from facts:

(16) First cases started in Wuhan, in the close vicinity of the Virology labs, who were known to be engineering coronavirus, but no, all a coincidence. Somebody ate an infected pangolin without cooking it properly first. #WuhanLabLeak shorturl.at/ainoN

Invoking the frame of WAR (as it is already partially visible in some previous examples), in particular by referring to different concepts designating

WEAPONS, is a frequent strategy employed by Twitter users to emphasise the negative information about China. Consider also the examples below:

(17) Yes This is China's biological weapon against world. This is #CHINESEVIRUS World should react in that manner only otherwise world can't eliminate this deadly VIRUS यह #ChineseVirus shorturl.at/tyNY2

(18) A BULLET was to obvious so they used a VIRUS #chinaliedpeopledied shorturl.at/adsCT

Partial activation of the WAR frame can also be noticed in the example below (mentioning 'military laboratory'), but the even greater stigmatising effect is achieved by the replacement of the official name of the disease (COVID-19) with the somewhat similarly sounding 'Sinovid19' and then also repeating the prefix 'Sino-' two more times in the fake name 'Sinovirus' (instead of coronavirus). Thus, the negative information about China is introduced here apparently in a subtle way (almost implicitly), but the pragmatic effect seems to be suggestively stronger (attaching a negative label to the prefix Sino- and, by extension, the concept CHINESE):

(19) Sinovirus Disease 2019 (Sinovid19) is a disease that has already, in the 1st quarter of 2020, brought the world economy to a shuddering halt. It is caused by the novel Sinovirus, which originated from some underground military laboratory in Wuhan, China.... "The Global Lockdown" shorturl.at/jzFH9

Finally, an interesting and highly intentional linguistic strategy of defaming China and the Chinese is realised by the author of the following tweet:

(20) China should be renamed Corona & its nationality (Chinese) should be renamed Coronise cuz Corona (China) created Wuhan Virus, lied & concealing everything about it, blocked health experts from investigating the origin of Wuhan Virus & Wuhan lab where it leaked. shorturl.at/ijpyK

This creates a simple and unambiguous correlation (China = Coronavirus), strengthened by the subsequent neologic creation (Chinese = Coronise) and emphasised negative account of the actions of the Chinese government. These examples clearly illustrate malevolent linguistic creativity which, in itself, belongs to van Dijk's "lexicalisation" strategy. By choosing certain words, or even creating new ones, a certain ideological stance of the Twitter user is

revealed and recreated via shareable tweet. This leads to spreading polarising views in this interactively construed type of discourse.

7. Conclusion

The presented analysis of selected examples has shown that from the pragmatic perspective, communication on Twitter clearly focuses on expressing or emphasising the negative information about Them, the outgroup – here: China and the Chinese people. All the other angles of van Dijk's ideological square seem to be mostly eclipsed or totally ignored. This may be a direct result of the spatial constraints of the medium itself, as suppressing or deemphasising positive information about Them or negative information about Us simply seems an inefficient communicative strategy on Twitter (it does not optimise communicative economy). However, on the other hand, it can be claimed that these sub-strategies of the ideological square are in fact fully realised in Twitter discourse, since "suppressing or deemphasising", in its most extreme form, can be construed as a total omission of such elements.

Also expressing positive information about Us seems not to be as effective as direct depreciation of Them. It may be argued, however, that the positive information about Us is suggested implicitly, especially in instances, where Them are only apparently praised or complimented on – in those cases, the tweets' authors' positive evaluation of their ingroup is strongly suggested in the reversed semi-appreciation of the outgroup.

At the same time, on the conceptual level, the intensity of the social stigma and negative stereotypes created around China and the Chinese in relation to the COVID-19 discourse on Twitter depends largely on the degree of generalisation of the utterances produced by particular Twitter users – whether the subject they target are, among others, Chinese people at large, the Communist state in general, Chinese lab workers in Wuhan, or the Chinese government or even its selected representatives. The level of specificity of the WHOLE FOR PART metonymy activated in all those cases determines the severity of social stigmatisation, with the selection of less specific subjects (e.g., China/the Chinese) always resulting in stronger negative correlations, including undesirable pragmatic and social effects (such as defamation, racism, ostracism, persecution etc.).

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