Making use of language in healthcare: an applied perspective through corpus linguistics

What can language reflect about patients and health conditions ?

A Healthcare Symposium

4 March 2025
09:00 - 16:30 (HK Time)
Hybrid mode

Room AG312, Core A,
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

How can researchers and health professionals make use of the linguistic data they may have been collecting, even inadvertently? Patient and general public forums, feedback reports, and other forms of text around health can provide important insights by opening up a direct connection to patients and laypeople. One approach to this work comes from corpus linguistics and the 4 expert speakers and rapporteur all have extensive applied experience in the field in the area of healthcare. Through talks, discussions, and a workshop, this symposium will provide an overview and some initial experience in addressing these areas.

Programme

09:00-09:15

Introduction by Stefano Occhipinti
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

09:15-10:00

Time heals? An analysis of an anxiety forum
Paul Baker
Lancaster University, The United Kingdom

10:00-10:45

Discourses of Dementia: Corpus, Multimodal and Critical Perspectives
Gavin Brookes
Lancaster University, The United Kingdom

11:05-11:50

Examining expert discourses of health in the climate crisis
Niall Curry
Manchester Metropolitan University, The United Kingdom

11:50-12:20

Rapporteur for morning talks
Tony McEnery
Lancaster University, The United Kingdom

13:45-15:00

Workshop: Sex differences in patient feedback
Paul Baker
Lancaster University, The United Kingdom

15:15-16:30

Roundtable discussion & closing remarks

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Participants are advised to bring a laptop. Lunch and tea will be provided for all participants. The registration will be on a first-come, first-served basis.

Time heals? An analysis of an anxiety forum

Paul Baker, Lancaster University, The United Kingdom

Anxiety is a growing, worldwide phenomenon. The World Health Organization (2017) estimates that there are 264 million people living with anxiety, a 14.9% increase since 2005. The way that people conceptualise feelings or conditions is significant. Chan, Chan and Kwok (2015) found that catastrophising (e.g. describing anxiety using exaggerated or all-or-nothing language like *constantly, everything* or *completely*) was a positive predictor of anxiety among adolescents while Chen, Chen and Yang (2019) have described a study where individuals who were instructed to anthropomorphise sadness or happiness (e.g. to think of the emotion as a person) reported less experience of that emotion afterwards.

In this talk I examine 23 million words of text posted to the Anxiety Support forum of the social networking service Health Unlocked between March 2012 and October 2020, comprising 294,082 separate posts.

I consider how time relates to people's experiences of anxiety, taking account of three dimensions. First, a diachronic analysis examines how the language in the forum changed over the 8 years of data that were collected. Second, age of forum poster was considered – identifying features that were more typically associated with different age groups. Finally, time was characterised by the amount of posters interaction with the forum in order to obtain a sense of the typical 'journey' that posters experienced, from their first post to their last. The analyses indicate how posters' identities and perceptions of anxiety changed, both as they aged, and as they engaged with the forum.

Discourses of Dementia: Corpus, Multimodal and Critical Perspectives

Gavin Brookes, Lancaster University, The United Kingdom

This talk examines the linguistic and visual discourses surrounding dementia using corpus linguistic and multimodal approaches to critical discourse studies. Focussing first on linguistic representations in the context of news media, I use a corpus-based approach to critical discourse studies to explore metaphorical depictions of dementia of dementia in UK newspapers over the period of a decade. This analysis shows a prevalence of metaphors of violence and competition which ultimately serve to dehumanise people with dementia, for example by constructing dementia as an active aggressor while rendering those diagnosed with it as passive victims. This corpus analysis is complemented by a multimodal critical discourse study of AI-generated images of dementia. Using text-to-image AI models, 171 generated images are critically analysed, revealing common tropes such as isolation, suffering, cognitive decline and a visual metaphor of people with dementia as the "living dead". Bringing together corpus and multimodal approaches to critical discourse studies, the analyses presented here offer insights into the social construction of dementia, highlighting how such representations can contribute to stigma and reinforce negative stereotypes around people with dementia. The findings underscore the importance, for public health literacy, both of developing critical awareness around journalistic practice and of engaging with the ethical implications of using emerging AI technologies.

Examining expert discourses of health in the climate crisis

Niall Curry, Manchester Metropolitan University, The United Kingdom

The climate crisis represents a complex network of cross-cultural, multidisciplinary, and interdiscursive interdependencies that threaten the future of life on Earth. This talk unpacks this complexity focusing on one particular discursive strand: health. Specifically, it focuses on the social construction and framing of health issues within discourses of the climate crisis. To do so, the talk report on a corpus-based contrastive analysis of the use of *health, santé* and *salud* in climate-themed and health-themed public-oriented research communication in English, French, and Spanish. Through this analysis, three recurrent framing activities are identified. These include defining and contextualising, representing cause and effect, and proposing solutions. These framing activities were interrogated to determine variation in the cultural and epistemological construction of knowledge at the intersection of climate and health crises. The findings highlight the crucial role of cultural and linguistic diversity in shaping responses to global crises, and call for pluriversal approaches to knowledge production to address the complex challenges posed by global (poly)crises.

Workshop: Sex differences in patient feedback

Paul Baker, Lancaster University, The United Kingdom

In this workshop we will use corpus linguistics techniques to analyse a small corpus of 400 pieces of patient feedback which made publicly available on the National Health Service website (approximately 77,000 words). In all the feedback, patients have self-identified as male or female, enabling a comparison of sex differences to be carried out on the data. Using the corpus analysis tool AntConc, we will identify male and female keywords, subjecting them to more detailed collocational and concordance analyses in order to examine i) the ways that male and female patients represent their identities as patients, ii) how they orient towards the health conditions they experience, iii) how they evaluate the care and treatment they receive and iv) the strategies they use in order to legitimate their feedback.

Healthcare Symposium 4 Mar 2025   **PRESENTATION ABSTRACTS**