A Pragma-semantic Survey of Newspapers and Academic Publication's Portrayal of People with Mental Disorders

Conference paper

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have shown that the language use has had adverse effects on levels of tolerance for people with mental illness. New research suggests even subtle differences in how the society refers to people with mental illness can affect levels of tolerance. Granello submits that everyone, including the media, policymakers and the general public, need to change how they refer to people with mental illness (18). It is based on this premise that the present study surveys ways in which the media/academic practitioners portray people with mental illness and its perception from a pragma-semantic point of view. The main objective of the study is to ascertain the intention that underlie the language choices in referring to people with mental illness. The research is qualitative as it collects data from selected newspapers and academic publications including completed research works of post-graduate students of the University of Jos that discuss the subject matter. The data are analysed using pragmatic/semantic tools such as implicatures, presupposition, politeness principle, ambiguity and vagueness. The work adopts the tenets of systemic functional linguistics as its theoretical framework for analysis. The study concludes that language should not only be viewed in terms of political correctness but be humane and accommodating in order to achieve our communicative intentions.

Keywords: *Media, Mental Disorder, Pragma-semantics, Systemic Functional Linguistics*

Introduction

The appropriate nomenclature for identifying people with mental illness has in recent times been debated hotly. This follows the fact that, this category of people suffers mental imbalances in various domains of thought, perception, and psychomotor activities among others thus making them unable to function properly in daily life. They are as a result of this unique mental health challenge, looked down upon and referred to in derogatory terms that undermine their humanness. While opinions vary regarding the most appropriate terminology to be used to describe people with mental health disorders, Granello has written that:

> But I think people with mental illness deserve to have us change our language. Even if it is more awkward for us, it helps change our perception, which ultimately may lead us to treat all people with the respect and understanding they deserve (43)

The study evinces that it is critical to understand why this status quo has been naturalised, normalised and maintained by the media, government, stakeholders and the entire citizenry of Nigeria over the years

For many years it has been recognised that media reporting of mental illness is heavily biased in representing a misleading link between mental illness and violence, with preferential reporting for sensationalist stories depicting individuals with mental disorders as being aggressive, dangerous and unpredictable. Such widespread negative portrayals have reinforced the continued stigmatisation and lack of acceptance among those with psychiatric diagnoses, possibly increasing social distance and contributing to morbidity and distress. Of particular concern is the potential 'internalisation' of prejudices portrayed by the media, such that people with mental illnesses also begin to take on the view that they are dangerous and unstable. Furthermore, there is a corresponding lack of voice for people with mental illness, with few personal accounts of their burden of disease and similarly little representation from qualified healthcare professionals. All of this contributes to creating a stereotyped, isolated group without social status and acceptance.

It is believed that the media has the potential to reflect the situation in the society through their messages, programming content and the amount of reportage they place on an issue. Media professionals have been admonished to always ensure balance, fairness and objectivity in their reportage, in order not to marginalize any member in society (Nigerian Press Council 2016; Weishar, 2014). This is because 'not only do people acquire factual information about public affairs from the news media, readers and viewers also learn how much importance to attach to a topic on the basis of the emphasis placed on it in the news' (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Indeed, the media sets the agenda for the public by raising salient issues in our society

through frequent reportage of the issues which they see as important, while they partially or completely neglect any issue they regard as irrelevant.

When the reflection of the real world is incomplete and distorted by the media it is because a dominant group's idea of reality is upheld against the general beliefs (Nagendra & JR, 2015). Literature has shown that the media have carved out a niche within which issues of mental illness are generally reported.

Statement of the Problem

From the review of literature, it is evident that little formal attention has been given to the force and language in which the mentally ill should be referred to. While some may consider it appropriate to refer to people with mental disorders as mad, crazy, insane, mentally impaired, others may not due to reasons best known to them. The media, being a global platform and a standard on which the vast majority of people often lean on, has a significant role to play when referring to people with various forms of mental impairment. This contributes greatly to the tolerance levels for such nomenclature. Although the reasons for such linguistic choices vary, the research finds it problematic how the media and even enlightened people are unable to find appropriate adjectives or names to qualify or refer to people with mental health disorders. The name used to identify this group of people can facilitate tolerance and promote a felicitious relationship with them or otherwise.

In an article about terms used to refer to mental health Diana Rose et al. submit that 'Derogatory references about people with mental illness appear commonly in the print, broadcast and cinematographic media' (48). For television and newspaper items about mental illness, for example, between one third and two thirds refer primarily to violence (25).

According to Mindframe, which provides guidelines to the media about the reporting and portrayal of suicide and mental health issues, approximately one in five Australians will experience some form of mental illness each year. The study centres on how we talk about mental health and people in crisis, particularly in the frenzy of modern news reporting, when social media can and often does run ahead of the news cycle, when difficult ethical decisions are made in real time – often before facts are fully established – in an age of clickbait, confessional storytelling, declining revenues and minimal editorial oversight.

"Every time a journalist makes a decision around how to report on either mental illness or suicide, they're making a judgment call based on the facts about the story that they have in front of them, so the application of the guidelines can be variable," says Jaelea Skehan, chair of Mindframe's media advisory group and director of the Hunter Institute for Mental Health.

On newspaper depiction of mental illness, Marian Chen and Stephen Lawrie have asserted that 'Media portrayals of mental illness have long been recognised as

being misleading and stigmatising' (78). Following the campaigns of several advocacy groups to address this issue, we aimed to evaluate the impact on mental health reporting over time.

Methodology

The study is rooted in two sub-disciplines of linguistics namely; pragmatics and semantics fused in the language of the media. This is because, while semantics accounts for the meaning of words as provided in the lexicon and its collocations, pragmatics provides for the meaning of language in use. It accounts for hidden meaning and makes explicit that which is implicated. The research is qualitative in nature as it collects data from two newspapers namely; 'Science Daily', an online source and from a Nigerian daily called 'Independent' and two postgraduate dissertations in a bid to examine the unique language choices in referring to people with mental health disorders.

A total of two newspapers and two dissertations were used to extract the names or adjectives used for the mentally ill in a purposive manner. The data are analysed semantically by considering the surface meaning and then the collocations of the names and then pragmatically by subjecting the data to pragmatic tools such as implicatures, politeness principle, presupposition among others.

The newspapers and dissertations are the main instruments for the research which is also supported by library materials, journals and books. The theoretical framework for the study is systemic functional linguistics. The chief exponent of Systemic Functional Linguistics is MAK Halliday who was a student of JR Firth (a British linguist who himself was influenced by Malinowski). Halliday's work stresses the fact that language cannot be dissociated from meaning. SFL, as its name suggests, considers function and semantics as the basis of human language and communicative activity. Unlike structural approaches that give prominence to syntax, a key concept in Halliday's approach is the "context of situation" which obtains "through a systematic relationship between the social environment on the one hand, and the functional organization of language on the other" (Halliday, 11). Bloor and Bloor encapsulate Halliday's preoccupation in SFL:

> For Halliday, the only approach to the construction of grammars that is likely to be successful will be one that recognizes meaning and use as central features of language and tackles the grammar from this point of view. It follows from this that Halliday's grammar is semantic (concerned with meaning,) and functional (concerned with how language is used) (2).

They further contend that "since a speaker's or writer's choice of words is

constrained by the situation of utterance, and since words and groups of words take on special significance in particular contexts, the grammar must be able to account for the way in which the language is used in social situation" (Bloor and Bloor, 4).

Literature Review

Mental disability is a broad concept which may refer to any of a number of specific disabilities: Afolabi Abimbola defines it as 'a temporary or permanent change in an individual's brain or mental processes which makes the person unable to function normally in daily life activities' (10).

Describing mental illness, the American Psychiatric Association as cited in Afolabi say:

> Mental illness is the term that refers collectively to all diagnosable mental disorders which are health conditions that are characterised by alteration in thinking, mood or behaviour associated with distress and/or impaired functioning (12).

Many factors are responsible for mental disability. Sometimes it is hereditary, damage of the central nervous system, body distortion, preternatural and supernatural causes. Mojoyinola says 'sometimes it is unknown' (36). Afolabi opines that in Africa, mental illnesses are believed to be malignant magical practices of witchcraft, sorcerers' (45).

Among many other factors, it can be said that mental disability is to a large extent caused by biopsychosocial factors and is characterised by abnormal behaviour. Although abnormal behaviour may be relative and its definition varies across academic disciplines, it is always bizarre. Santrock is of the view that 'normal and abnormal behaviour are different in kind' (519). He further says that abnormal behaviour consists of a poor fit between the behaviour and the situation in which it is enacted, once people have a mental disorder, they always have it.

The American Psychiatric Association defines abnormal behaviour in medical terms as: a mental illness that affects or is manifest in a person's brain and can affect the way a person thinks, behaves and interacts with people. Generally, abnormal behaviour is deviant, maladaptive and involves personal distress and the mentally challenged often exhibit a high level of abnormality in their behaviour.

In a study that sought the input of people with common mental health issues on how their disorders are described in diagnostic guidelines, Rutgers University researcher reported that the subjects suggested 'removing confusing or stigmatising terms such as retardation, neuro-vegetative, bizzare, disorganized and maladaptive. They asserted that 'the current draft reflected external perspectives of these conditions rather than the perspectives of the person's lived experiences. They

further reiterated that using such common language will go a long way in bridging the communication gap between people being diagnosed and clinicians.

Mental health is to a large extent ingrained in everyday vernacular but it is still difficult to unshackle meaning, intent and potential offence caused by reinforcing negative stereotypes. Despite this, it will just be an excuse for the ignorant to remain ignorant if we continue to use language that can potentially harm others claiming that the increased censorship of words that have been deemed politically incorrect places a nation at risk of losing its freedom of speech.

Adding a voice to the discussions on the appropriate terms to refer to the mentally ill by the media, Nightingale has written that:

> The media is extremely powerful and is consumed by millions of people everyday. Therefore, we would encourage journalists to recognize the influence they have when reporting on mental health so as not to reinforce damaging stereotypes or create sensationist articles which can cause huge distress to the one in four people who will experience mental health problems (23)

Mark Rice-Oxley's Guardian piece about his mental health illness eloquently captured the inadequacy of language in reflecting such a serious condition. He says 'they use to call it nervous breakdown, now it is depression. Neither term is helpful' (11). The former doesn't come close to expressing the long list of symptoms that apply (insomnia, anxiety, and dismal mood, panic thoughts of suicide, loss of energy, joy, weight, lib, and love). The latter is if anything, worse, conjuring up misleading images of people.

Nightingale holds the belief that 'the meaning of words can change over time. 'manic' and 'mad' are frequently used in informal conversations and while we accept they have various meanings, they can also cause offence. Using words like 'Psycho' 'nutter' 'schizo' or 'loony' to describe someone with mental health problem is certainly offensive and unacceptable' (53).

Data Presentation
Independent
1. Mother who drowned twins was narcissistic and not severely **depressed**- (a wish to appear more severely ill than she is)
2. Poldark screen writer says postnatal **depression** helped her write show
3. Camillia Cabello opens up about becoming **'incredibly nervous'**
4. Thousands to get benefits for **mental health issues** after court ruling
5. Kylie Jenner shares emotional post about battling **anxiety**
6. **People with mental health issues** let others use their bank cards

7. Public transport providers 'must do more' to help **anxiety sufferers**

Science Daily

1. Genes underscore five **psychiatric disorders**
2. Thyroid screening may not be needed in all **youth with psychiatric disorders**
3. People who eat dark chocolates are less likely to be **depressed**
4. **Parents' Mental illness** increases suicide Risk in Adults with Tinnitus, Hyperacusis
5. Coping strategy therapy for **family Dementia** Carers works Long-term
6. The family that went **mad** together- 'what happened inside the walls of this farmhouse that drove the family out of their minds at exactly the same time.

Postgraduate Dissertation 1 and 2

1. The **mad people'**s thoughts are reflected from the authour's …
2. **Madness** defines a character's actions and is…
3. Cognitive pragmatic study of the language of the **mentally challenged** at the…
4. The study moves from the **mentally well** to the **unwell**
5. **The mentally ill** suffer diseases that affect them in various domains of thought…
6. **People with mental illness** often attribute the wrong intentions…
7. **Schizophrenia** is a disorder that is highly associated with distortion of thought…
8. **The schizophrenic** are characterized by verbigeration, delusion…
9. **Schizophenics and the manic** are the are used in this study since these **mental disorders** are associated with high rate of thought disorder
10. **The mentally disordered people** experience difficulty in communication…

Superordinate Categories from the Terms Used as Highlighted Above

Themes	1 Popular derogatory terms	2 Negative Emotional State	3 Physical Illness or Learning Disability	4 Psychiatric categories
Number of instances	4	3	7	4
Examples	Mad	Mentally Challenged	Schizophrenia	Schizophrenia
	Madness	Mentally disordered	Anxiety	Depression
	Mad People	Depression	Depression	Psychiatric

	Crazy		Mentally well	Mania
			Mentally Unwell	
			People with mental illness	
			People with mental disorder	
			Incredibly Nervous	

Discussion of Findings

Popular Derogatory Terms

It is observed that the terms 'mad' 'madness', 'mad people' and 'crazy' are used in the dailies as well as the theses. The connotations of the word mad could be 'insane' or 'crazy' and pragmatically these terms are considered impolite as they imply a sense of total or abject state of insanity. Mad people are popularly regarded as people whose physical appearance is shabby, their mental case is almost incurable and they are often taunted by others. Using these terms to refer to people who are already in a somewhat disadvantaged position physically, mentally and socially further creates social distance as it threatens their positive face. The use of 'mad people' in this category connotes that they are first of all insane before being humans with. More so, people are not always referred to in terms of their health challenges except for those with mental illness. For instance, the media does not say 'typhoid people' or 'malaria people' why then 'mad people'?

Negative Emotional State

The terms under this category are 'mentally challenged', 'mentally disordered' and 'depression'. They are tagged negative emotional states because even though they place emphasy on emotional psyche of listeners in order to draw empathy and solidarity to the cause of the patient, the emotion is considered or perceived in negative light. These expressions also threaten the positive face of the patients even though politeness is enshrined. Cooperative principles of relevance, manner and quality are upheld while quantity is violated in 'mentally disordered' and 'mentally challenged' as it does not say the specific disorder or challenge affecting the mental state. Following these, even though the use of these terms reflects that the user has shown some human face/ respect for the patients, they have achieved that negatively and the terms are still considered to be inappropriate in referring to these category of people.

Physical Illness or Learning Disability

Schizophrenia, mania, anxiety, depression, mentally well, mentally unwell, people with mental illness and people with mental disorder are in the category above. It is

observed that these were most often used in the post graduate theses to show that there is an understanding of the fact that using words like mad and crazy are derogatory so, they try to find more suitable ways of addressing these patients. Referring to them by the specific form of the disorder exposes their unique challenge publicly. Every individual's health challenge is supposed to be unique to that individual so, when they are addressed as 'schizophrenic' 'manic' 'anxiety' 'depressed' e.t.c, it relegates the fact that they are first of all human beings and reduces them to merely people who are suffering from a particular ailment. It is negative emotion as well that is being exuded even with the hedging employed in 'people with mental illness' and 'people with mental disorder' is aimed at promoting the humanity of the patients first. The mentally well and mentally unwell still does not isolate the patients from their mental health conditions. In the light of this it has also been suggested that the disabilities should not even be reflected in their identification. They should be referred to as people with alternative abilities. This is in a bid to mitigate the effects of face and forestall ay loss of positive face.

Psychiatric Categories

Words like mania, schizophrenia, depression and anxiety fall under psychiatric category. Here, there is an attempt to address the patients using the unique health challenge being faced but at the same time, it violates grice's principles of politeness. There is loss of face with the mention of the specific ailment which should ordinarily not define an individual. Even though the maxim of relevance is upheld, politeness is lost and the words become face threatening. These mental health disorders are also of various types. For instance schizophrenia is of four types; catatonic, hebephrenic among others and identifying an individual as a schizophrenic violates the maxim of quantity because the information is incomplete and at the same time it derogates the individual's personality.

Conclusion

The study which is in the domain of medical humanities facilitates an exploration into the interdisciplinary space between medicine and the humanities. It explores ways in which clinical data contributes to theoretical issues in pragmatics in order to demonstrate the importance of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary studies in the furtherance of knowledge. The research submits that all the words used in the selected newspapers and postgraduate works are semantically correct but pragmatically unacceptable as they threaten the positive face of the subjects. It is important to define every individual in positive light and not by the health challenge of the individual. For instance, people suffering from mental health issues rather than mentally ill people or better still, people with alternative abilities.

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