

Conference Paper

Social Actors and the Language of Othering: A Corpus-Assisted Analysis of the Representation of Covid-19 in Selected Western and Asian English Newspapers

Ong Theng Theng (Andrine)

School of English, University of Nottingham Malaysia, Jalan Broga, 43500 Semenyih, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

ORCID

Ong Theng Theng: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9190-5160>

Abstract.

As of May 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused approximately 3.5 million deaths and 168 million confirmed cases worldwide. Unfortunately, this crisis has not only resulted in a devastating loss of human life but has also given rise to racism, national insecurity, and general xenophobia. This phenomenon can be understood through the concept of "othering," which refers to the exclusion of individuals or entire groups based on their ascribed or enacted identities. This study aims to investigate how social actors are constructed by selected Western and Asian English newspapers in relation to Covid-19. Specifically, it seeks to examine whether language of othering is used by different English users (West vs. Asia, inner circle vs. outer circle) in representing the 2020's deadliest pandemic. To achieve this, the researcher has custom-collected six different newspapers: New Straits Times (Malaysia), The Straits Times (Singapore), Philippines Daily Inquirer (Philippines), The New York Times (US), The Guardian (UK), and The Australian (Australia). A simple corpus query language is used to analyze common nouns in the corpus, focusing on proper nouns and possessive nouns, which will be ranked by frequency. The semantic preference of the most frequent nomination strategy for social actors will be further explored through tagging and categorization of collocates. This study aims to reveal if any social actors were dehumanized or discriminated against through the language used in relation to Covid-19 across the selected Western and Asian newspapers.

Keywords: Covid-19, othering, newspapers, social actors, corpus

Corresponding Author: Ong
Theng Theng; email:
andrine.ong@nottingham.edu.my

Published 7 December 2023

Publishing services provided by
Knowledge E

© Ong Theng Theng et al. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the ICESG Conference Committee.

OPEN ACCESS

1. Introduction

At the time of writing this article (in May 2021), there are about 3.5 million of deaths and 168 million confirmed cases of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid -19) across the globe¹. Unfortunately, this Covid-19 crisis has led not only to a dramatic loss of human life, but it has enabled the spread of racism and created national insecurity or general xenophobia². Since, Covid -19 is believed to have emerged in Wuhan, China in 2019, anti-Asian hate crime has increased (specifically in the US) during the pandemic (Gover et al., 2020). In this case, the Asians are perceived as dangerous and solely responsible for causing and spreading Covid -19 (Gover et al., *ibid*). Similarly, in the past, Washer's (2004) study of the representation of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in the selected UK newspapers revealed that China and the Chinese were both blamed for the threat. The Chinese people were portrayed as an inevitable breeding ground for new infections, creating the impression that they were different to 'Us' (UK audiences) as 'Others' – outsiders and dangerous.

Based on the concept of othering as 'an attempt to exclude individuals or all members of a group, by focusing on their ascribed or enacted identities' (Hadzantonis, 2012: 75), the researcher aims to investigate how a group of social actors is constructed by selected Western and Asian English newspapers in relation to Covid-19. This study is important to examine how language of othering (if any) is used between different English users (West vs. Asia, inner circle vs. outer circle) in the newspapers to represent the 2020's world deadliest pandemic: Covid -19. Essentially, this study helps to reveal if any social actors were dehumanised or discriminated through the presentation of Covid-19 across the selected Western and Asian newspapers. As stated by Dervin (2016) it is crucial to be aware of the discourse of othering as it which could easily lead to prejudice, patronising attitudes and hate crime against the 'Others'.

2. Background of Study

Prior research has provided useful insights into news media representation of human sufferings in different contexts. Examples include: UK newspapers reporting of floods in Northern England and Chennai, India (Solman & Henderson, 2019), representation of SARS in the UK national newspapers (Washer, 2004), US and UK news coverage of the 2011 Great East Japan disaster (Matthews, 2019) and representation of people in Hurricane Katrina reportage by major American newspapers (Potts, 2015). Analysis from the data collected in these studies (including: Moeller, 2006; Höjjer, 2004; Thusu, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2006; Ashlin & Ladle, 2007; Joye, 2009, 2010) indicated that there

is a tendency in Western news media to construct distant sufferings with a classification between 'Us' and 'Other'. The 'Others' were generally presented as less capable and misconceived, implying a crucial role for the West as charitable benefactors helping 'Others' who appear to be weak and helpless. Given that these studies focused mainly on selected Western newspapers, the finding may solely represent the narrative of human sufferings from the Western context.

A number of studies on the representation of infectious disease/natural disasters have extended to include newspapers from Asian countries. For instance, Tong (2006) examined the framing of HIV/AIDS in US (The New York Times) and Chinese newspapers (China Daily); Zhang & Matingwina (2016) explored the narration of Ebola by China Daily and the BBC; Ong & McKenzie (2019) investigated the narrative of MH17 air tragedy in two selected UK newspapers and Malaysian newspapers. Taken together, the finding from these studies has pointed to a substantial difference in news frames of the human sufferings between the selected Western and Asian newspapers. It is observed that each of the representative newspapers have tended to serve as the respective national elite press, focusing on the event in their local context. Ong & McKenzie's (2019) study further revealed a tendency for the Malaysian news media to construct the MH17 air tragedy with a classification between important 'Us' (Malaysian elites) and non-important 'Others' (victims). Unfortunately, due to limited number of recognition studies examining the language of othering in Asian context, we know little about the ways Asian newspapers (may) contribute to the concept of othering.

It is also worth mentioned that most of the prior studies discussed above are broadly conducted in the area of journalism (e.g. Zhang & Matingwina, 2016; Solman & Henderson, 2019; Thussu, 2004; Joye, 2009; Tong, 2006), healthcare (e.g. Washer, 2004) and environment (e.g. Ashlin & Ladle, 2007). Linguistics/ applied linguistics analyses on the representation of human suffering in Asian news media are relatively limited in number. Yet, with a few exceptions (see Pope, 2017; Ong & McKenzie, 2019), research on the language of othering in relation to human suffering remains to be understood, for example, regarding the ways language of othering (if any) is used among different English users (Western vs. Asian) in the news media. A linguistics analysis is relevant to examine the portrayals of human suffering in the news media because news is a representation of the world in language (Fowler, 1991). This statement is further supported by Fairclough (2003) who stated that linguistic analysis of media texts can bring to light patterns of variation in language use within newspapers from different countries which reflect fundamental differences in culture, audience and purpose.

In contrast to previous research on the representation of human suffering in the news media, the researcher examines the ways in which the Western newspapers (as

representative of inner circle English use) and Asian newspapers (as representative of English employed within the outer circle) (Kachru, 1985) use language to construct 'Others' in the portrayals of Covid-19. Specifically, this study aims to gain a broad understanding of the ways that social actors are constructed in a corpus of COVID-19 reporting within the selected Western and Asian newspapers. According to Woods (2006: 129), the naming of events or people frequently leads to the establishment of assumptions and expectations about the character and nature of who or what has been named. In the media texts, social actors can be included or excluded, if they are included, they can be personalised and categorised in terms of their identity (such as gender, social class, age, profession) (Caldas-Coulthard, 2003). Simultaneously, social actors can also be excluded through the use of anonymity in which persons are vaguely, abstractly or metaphorically referred to and named (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). In this study, the researcher adopts Potts (2015: 286) and Reisigl & Wodak's (2009: 95) definition of nomination as 'discursive construction of social actors, objects/phenomena/ events and processes/actions, particularly as belonging to in-groups or out-groups'.

3. Purpose/Objectives

The study aims to determine the ways in which social actors are represented in the selected Western and Asian corpus of Covid-19 reporting. In order to achieve the aim of the study, the research questions have been designed in line with the aims as follows:

1. How are social actors named and referred to linguistically in the selected Western newspapers (as representative of inner circle English use) and Asian newspapers (as representative of outer circle English use)?
2. What characteristics, qualities and features are attributed to social actors in the selected Western and Asian newspapers?
3. From what perspective are these nominations, attributions and arguments expressed?

4. Methodology

4.1. Description of the corpus

In this study, six different newspapers were custom-collected through an online database called NexisUK (see Table 1 below). The sampling frame consists of all available articles from six selected publications (e.g. *New Straits Times (Malaysia)*; *The*

Straits Times (Singapore); Philippines Daily Inquirer (Philippines); The New York Times (US); The Guardian (UK); The Australian (Australia)). These articles were published between 31st January 2020 and 15 May 2021 – from the date when World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public Health emergency of international concern on the Covid -19 crisis³ to the date of the data collection of the present study. The intention is to provide a thorough coverage of Covid-19 progression in different timeline across the newspapers. All the articles were downloaded using the search term ‘Covid-19’.

TABLE 1: Distribution of Western and Asian news corpus by countries and number of news articles.

| Asian Newspapers | News Articles | Western Newspapers | News Articles |
|---|---------------|---|---------------|
| Malaysia <i>New Straits Times</i> | 7,700 | United States <i>The New York Times</i> | 13,727 |
| Singapore <i>The Straits Times</i> | 14,052 | United Kingdom <i>The Guardian</i> | 21,156 |
| Philippines <i>Philippines Daily Inquirer</i> | 19,614 | Australia <i>The Australian</i> | 11,701 |
| Total | 41,366 | Total | 46,584 |

There are several reasons for selection of the Western newspapers: US, UK, Australia, and Asian newspapers: Malaysia, Singapore and Philippines in investigating the construction of Covid-19 crisis. First, anti-Asian hate crimes have spiked in cities around North America, Britain and Australia. For example, anti-Asian hate incident reports nearly doubled in March 2021 (from 3,795 to 6,603) in the US⁴ whereas, in the UK, local police data suggest a rise of 300% in hate crimes targeting Asians in the first quarter of 2020⁵. Similarly, the Asian Australian Alliance received 377 reports of Covid-19-related racism between April and June 2020⁶. Acknowledging the role of news media in the construction of social reality (Fowler, 1991), the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes in these Western countries may contribute to different use of language and presentations of Covid-19 in their newspapers, and thus are worthy of investigation.

Second, English is the native language in the US, UK and Australia but it is learnt as a second language in Malaysia, Singapore and Philippines (Kachru, 1985). Hence there may be some overt differences in linguistic features such as nomination used between the Western and Asian countries. It is also worth mentioning that Malaysia, Singapore and Philippines are the top-ranking countries in Asia, which has the largest range of English proficiencies of any region⁷. As a result, the researcher considered that these Asian countries relatively level of English proficiency would allow a more compatible comparison between the newspapers. Third, due to the large corpus size (60,950 news articles), six different newspapers (one from each country) seem sufficient for the analysis of the representation of social actors in the Covid-19 reporting.

4.2. Tools and Methods

In this study, #LancsBox, a new computer software for the analysis of language data and corpora, is used to generate the data. #LancsBox provides a powerful KWIC (key words in context) tool to help find frequencies of different word classes such as nouns, verbs, adjectives (see Brezina et al, 2015). This feature is important for this study as it provides useful statistical figures about a word's frequency and also enables the users to sort collocates on the basis of part-of-speech (POS) - identification of words as nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. In order to identify the most frequent referential strategy of social actors in the corpus, the researcher carries out a simple keyword analysis using words tool. The common or proper noun with high relative frequencies (proportional frequency per 10k of tokens) that occurred in all six news corpora – are considered as a shared keyword. Due to limited space, only the most common noun shared across the news corpora is studied in detail. In this study the most common naming strategy or common noun with highest relative frequencies (i.e. between 39.6 to 16.58) that is shared across the six news corpora is '*people*' (See Table 2 & 3 below).

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the ways '*people*' is presented across the selected Western and Asian newspapers, as well as to uncover (if any) the language of othering is used in the news corpora, a collocation analysis of '*people*' was conducted. Subsequently, the most frequent collocates were grouped into different semantic fields using the automated semantics tagging system - UCREL Semantic Annotation System (USAS), to uncover the specific groups of meaning to which the '*people*' are related. USAS involves the application of a computerised semantic coding system - it groups words according to a semantic field taxonomy. The tagging system contains 21 major discourses fields and 232 fine-grained semantic field tags (see Rayson et al., 2004).

5. Results / Findings

Table 2 and 3 reveal that the most common naming strategy or common noun with highest relative frequencies in all six news corpora is '*people*' (marked in bold). As mentioned earlier, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which '*people*' are described or related to in the newspapers, further fine-grained analysis of the collocates of '*people*' was undertaken using USAS automated semantic tagging system. The frequency of collocates of '*people*' in each USAS broad semantic category is presented in Table 4. For reasons of space, only the most salient USAS broad categories are discussed.

TABLE 2: Top five most common nouns of social actors in the US, UK and Australia news corpus, ranked by relative frequency.

| US | | UK | | Australia | |
|-----------|------------------|------------|------------------|------------|------------------|
| Noun | Relative freq. | Noun | Relative freq. | Noun | Relative freq. |
| people | 33.402712 | people | 39.550637 | government | 24.251243 |
| mr. | 30.459936 | government | 24.696204 | mr | 23.136573 |
| dr. | 15.308974 | death | 17.624607 | people | 21.361713 |
| president | 10.884096 | minister | 12.305085 | australian | 20.658466 |
| trump | 10.827319 | trump | 9.947730 | minister | 8.039496 |

TABLE 3: Top five most common nouns of social actors/s in the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore news corpus, ranked by relative frequency.

| Philippines | | Malaysia | Singapore | | |
|-------------|------------------|------------|------------------|------------|------------------|
| Noun | Relative freq. | Noun | Relative freq. | Noun | Relative freq. |
| government | 26.922706 | government | 24.044472 | mr | 26.284436 |
| people | 16.577741 | people | 22.546284 | people | 21.918100 |
| patient | 15.706785 | dr | 14.150135 | worker | 18.234696 |
| worker | 14.241781 | datuk | 10.621129 | government | 13.532163 |
| community | 13.829971 | minister | 10.411225 | minister | 11.633023 |

As one can see, in the Asian newspapers (see Table 4), ‘people’ affected by Covid-19 are mostly described in relation to numbers and measurements (e.g., ‘million’, ‘many’) and some social related matters and attributes (e.g., ‘encourage’, ‘Filipino’). In all three Western newspapers, the highest percentage of collocates are related to people’s social attributes (e.g., ‘Black’, ‘transgender’). Below, the researcher will review the most salient semantic categories in each corpus (highlighted in Bold in table 4).

5.1. Collocates of ‘people’ in the US corpus

As indicated in table 5 above, category S contains the highest number of collocates of ‘people’ (33.3%), making social actions, states and processes as a prominent component of the construal of social actors in the US corpus. Majority of the collocates in this category fall under identity types such as ‘Hispanic’, ‘Irish’ and ‘Indigenous’. One of the most interesting features that the researcher spotted is the occurrence of collocates referring to people of colour, e.g., ‘brown’ and ‘black’ (see extract 1 & 2) (relevant words associate with the collocates are underlined).

1. This year, Covid-19 has swept through Lowndes County like a brush fire. Poor people, and especially poor **Black people**, fell victim in alarming numbers.

TABLE 4: Identified USAS semantic categories and percentages of collocates of 'people' in the six corpora.

| USAS broad category | Philippines Corpus | Singapore Corpus | Malaysia Corpus | US Corpus | UK Corpus | Australia Corpus |
|---|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|
| A. General and abstract terms | 6.7 % (2) | 6.7% (2) | 10.3% (3) | 6.7% (2) | 3.3 % (1) | 6.7% (2) |
| B. The body and the individual | 13.3% (4) | 10% (3) | 6.9 % (2) | 23.3% (7) | 3.3 % (1) | 16.7% (5) |
| C. Arts and crafts | 0% (0) | 3.3 % (1) | 0% (0) | 0% (0) | 0% (0) | 0% (0) |
| E. Emotion | 3.3% (1) | 0 % (0) | 0 % (0) | 0% (0) | 0% (0) | 0% (0) |
| G. Government and public | 0% (0) | 0 % (0) | 3.5% (1) | 3.3 % (1) | 10.3% (3) | 3.3 % (1) |
| H. Architecture, housing and the home | 0% (0) | 0 % (0) | 0% (0) | 0 % (0) | 6.7% (2) | 0% (0) |
| I. Money and commerce in industry | 0% (0) | 3.3 % (1) | 0% (0) | 0% (0) | 3.3 % (1) | 3.3 % (1) |
| L. Life and living things | 6.7% (2) | 0 % (0) | 6.9% (2) | 0% (0) | 0% (0) | 10% (3) |
| M. Movement, location, travel and transport | 3.3% (1) | 6.7% (2) | 13.8% (4) | 0% (0) | 3.3 % (1) | 0% (0) |
| N. Numbers and measurement | 13.3% (4) | 23.3 % (7) | 17.3 % (5) | 6.7% (2) | 13.3% (4) | 16.7% (5) |
| P. Education | 0% (0) | 3.3 % (1) | 0% (0) | 0% (0) | 0% (0) | 0% (0) |
| Q. Language and communication | 3.3% (1) | 3.3 % (1) | 3.5% (1) | 3.3 % (1) | 0% (0) | 3.3 % (1) |
| S. Social actions, states and processes | 16.7% (5) | 16.7 % (5) | 10.3% (3) | 33.3% (10) | 26.7% (8) | 20% (6) |
| T. Time | 13.3% (4) | 16.7 % (5) | 10.3% (3) | 20% (6) | 13.3% (4) | 16.7% (5) |
| W. World and environment | 3.3% (1) | 3.3 % (1) | 0% (0) | 3.3 % (1) | 0% (0) | 0% (0) |
| X. Psychological actions, states and processes | 6.7 % (2) | 3.3 % (1) | 10.3% (3) | 0% (0) | 6.7% (2) | 3.3 % (1) |
| Y. Science and technology | 0% (0) | 0 % (0) | 6.9 % (2) | 0% (0) | 0% (0) | 0% (0) |
| Z. Names and grammar | 10% (3) | 0 % (0) | 0% (0) | 0% (0) | 10% (3) | 0% (0) |
| Total | 100% (30) | 100% (30) | 100% (30) | 100% (30) | 100% (30) | 100% (30) |

2. Part of the issue is that the virus is not only being politicized, its effects are also racialized: **Black and brown people** are having worse outcomes. Some of the states now seeing the greatest surges in cases are those in the South and West with large Black or Hispanic populations.

It is observed from extract 1 and 2, the US newspapers show a preference for reproducing a discourse of victimisation around black and brown people who appeared

TABLE 5: USAS S category collocates of ‘people’ in the US corpus, listed in order of descending Mutual Information value (MI).

| USAS broad category | Collocates | Percentages of overall collocates (number of collocates) |
|---|--|--|
| S. Social actions, states and processes | transgender [MI=6.51], homeless [MI=6.39], Indigenous [MI=6.10], LGBTQ [MI=5.82], Congregate [MI=5.52], brown [MI=5.29], Hispanic [MI=5.22], marginalized [MI=5.19], black [MI=5.11], Irish [MI=5.01]. | 33.3% (10) |

to be poor and vulnerable. In the news articles, they were frequently associated with words that generally carry negative connotation such as ‘poor’, ‘victim’ and ‘worse’. Additionally, the Black people were found more prominent in stories related to the cycle of dependency and welfare reform. This portrayal of poverty among ‘black’ and ‘brown’ people can also be seen in the news reporting of Covid-19 crisis, reinforcing discourses of the people of colour as the ‘Other’ – less privileged and poor.

The second group of collocates in this category is related to gender identity or expression such as ‘transgender’ and ‘LGBTQ’ (acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning). Some examples are shown in extract 3 & 4 below.

1. There’s an overarching mistrust around vaccination,” said Anthony Fortenberry, the chief nursing officer of the Callen-Lorde Community Health Center, which provides medical care to L.G.B.T.Q. **people** in New York City. “They’re not sure if they want to get it.”[...] Those in intersectional vulnerable groups, such as Black or low-income **L.G.B.T.Q. people**, may have even more medical mistrust.
2. Communities of colour and other marginalized groups have faced some of the most severe coronavirus outcomes, yet have received a smaller share of vaccines. L.G.B.T.Q. people could face similar problems but may be overlooked because they aren’t counted.

Similar to the representations of people of colour, ‘LGBTQ people’ are portrayed as low-income group who received smaller attention in medical care. In fact, they are further suppressed as a group of people who are likely to be overlooked because they are not counted in the collection of sexual orientation and gender identity data (see extract 4). Despite increases in the visibility of the marginalised people, the depiction of these groups of people in news media somehow remains problematic. These people have consistently been stereotyped as mental patients, victims of violence, HIV/AIDS, gender/sexual identity disorder (Raley & Lucas, 2006) and victims of poverty (as indicated in this study).

5.2. Collocates of `people' in the UK corpus

TABLE 6: USAS S category collocates of 'people' in the UK corpus.

| USAS broad category | Collocates | Percentages of overall collocates (number of collocates) |
|---|---|--|
| S. Social actions, states and processes | CEV (clinically extremely vulnerable) [MI=7.83], enslaved [MI=6.41], unhoused [MI=6.39], incarcerated [MI=6.26], congregating [MI=6.25], islander [MI=6.23], homeless [MI=6.14], discourage [MI=5.98], transgender {MI=5.55}, encourages [MI=5.49], BAME (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) [MI=5.47], LGBTQ [MI=5.45], encourage [MI=5.41]. | 43.3% (13) |

Align with the US corpus, category S contains most collocates (43.3%) in the UK corpus, attributing to this category a dominant thematic role in the corpus. In this category, there are collocates that refer to ethnicity (e.g. 'BAME'), gender identity (e.g. 'transgender', 'LGBTQ'), housing situation (e.g. 'unhoused', 'homeless') and confinement (e.g. 'incarcerated'). Given that the collocation between 'enslaved' and 'people' in the corpus is mostly related to the US election and does not inform the currently study into discourses around Covid-19 on a generalizable scale, the collocate has been discarded.

The researcher will begin this category with the occurrence of an acronym 'BAME' (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) (283 times). BAME is generally used by Government public health agencies as a modifying adjectives for '... communities', '... groups', '... households', '... people', '... populations', '... staff' and as a noun (Aspinall, 2021:1). The negative discourse around BAME people in the UK corpus is addressed in extracts 5 and 6 below.

1. **BAME people** are more likely to have poor housing, lower incomes, higher risk jobs and greater risk of underlying health conditions.
2. The Guardian revealed last week that **BAME people** in England were 54% more likely to be fined under coronavirus rules than white people.

As can be seen from the examples above, news consumers are made to see that 'BAME people' are generally poor and less privileged than White people in the UK, at least in reportage. In other words, the portrayal of 'BAME' in the UK newspaper may reproduce unequal power relations where White is considered as a privileged identity. The use of the term BAME itself is debatable. The acronym highlights specific

pan-ethnicities (Black and Asian) and implies that these individuals are a homogenous group, thus, raising issues of exclusion and divineness (Aspinall, 2021).

Gender identity-related terms such as ‘LGBTQ’ and ‘transgender’ also collocate frequently with ‘people’ in the UK corpus. Similar to the comparison between ‘BAME’ and White people in the previous discussion, a comparison is made between ‘transgender’ people and straight (or cisgender) counterpart (see extract 8), in which ‘transgender’ people is again classified as the vulnerable group who is likely to be affected by Covid-19. Therefore, it can be argued that, in addition to emphasising humanity and commonality; identity construction in the UK newspapers seemingly favours comparison, classification and othering (as shown in extracts 7 & 8).

1. In California, Governor Gavin Newsom signed into a law a bill that required health-care providers to collect and report gender identity and orientation along with other public health data, including Covid-19 data - but the policy has been unevenly implemented. In that state, and across the US, there is no account of just how many **LGBTQ+ people** have died.
2. Queer and **transgender people** across the US have been more vulnerable to contracting and dying of Covid-19 than their straight, cisgender counterparts, several new studies have found, with barriers to medical care and high rates of underlying conditions exacerbating the pandemic’s toll.

5.3. Collocates of ‘people’ in Australian corpus

TABLE 7: USAS S category collocates of ‘people’ in the Australian corpus.

| USAS broad category | Collocates [MI] | Percentages of overall collocates (number of collocates) |
|---|---|--|
| S. Social actions, states and processes | indigenous [MI=5.61], vulnerable [MI=5.40], gather [MI=4.99], encourage [MI=4.72], American [MI=4.09], prevent [MI=3.86]. | 20% (6) |

Similarly, in the Australia corpus, category S contains most collocates of ‘people’ (20%). The most frequent and strongest collocate in this category is the adjective ‘indigenous’ (69 times). In the corpus, the portrayal of the ‘indigenous people’ is in the experience of suffering from poverty and Covid-19 disease as evidenced in extracts 9 and 10 below:

1. The poor and disadvantaged, including **indigenous people**, would suffer severe hardships, with governments' capacity to help limited after months of costly support and stimulus spending.
2. From the outset of the pandemic, health authorities have cautioned that **indigenous people**, who tend to suffer poorer health than non-indigenous people, were at higher risk from the coronavirus. That also has proven to be the case in the US, where African-Americans have died from COVID-19 at three times the rate of white Americans.

In the news articles, the media shows a strong preference for formulating a dichotomised relational structure in the news; contrasting indigenous people and non-indigenous people in terms of their health condition (see extract 9 and 10). The comparison indicates a sharp contrast between the two groups of people (indigenous vs. non-indigenous; African-Americans vs. white Americans) in which one group (e.g. indigenous and African-Americans) is degraded. The finding seemingly reflects the ideology of racism and degraded Otherness in the Australian newspapers. This is not surprising given that there has been a dense history of racist and negative portrayals of Indigenous people in Australia media (Jakubowicz, 1994).

Apart from the Indigenous people, the Australian news media also pays attention to the '*vulnerable people*' for examples:

1. Accenture launched its Social Innovation Challenge to develop solutions to rebuild livelihoods for **vulnerable people**, support virtual learning and assist with digitisation.
2. Dr Boyle said she was concerned that if she or Dr Garg were infected, they could give COVID-19 to their children who would pass it to other children at school. They could, in turn, infect **vulnerable people** such as grandparents

In the news corpus, '*vulnerable people*' is presented generally with no overt connection made to a specific race or gender. In a few cases, the media refers '*vulnerable people*' to elderly or older people such as grandparents (see extract 12). As Chen (2015) has pointed out, vulnerability is more likely to be portrayed as age-marked. The media seemingly view the '*vulnerable people*' as passive recipients of the resources and portray them mostly in the position of receiving help and protection from the government (see extract 11).

TABLE 8: USAS S category collocates of 'people' in the Philippines Corpus.

| USAS broad category | Collocates | Percentage (number of collocates) |
|---|--|-----------------------------------|
| S. Social actions, states and processes | Filipino [MI=5.84], discourage [MI=5.66], encourage [MI=4.98], gather [MI=4.62], stranded [MI=4.36], advise [MI=4.14]. | 20% (6) |

5.4. Collocates of 'people' in the Philippines corpus

In the Philippines corpus, the most frequent collocate in category S is the proper noun 'Filipino' (212 times), indicating that the newspapers paid great attention to the local people. Given the origin of the newspapers (in Philippines), this collocate was perhaps predictable. In the newspapers, Filipino people's wellbeing was given priority in conjunction with the government's commitment to the people, as indicated in extracts 13 and 14 below.

1. 'To further support the **Filipino people** during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Monetary Board authorized ...'
2. 'The donation is just one of the projects that M Lhuillier has launched in line with their commitment to assist the **Filipino people** in times of crisis.'

While Filipino people's welfare is highlighted in the news, they are also passivized in such constructions. For instance, words that denote help such as 'support', 'donation', 'assist' are used to describe Filipino people who appeared as the object who received the aids. Another interesting feature in this category is the occurrence of social-action antonyms: 'encourage' and 'discourage'. These two lemmas most commonly occur in the phrase 'encourage people to', and 'discourage people from', suggesting the importance of following the rules and regulations to prevent Covid-19 from spreading. Again, the collocates also indicate that the people are being acted upon and passively received the actions (encourage to and discourage from).

1. 'YouTube will remove videos 'that **discourage people** from seeking medical treatment or claim harmful substances have health benefits.'
2. 'Villanueva said the government should have focused on strengthening the country's health-care system and continued providing assistance to **encourage people** to stay at home.'

TABLE 9: USAS N category collocates of 'people' in the Malaysia Corpus.

| USAS broad category | Collocates | Percentage (number of collocates) |
|----------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| G. Government and public | arrested [MI=5.10] | 3.5% (1) |
| N. Numbers and measurement | many [MI=5.23], million [MI=4.95], some [MI=4.20], more [MI=4.08], most [MI=4.05], few [MI=3.68] | 20 % (6) |

5.5. Collocates of 'people' in the Malaysia corpus

In the Malaysia corpus (see Table 9: Category N), 'people' collocates with 'many', 'more', 'some' and 'million' highly frequently: 287 times, 208 times, 153 times and 286 times, respectively. According to McEnery & Xiao (2007), quantifiers are linguistics concept that indicates how many or how much, for example, the number of entities denoted by a noun. However, Moll et al. (2021), refer to these terms as vague quantifier or natural language quantifiers (NLQ). In general, vague quantifiers are used to give an approximating impression of our perception when we are not able to provide specific numbers (ibid). Some of the examples are shown in extracts 19 and 20.

1. **Many people** were spotted not following the standard operating procedures (SOP).
2. Dr. Adham said the ban on Hari Raya open houses and gatherings during the MCO did not stop **some people** from breaking the rules.

Extracts 17 and 18 illustrate 'people' in Malaysia as large and amorphous groups who are threatening (by violating the rules – see extract 17-18). In fact, the collocate 'arrested' in category G provides further evidence of the 'people' as Covid-19 norms violators in Malaysia. For instance, '**more people arrested** for defying MCO (Movement Control Order)'. In the news articles, the emergence of a second wave of Covid-19 infections is said to be almost certainly due to people being selfish and are heedlessly breaching the SOPs. Those people were accused for not wearing face masks, not recording details at premises, failure to practice social distancing and other offences.

While the people are constructed as rules violators, the Malaysian government are constructed as charitable benefactors, helping people and industries to cope with their financial hardships during the pandemic. For example: 'Federal Government has formulated initiatives to mitigate the impact towards the industry'; 'Government to review existing measures, introduce more aid for affected groups'. The sharp contrast between the people and the government may lead to tolerance renderings of the government narrative, reproduce the notion of good leadership in Malaysia.

5.6. Collocates of `people' in the Singapore corpus

TABLE 10: Most frequent collocations of 'people' in the Singapore Corpus.

| USAS broad category | Collocates | Percentage (number of collocates) |
|----------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| N. Numbers and measurement | queue [MI=6.44], million [MI=5.59], many [MI=4.79], eight [4.74], most [MI=4.64], five [MI=4.56], more [4.44] | 23.3 % (7) |

Similar to the Malaysia corpus, the most highly populated USAS semantic collocates of 'people' in the Singapore corpus is Category N: Numbers and measurement (23.3%), for example:

1. There are **many people** who are currently free and staying at home and don't mind doing some paid delivery work.
2. **More people** are buying and playing games at home with the coronavirus pandemic.

Interestingly, these large groups of people are construed as 'doing' (e.g., staying at home, doing some paid work and playing games) rather than being acted upon. Unlike the Philippines and Malaysia corpora, this construction makes the 'people' in Singapore more active in a social sense. Another striking collocation in this category is the verb 'queue' as the strongest collocate in the category. Indeed, queuing culture is considered common in Singapore, and it is part of the Singaporean *kiasu* character (Leong, 2001). *Kiasu* comes from the vernacular Chinese phrase means afraid to lose out to another person (Hwang et al., 2002), indicating a competitive behaviour. Singaporeans are known as queuing endlessly for free gifts, for stocks and shares, and for National Day parades (Leong, 2001). Therefore, the *kiasu* act of queuing in such a manner is also known as 'doing Singaporean' (Leong, *ibid*). In the corpus, 'queue' is described as a routine in different occasions (extract 23 & 24).

1. ... every time there is anxiety, **people queue** up at supermarkets for essentials.
2. The authority is also promoting e-gifting to avoid crowding at banks as **people queue** up to exchange their old notes for new ones, a CNY practice.

This collocate is likely to contribute to the construction of Singaporean identity in the news reporting of COVID-19. As stated by Leong (*ibid*), the media helps reproduce a sense of national belonging by highlighting one of the prominent cultural traits of Singapore – queuing. This commonality may also reflect the value Singaporeans place

on competitiveness even in a Covid situation. The collocation analysis reveals that there is no overt negative attribution of the '*people*' in Singapore. The media's portrayals of the people as active agents may create a closer relationship between the construed groups and the group of the readers, who find more rooms to relate to greater numbers of familiar 'Us'.

6. Discussion & Conclusion

The present study examined the ways that human participants are linguistically constructed in three selected Western and Asian corpora of Covid-19 reporting. The results show that there is a significant difference in the occurrence of collocates of '*people*' in the Asian corpora and Western corpora. In the Asian corpora, '*people*' are constructed predominantly as homogenous groups with no overt classifications (e.g., ethnicity and gender). On the contrary, '*people*' are often being classified based on their skin colour and gender in the Western corpora (e.g., '*Black*', '*LGBTQ*'). Specifically, the results indicate that the Western news media have higher tendency in using and reinforcing language of othering in the Covid-19 reportage. Language choices displayed in these newspapers coverage of '*people*' reflect subtle linguistic biases consistent with Potts's (2015) study on hurricane Katrina reportage from major American print publications in which '*Black people*' are often presented as threats to social order and overall national welfare. It is also worth mentioned that, although people of African descent and those of mixed-race origin in the UK find the coloured labels offensive (Ifekwunigwe, 2004), the media continue to use colour terminologies (e.g. '*BAME*') and revealing stronger negative associations to the group of people.

According to Kalunta-Crumpton (2020), the use of colour as a racial identifier can signal that anyone who is identifiable by a skin colour is a person of colour. Therefore, these terminologies imply a clear racial classification within the US and UK newspapers, in which Whites remain immune and invisible to racial labels and their racist connotations (Dyer, 1988). Meanwhile, the use of colour terminologies in the newspapers is likely to reproduce historical and contemporary racial identities perpetuated by the dominant White to sustain and promote White supremacy. In fact, stereotypical presentations of '*Black*', '*Brown*', and '*BAME*' people as typically poor, have greater risk of health conditions, and normally resident in less-advantaged inner-cities further reproduce the racial order of White superiority (see extracts 1, 2, 5, 6). Similar to the previous studies (e.g., Due & Riggs, 2011), this study has shown that *The Australians*' description of the '*indigenous*' people is quite specific including exact references to poverty and poor

health condition. In addition, it is found that the media representation of Indigenous people intensified the dichotomised relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous (see extract 10), causing the indigenous people to be perceived as a 'threat' of Covid-19 to general public.

Contrary to the three Western news corpora, '*people*' are made homogenous by language in the Asian newspapers. The absence of the term '*LGBTQ*' in Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines corpora could be explained by the fact that, same-sex marriage is illegal in the countries. Therefore, this group of '*people*' remain invisible in the news reports as if their well-being during the pandemic is not important to the society. It is also noted that there was no overt racial classification found associated with '*people*' in the news reporting. Despite being multi-ethnic countries, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines's news reporting of Covid-19 seemingly regard '*people*' as homogeneous groups, masking diversity. For example, '*people*' collocates regularly with '*Filipino*' in the Philippines newspapers to indicate local people as a whole. In Malaysia and Singapore, '*people*' is described frequently in terms of numbers and measurements (e.g. '*many*') with no particular cultural or physiological attributes. This use of language may serve to blur ethnic identity and to avoid segregating people into racialised representations (Kalunta-Crumpton, 2020).

According to Lynott et al. (2019), the distributions of positive and negative terms in language closely reflects the positive or negative attitudes people exhibit toward various objects. Therefore, it is possible that the Western media sympathise with minority groups and support the principle of gender and racial equality, but, at the same time possess negative feelings and beliefs about the '*people*', which may be unconscious. Conversely, in the Asian media, language used to elicit associations between ethnic groups is not identified. This could be due to potential tension between ethnic groups in the multicultural communities (Danziger & Ward, 2010). In addition, '*people*' are often quantified in the Covid-19 reportage in the absence of an explicitly defined number. The presentation of people in the form of quantifiers may have the effect of portraying them as a homogeneous group with their individual experiences being objectified and backgrounded (Baker et al., 2008).

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Nottingham University Malaysia for the sponsorship to attend the ICESG22 conference.

7. Notes

1. WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard https://Covid19.who.int/?adgroupsurvey={adgroupsurvey}&gclid=Cj0KCQjwp86EBhD7ARIsAFkgakjwQBxZrMDuabU5VrVxRAnRrxuSCe2xE3RWnHx6fTL_JLXaOOvtgvQaAvGGEALw_wcB
2. BBC: Covid 'hate crimes' against Asian Americans on rise <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56218684>
3. A Timeline of COVID-19 Developments in 2020 <https://www.ajmc.com/view/a-timeline-of-Covid19-developments-in-2020>
4. NBC news: Anti-Asian hate incident reports nearly doubled in March, new data says <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/anti-asian-hate-incident-reports-nearly-doubled-march-new-data-n1266980>
5. BBC: Covid in Wales: Racist incidents 'take your breath away' <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-56323775>
6. COVID-19 coronavirus racism incident report <http://diversityarts.org.au/app/uploads/COVID19-racism-incident-report-Preliminary-Official.pdf>
7. English proficiency: an Asian nation in top three for first time in survey of non-native speakers <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/article/2171329/english-proficiency-asian-nation-top-three-first-time-survey>

References

- [1] Ashlin A, Ladle RJ. 'Natural disasters' and newspapers: Post-tsunami environmental discourse. *Environmental HazardS*. 2007;7(4):330–341.
- [2] Aspinall PJ. BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic): The 'new normal' in collective terminology. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*. 2021 Feb;75(2):107.
- [3] Brezina V, McEney T, Wattam S. Collocations in context: A new perspective on collocation networks. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*. 2015;20(2):139–173.
- [4] Caldas-Coulthard CR. Cross-cultural representation of 'Otherness' in media discourse. In: Weiss G, Wodak R, editors. *Critical Discourse Analysis: Theory and Interdisciplinarity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; 2003. pp. 272–296.

- [5] Chen CH. Advertising representations of older people in the United Kingdom and Taiwan: a comparative analysis. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*. 2015 Jan;80(2):140–183.
- [6] Chouliaraki L. *The Spectatorship of Suffering*. London: Sage; 2006. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446220658>.
- [7] Danziger S, Ward R. Language changes implicit associations between ethnic groups and evaluation in bilinguals. *Psychological Science*. 2010 Jun;21(6):799–800.
- [8] Dervin F. *Interculturality in Education: A theoretical and Methodological Toolbox*. London: Springer; 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54544-2>
- [9] Dyer R. White. Screen. 1988;28(4):44–64.
- [10] Fairclough NL. *Analyzing Discourse*. London: Routledge; 2003. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203697078>
- [11] Fowler R. *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press*. London: Routledge; 1991.
- [12] Gover AR, Harper SB, Langton L. Anti-Asian hate crime during the COVID-19 pandemic: Exploring the reproduction of inequality. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*. 2020;45(4):647–667.
- [13] Hadzantonis M. *English-Language Pedagogies for a Northeast Asian Context: Developing and Contextually Framing the Transition Theory*. London, New York: Routledge; 2012.
- [14] Höijer B. The discourse of global compassion: the audience and media reporting of human suffering. *Media, Culture & Society*. 2004;26(4):513–531.
- [15] Hwang A, Ang S, Francesco AM. The silent Chinese: the influence of face and kiasuism on student feedback-seeking behaviors. *Journal of Management Education*. 2002;26(1):70–98.
- [16] Ifekwunigwe JO. *Mixed Race Studies: A Reader*. London: Routledge; 2004.
- [17] Jakubowicz A. *Racism, Ethnicity and the Media*. St Leonards: Allen and Unwin; 1994.
- [18] Joye S. The hierarchy of global suffering: A critical discourse analysis of television news reporting on foreign natural disasters. *The Journal of International Communication*. 2009;15(2):45–61.
- [19] Joye S. News discourses on distant suffering: A critical discourse analysis of the 2003 SARS outbreak. *Discourse & Society*. 2010;21(5):586–601.
- [20] Kachru B. Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: the English language in the outer circle. In: Quirk R, Widdowson H, editors. *English in the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1985. pp. 11–30.

- [21] Kalunta-Crumpton A. The inclusion of the term 'color' in any racial label is racist, is it not? *Ethnicities*. 2020;20(1):115–135.
- [22] Leong LW. Consuming the nation: national day parades in Singapore. *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*. 2001;3:5–16.
- [23] Lynott D, Walsh M, McEnery T, Connell L, Cross L, O'Brien K. Are you what you read? Predicting implicit attitudes to immigration based on linguistic distributional cues from newspaper readership; a pre-registered study. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2019 May;10:842.
- [24] Matthews J. Cultural otherness and disaster news: the influence of western discourses on Japan in US and UK news coverage of the 2011 Great East Japan Disaster. *International Communication Gazette*. 2019;81(4):372–392.
- [25] McEnery T, Xiao R. (2007, July). Quantifying constructions in English and Chinese: A corpus-based contrastive study. In *Proceedings of the Corpus Linguistics Conference CL2007 University of Birmingham, UK* (pp. 27-30).
- [26] Moeller SD. Regarding the pain of others: Media, bias and the coverage of international disasters. *Journal of International Affairs*. 2006;59(2):173–196.
- [27] Moll R, Lücke AJ, Bromme R. How Much Are “Many People” on Facebook? Interpretations of Vague Quantifiers in Online and Offline Contexts. *SAGE Open*. 2021;11(3):21582440211032205.
- [28] Ong TT, McKenzie RM. The language of suffering: media discourse and public attitudes towards the MH17 air tragedy in Malaysia and the UK. *Discourse & Communication*. 2019;13(5):562–580.
- [29] Pope M. Reporting beyond the pale: UK news discourse on drones in Pakistan. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*. 2017;10(1):138–161.
- [30] Potts A. Filtering the flood: Semantic tagging as a method of identifying salient discourse topics in a large corpus of Hurricane Katrina reportage. In: Baker P, McEnery T, editors. *Corpora and Discourse Studies: Integrating Discourse and Corpora*. London: Palgrave MacMillan; 2015;285–304.
- [31] Raley AB, Lucas JL. Stereotype or success? Prime-time television's portrayals of gay male, lesbian, and bisexual characters. *Journal of Homosexuality*. 2006;51(2):19–38.
- [32] Rayson P, Archer D, Piao SL, McEnery T. The UCREL semantic analysis system. In *Proceedings of the workshop on Beyond Named Entity Recognition Semantic labelling for NLP tasks in association with 4th International Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC 2004), Lisbon, Portugal* (pp. 7–12). Paris: European Language Resources Association. 2004.

- [33] Reisigl M, Wodak R. The discourse-historical approach (DHA). In: Wodak R, Meyer M, editors. *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Sage Publications; 2009; 87–121.
- [34] Reisigl M, Wodak R. *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism*. London, New York: Routledge; 2001.
- [35] Solman P, Henderson L. Flood disasters in the United Kingdom and India: A critical discourse analysis of media reporting. *Journalism*. 2019;20(12):1648–1664.
- [36] Thusu DK. Media plenty and the poverty of news, In: Paterson, C & Sreberny, (Eds.), *International News in the 21st Century*, London: John Libbey Publishing. 2004;47-62.
- [37] Tong JJ. Framing AIDS: A comparative analysis of AIDS coverage in US and Chinese newspapers, 2001-2004. *Perspectives: Working papers in English and communication*. 2006;17(1), 1-21.
- [38] Washer P. Representations of SARS in the British newspapers. *Social Science & Medicine*. 2004 Dec;59(12):2561–2571.
- [39] Woods N. *Describing Discourse: A Practical Guide to Discourse Analysis*. London: Hodder Arnold; 2006.
- [40] Zhang YQ, Matingwina S. A new representation of Africa? The use of constructive journalism in the narration of Ebola by China Daily and the BBC. *African Journalism Studies*. 2016;37(3), 19-40.