

A Corpus-based Diachronic Discourse Analysis of Antidepressant Advertisements in China: 1996 to 2015

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1. Introduction: research background and research questions

This research falls within the broad scope of corpus-based discourse analysis. It looks at a specific social phenomenon that is increasingly relevant to human life: drug advertising. Advertising language has been extensively investigated in the field of discourse analysis. Fairclough (1993) examines the advertisements of academic posts and identifies the promotional element in the newer university, explaining that the marketization of universities is the wider social practice within which these discourse practices underwent significant change. Koteyko & Nerlich (2007) investigate the discourse of probiotic web advertising, showing how appeals to shared values together with associations with high-tech science function in generating trust and reinforcing the discourse of healthism. Baker (2006) presents a critical discourse analysis of holiday advertising leaflets: by using corpus linguistic methods, he depicts the most frequently employed language patterns and identifies the social matrix and over-arching ideology related to tourism constructed in the advertising leaflets. This research aims to, by using corpus methods, identify the linguistic patterns of antidepressant advertisements in China, and explore whether such patterns have changed/developed for the last 20 years. Furthermore, it attempts to explain how these patterns and changes are related to their wider patterns of sociocultural contexts.

2. Data collection and management

The special corpus built for this research includes all the antidepressant advertisements that appear in the *Chinese Journal of Psychiatry* from 1996 to 2015. Corpus research methods such as frequency, collocation, keyword and concordance analyses are conducted by using the WordSmith Tool (5.0). In analysing Chinese corpora, the ICTCLAS (the Institute of Computing Technology, Chinese Lexical Analysis System) is used to segment Chinese texts into analysable lexical units. The reference corpus used for keyword analysis is the *Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese (LCMC)*. To highlight the distinctive features of the linguistic patterns of Chinese adverts, 10 adverts randomly chosen from the *British Journal of Psychiatry* are included for a comparative analysis.

3. Corpus analyses and main findings

The findings of frequency analysis show that the word 焦虑 (*anxiety*) is the most frequent word in the Chinese corpus, with 治疗 (*treat*) as the second. Concordance lines of 焦虑 (*anxiety*) show clearly that this word is predominantly used to describe the symptom that antidepressants can treat. Other symptoms that antidepressants treat are heavily simplified, such as by using the phrases of *depressive feeling* and *all types of depression*. In British adverts, the use of a particular brand of

antidepressant is described in relation to specific types of depression with distinctive symptomatic features, providing more detailed information for prescribing doctors.

Collocate analysis enables to see all the words that co-occur with 不良 (adverse)反应 (effects), and the top five collocates are 较 (comparatively), 及 (and), 常见 (common), 与 (with) and 包括 (include). Concordance lines in which both 不良反应 (adverse effects) and these collocates occur show that the side-effects of antidepressants are represented as *comparatively rare*, and the *common* side-effects of antidepressants *include* very light stomach discomfort, etc. By contrast, the category of adverse effects in British adverts offers very clear and straightforward contents which are identical with the information included in medical instructions.

A diachronic keyword analysis indicates that from 1996 to 2002, two important key words appeared as 疗效 (effectiveness) and 有效 (effective), implying that antidepressants are constructive as *effective* in treating depressive symptoms, such as anxiety and depressive feeling, and such *effectiveness* is repeatedly emphasized. From 2003 to 2008, more formal and scientific names of the categories of information start to appear, such as 适应症 (indication), and 不良反应 (adverse effects), implying that Chinese adverts began to develop in a more scientific and objective way. From 2009 to 2015, 禁用 (contraindication) and 过敏 (hypersensitivity) entered as new key words, indicating that Chinese adverts in the last ten years have begun to include information related to the contraindications of antidepressants.

4. Discussion and implications

Antidepressants are represented as very effective, with rare side-effects, and convenient-to-use medication in Chinese adverts, with rather general and simple languages. Despite an increase of the frequency of relevant adverts in medical journals and an emphasize in adding more balanced information in adverts, antidepressants remain a less discussed medication in Chinese society. This is closely related to the ways how depression and antidepressants have been conceptualized in Chinese culture. Wang (2013) finds that China constructs '抑郁症' (*yiyuzheng*, 'depression') as a problem that is normally caused by external social factors, and therefore psychological support and improvement of the social environment have been represented as more helpful. Medical treatment, on the other hand have been marginalised and negatively represented. By contrast, Britain has constructed depression as both a psychological problem that needs psychotherapy and a biochemical condition that needs pharmaceutical intervention. Especially in the last two decades, with the rapid development of pharmaceutical industry in the UK, depression has been predominantly constructed as a chemical condition and over 50 million prescriptions of antidepressants have been written for the British. The antidepressant advertising regulations have been established and the existing policy structure has ensured that more balanced and truthful information of antidepressants can be represented in the UK. This research, therefore, demonstrated the view that all the factors beyond linguistic structures, such as those in the context of situation and context of culture, are intricately woven into the actual use of language. Even drug advertising, which is perceived as an objective form of language, can be devised in dramatically different ways in Chinese and British societies. Discourse, therefore, can be understood as the totality of all the

texts that have been produced within a particular discourse community (Teubert, 2010). By discovering the features and patterns in different discourses, one can always find how a specific discourse object has been differently constructed and understood. This research is an integrated part of a more large-scale project, comparing the constructions of antidepressants in British and Chinese medical advertisements, in national newspapers and in medical journals. It will increase the reflective awareness of both laypeople and health professionals as to how news and scientific discourses echo, filter or reject the assumptions made in consumer discourse, showing that medicine is not an objective and self-contained entity, but that medical conditions and their implications are discursively constructed.

References

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