

'Don't touch your face, avoid it friends'

The representation of coronavirus in YouTube songs – the case study of 'le cumbia del coronavirus'

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About the Special Issue: Discourse Studies Essays on the Corona Crisis

Edited by Jens Maeße, David Adler & Elena Psyllakou

This special issue seeks to collect ideas, reflections and discussions on the multiple aspects of the ongoing corona crisis from a discourse analytical and discourse theoretical point of view. We publish short work-in-progress papers (approx. 1000–3000 words) that take empirical, ethical, psychoanalytical, economic, political and everyday aspects as starting point for developing discourse analytical research ideas and reflections which can be further developed into full research papers at a later time.

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Shaimaa El Naggar

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the discussion about the global discourses of the coronavirus pandemic (cf. Maeße 2020 and Kremer 2020 in this Special Issue, Adler 2021 and Wodak 2021). It turns attention to popular culture, more specifically YouTube and sheds light on an interesting phenomenon in which songs about the coronavirus are mediated on YouTube, achieving millions of hits. Using Critical Discourse Studies as an approach, combined with insights from media and literacy studies (cf. Wodak 2018 and Tolson 2010), this paper explores the representation of the coronavirus in the song 'le cumbia del coronavirus', using it as a case study. It will show how various layers of contexts interact in the YouTube song to create a light-hearted and a humorous representation of the coronavirus, which contrasts with a more serious and a menacing representation of the coronavirus in the press and government discourse as a 'war' or a 'tsunami' (cf. Nikolopoulou and Psyllakou 2020: 2, and Wodak 2021: 15). In addition, the analysis of users' comments suggests that – to some users – the song offered a space for cultural contact and/or imagining a global audience.

Keywords: coronavirus, language and new media, The Discourse Historical Approach, multi-modal analysis, literacy practices on YouTube

1. Introduction

The outbreak of coronavirus has been a widely mediated event in mainstream media channels including press, television and radio, and in new media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Recently, some attention has been given to exploring the representation of the coronavirus pandemic in mediated government discourse (cf. Nikolopoulou and Psyllakou 2020, Adler 2021, and Wodak 2021). In this paper, I extend the interest in discourses on coronavirus. I turn attention to popular culture and more specifically YouTube as I shed light on an interesting phenomenon in which songs about coronavirus are mediated and re-mediated on YouTube, attracting millions of hits. From Nigeria in Africa, to Mexico in Latin America, to the UK in Europe, many songs have been produced about the coronavirus in what appears to be a global phenomenon (cf. From Poverty to Power 2020). Some of these songs are parodies of famous songs/tunes. Others are original productions; 'le cumbia del coronavirus' – which will be examined in much detail in this paper- is an example of the latter. Performed by the Mexican singer Mister Cumbia, the song was released on 25 January 2020 and has many video-editions on YouTube, testifying to its popularity and to the 'participatory' nature of YouTube in which 'fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content' (Jenkins 2006: 290).

At this point, it is worth explaining why YouTube songs on the coronavirus are worth examining. This can be contextualised in the popularity of YouTube as a medium. It is a dominant platform for online video-sharing globally and offers 'an important location for some of the most significant trends and controversies in the contemporary new-media environment' (Burgess 2011: 1). In addition, YouTube represents a 'multi-semiotic landscape' that allows for the use of spoken words, insertion of images, written language, among other aspects (Androutsopoulos & Tereick

2015: 358). To add, on their own, songs can be a powerful tool in terms of their appeal to public sensibilities. This leads to the following question: What representations of the coronavirus are communicated in YouTube songs and in what ways do YouTube affordances shape the representations of the coronavirus pandemic?

To explore the above-mentioned questions, I will use the song 'le cumbia del coronavirus' as a case study. I will draw on insights from Critical Discourse Studies (the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) and multi-modal analysis) and research on the communicative and literacy practices on YouTube (cf. Tolson 2010; Barton and Lee 2013). The choice of the DHA is premised on its methodological rigour which will offer broader insights into the song and its meanings. The DHA explores four layers of context which include: (1) the relationship between texts and genres (e. g. the genre of the song in question and how it relates to other genres and discourses); (2) the broader social context (e. g. here, the coronavirus pandemic that has led-to date- to more than two million deaths, globally); (3) the situational context (e. g. YouTube as a context for mediation) and (4) the immediate language, taking the latter in a broad sense to include all the semiotic resources which have communicative meanings, including modes such as spoken words, written words, image and colour (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; Lemke 2009 and Stöckl 2009). The paper will also explore literacy practices that are key to YouTube such as writing comments, the use of descriptions, and the specific use of titles/names for YouTube videos (cf. Barton and Lee 2013).

In the light of the DHA, the following discussion will be divided into two main sections. Firstly, I will start by delineating the genre of the song and its communicative aims, which will set the context for the critical analysis of the song. Then, I will examine the situational context (i. e. the mediation of the song on YouTube). I will focus on two key aspects: the use of multi-modality and interactivity which appear to be salient in YouTube performances (cf. Tolson 2010; Barton and Lee 2013, and El Nagggar 2018).

2. Le Cumbia del coronavirus: Genre and overall features

A key feature of 'le cumbia del coronavirus' is that it is a cumbia song, where 'cumbia' is a form of dance music that grew from the slave trade in the seventeenth century in Columbia and developed in the contemporary age into many types that seem to keep an affinity to the rhythms and/or the musical instruments that originally characterised cumbia in Columbia (cf. Candelaria et al. 2004: 195). Cumbia has become popular not only in Latin America but also internationally (Candelaria et al. *ibid.*). As a cumbia song, it has upbeat rhythms which – in the context of talking about the coronavirus pandemic – communicate a sense of hope and resilience.

In terms of the communicative aims of the song, it seeks to give advice on how to avoid contracting coronavirus. It follows a rhetorical structure of problem-solution (cf. Hoey 2001: 123–126) in which coronavirus is first described as a 'global alarm' that has 'scared everyone' and led to 'the death of many people'. The lyrics then proceed to offer advice on how to avoid contracting coronavirus; therefore, presenting it as a serious problem that can be controlled and managed, if we follow certain rules:

*'Wash your hands
Do it often
Don't touch your face, avoid it friends ...
Use a disinfectant, it is very effective.'*

An interesting aspect in the above lines is how Mister Cumbia positions himself in the lyrics of the song. While in popular (love) songs, the singer often projects a persona, 'that audiences know is a character, as opposed to the performer singing in propria persona as him/ herself' (Coup-land 2011: 580), for example, of a lover celebrating love, Mister Cumbia performs the song as a cumbia singer. At the beginning of the song, there is a reference to him as the creator of the song and as the lyrics proceed, Mister Cumbia is referred to metonymically as 'the king of viral cumbias'. Here are a few lines from the beginning of the song:

*Mister Cumbia brought the rhythm back with the coronavirus cumbia
Everyone is scared with a disease
It is called coronavirus
And it is a global alarm.
For that I made this song
We have to pay attention
We have to take care
Don't touch your face
Avoid it friends*

As can be shown, the singer performs his identity as a cumbia singer, assuming a closer relationship with his audience. This is reflected through the use of the first personal pronoun 'I' in 'for that I made this song'. The plural pronoun 'we' ('we have to pay attention', 'we have to take care') describe the speaker and the audience as an in-group facing the same threat (coronavirus). The use of the imperatives ('wash your hands, do it often') and the noun 'friend' communicate the view that Mister Cumbia is occupying the social role of a 'friend' who is offering advice to his audience on how to prevent a potentially fatal disease. After briefly exploring the genre of the song, I will move on – in the following section – to explore the situational context manifest in its mediation on YouTube.

3. YouTube as a medium of mediation

As a media platform, YouTube is characterised by multi-modality, including the use of spoken language, written captions and images (cf. Androutsopoulos & Tereick 2015

on the digital and literacy practices of re-mix videos on YouTube). Interactivity is another salient aspect of YouTube, as users can leave comments following a YouTube video, showing their stance towards it (cf. Barton and Lee 2013: 10). In the following, I will examine these two aspects, i. e. multimodality and interactivity which prove to be salient in relation to the representation of coronavirus in the song.

3.1. Multi-modality in 'le cumbia del coronavirus'

A key feature that stands out in the video-editions of 'le cumbia del coronavirus' is the use of humour. To demonstrate, in one video-edition, uploaded by Mister Cumbia to his YouTube channel, humorous images are used. An example is a cartoonist representation of a bomb with a written caption that reads: 'coronavirus has arrived at Mexico'. In another image, the social practice of drinking beer in the pub is invoked. One image features a man on the right holding a bottle of beer (dancing, in enjoyment), while to the left, bottles of Corona Extra – a brand of beer native to Mexico – overlays iconic images of coronavirus (see Fig. 1 below). In another image, the spikes of coronavirus are replaced with bottles of Corona Extra. The pun on (coronavirus and Corona beer) invokes meanings of fun and enjoyment, and suggests that coronavirus can be overcome, through following hygiene and social distancing rules, and in this way can be celebrated.

In another video-edition of the song, humour is played out through re-contextualising the figure of a (scary) monster most common in children's storybooks. As the song plays, two cartoonist faces keep moving in their place (see Fig. 2). The two faces have crossed eyebrows, and betray their teeth showing an evil intention, therefore, representing coronavirus in a light-hearted manner.

In addition to the use of humour, dancing is another key mode (Fig. 3). Two video-editions of the song are performed by nurses. The two videos are interestingly filmed in different countries. One video-edition is apparently filmed in Mexico, while the other is filmed in Nicaragua, testifying to the transnational appeal that the song has achieved (see below for the section on interactivity). In both versions, the



Figure 1: Invoking the social practice of drinking beer in a video-edition of 'le cumbia del coronavirus'.



Figure 2: Re-contextualising the 'scary monster' character common in children's story books in 'le cumbia del coronavirus'

nurses dance in chorus and use gestures to perform the meanings of the lyrics, for example they 'rub their hands' (signifying hand-washing) and apply disinfectants from a bottle. The title and the description of both video-editions are worth exploring. In the Mexican version, the title reads 'Coronavirus – Cumbia versión Hispanoamérica 1 – montaje'; it features the phrase 'Hispanic America version 1 – montaje' in which the phrase 'Hispanic America' indicates that the user who video-edited and uploaded the song on YouTube is imaging a broader audience of Spanish speakers in Latin America. Although the song appears to be a montage of a footage done previously in Mexico (as can be shown in the reference to 'montage' in the title), the description of the song indicates that it has 'subtitles for all languages', seeking to widen the song's reach to other non-Spanish speakers. In this video-edition, a feature that stands out is the alternation between 'medium long shot' which shows the nurses from head to toes, at a low angle evoking closeness; and 'long shots' which reveal the background setting (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 124) where the nurses perform the song; the viewer can clearly read 'hospital general docente', giving an air of authenticity to the song, which is performed just in front of the nurses' workplace. Furthermore, this alternation between these two types of shots creates a dynamic feel, contributing to the upbeat rhythm of the song. The other video-edition – the Nicaraguan version – is uploaded by the channel ('Somos Dos') which – as the description of the channel on YouTube indicates – reports footages from Nicaragua. Unlike the Mexican version, the videoing of the song has an 'amateur' feel to it as if it is videoed by a personal mobile phone. It is taken at the beach and features banners, streamers, and big clapping hands in some shots, communicating positive vibes and a celebratory tone. The dancing of the nurses in chorus in both versions suggests harmony, hope and resilience, insinuating that through following social hygiene rules, coronavirus can be kept at bay.

Another key feature of the song is interactivity, as I will show below.



Figure 3: Dancing as a key mode in two video-editions of ‘le cumbia del coronavirus on YouTube’

3.2. Interactivity in ‘le cumbia del coronavirus’

There are many sides to interactivity in ‘le cumbia del coronavirus’. It is implied in the genre of the song; as a ‘cumbia song’, there is an assumption that the listener can interact with the song through dancing. This is communicated through Mister Cumbia’s bid to the listeners to dance through uttering ‘Yeah ... Yeah’. This is also communicated through the mediation of the song on YouTube. Indeed, the song has attracted thousands of comments; in Mister Cumbia’s video-edition alone, there are more than four thousand comments. Some of these comments are written in a variety of languages. Here are some examples of the top comments.

Lea Evans

This is my Jam for 2020! BTW, your song plays in Ukrainian FM Radio! You are the star here!

Ghostmatrix TV

Great Song 🤩🤩🤩. Greetings from germany 🇩🇪🇩🇪

Carlton 99

🇸🇦🇸🇦❤️ الغنبة علفت براسي 🇸🇦🇸🇦 وكورونا فيروس كورونا فيروس

(Translation from Arabic: coronavirus ... coronavirus ... the song is stuck in my head)

عبدالعزیز الزرعون

I am from dubi, I say that the song is beautiful, and we always hear your songs

Іван Володимирович

Дякую аміго за чудову пісню

(Translation from Ukrainian: Thank you amigo for a wonderful song).

As can be seen above, the users expressed their admiration of the song in a variety of ways such as the use of the predicates ‘great’, ‘beautiful’ and ‘wonderful’, the use of emoticons (laughing faces), the use of numbers and an intertextual reference to ‘Despacito’, a popular Latin American song (‘100 % better than Despacito’). The fact that some users were keen on mentioning their nationalities (Ukraine, Germany, and Dubai) and/or writing their comments in their own languages suggest that the mediation of

the song on YouTube offered a space for cultural contact and (global) connectedness.

4. Reflections and conclusions

In this paper, I have shown how various layers of contexts and multiple modes interact to present coronavirus in a (more) positive manner, in ‘le cumbia del coronavirus’. One layer of context is the genre of the song in which the lyrics and the song’s upbeat music communicate hope and resilience, presenting coronavirus as a problem that can be managed. The situational context – manifest in the mediation of the song on YouTube – is another layer of context that has allowed for the use of multimodality. Coronavirus is represented in a humorous manner through the use of puns (on coronavirus and Corona Extra), and through using a cartoonist style in representing coronavirus (as a ‘monster’ and a ‘bomb’), mitigating its threatening connotations. The use of celebratory symbols and practices in the various video-editions of the songs (such as the use of streamers, drinking beer in a pub, and dancing) reinforces the meanings of hope and resilience. A key aspect here is how YouTube affordances have emphasised and contributed to the song’s meanings, evoking meanings of hope, liveliness and celebration. From one perspective, therefore, this reminds us of the participatory nature of YouTube, where users can edit and re-edit original media content (cf. Androutsopoulos, & Tereick, 2015). Interestingly, these meanings appear to contrast with a more serious and a rather threatening and confrontational representation of coronavirus in the press and news reports as a ‘war’ or a ‘tsunami’ (cf. Nikolopoulou and Psyllakou 2020; Nerlich 2020; El Naggar 2020 and Wodak 2021: 15). As such, in its upbeat rhythm, use of humour and invocation of celebratory practices, the song offers an alternative discourse on the coronavirus pandemic.

The song’s mediation on YouTube has – in addition – allowed for its transnational appeal. This is indicated in the users’ comments which show that the song has achieved resonance with some audiences beyond the Mexican bor-

ders (where it was originally produced). On their turn, users' comments indicated that YouTube offered a space for cultural contact and showing global connectedness, as users showed their admiration of the song in their own (native/preferred) languages, or in English, imagining a global audience. Taking into consideration that more songs about coronavirus are produced every day, this calls for further inquiry into these bottom-up (and creative) representations of coronavirus on YouTube, and on social media broadly speaking.

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Appendix

Links to the video-editions referred to in the article:

- ▶ Mister Cumbia's video-edition of 'le cumbia del coronavirus'
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqasQyatfBQ&list=RDKqasQyatfBQ&start_radio=1
- ▶ Nurses performing 'le cumbia del coronavirus' – Cumbia versión Hispanoamérica 1 – montaje
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2LkFAisGcs>
- ▶ Nurses from Nicaragua perform 'le cumbia del coronavirus'
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUBWwd4Fhrw>
- ▶ The use of the 'scary monster' character in the video-edition of the song
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hW4DF6FWtk>