Using Language to Mobilize the Public in the Crisis: The Case of COVID-19 Public Notices on the Banners

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic calls for effective use of language to keep the public informed of the pandemic update and prevention measures. Meanwhile, the crisis context of the pandemic shaped the language use as well. Drawing upon public notices on the banners in China, this study shows how public notices on the banners have been used to perform the speech acts of warning, appeal, instruction, and prohibition. To mobilize the public to join in the battle of the pandemic, multiple speech acts have been adopted to achieve one purpose like asking the public to wear masks, which, the authors argue, is an indication of the diversity of crisis communication during the COVID-19. To better warn the public of some risky behaviors, some impolite utterances have been used as a vehicle in the warnings. This study not only shows how language is used to mobilize the public during COVID-19, but also points to the shaping role of the crisis context in the language use.

KEYWORDS
Banners, China, COVID-19, Crisis, Public Notices

1. INTRODUCTION

As a global public health emergency, the COVID-19 has been one of the most serious pandemics in decades. By 19th October, there has been 242,024,077 confirmed cases, 4,923,724 reported deaths (Worldometer, 2021). For the fight against the pandemic spread, keeping the public informed of regular updates and prevention measures is no less important than urgent medical assistance. And timely and accurate information requires the effective use of language. Public notices during the epidemic, in this sense, are speech acts (Austin, 1978) performed in the crisis context to fight against the epidemic.

The outbreak of Covid-19 made a crisis context for the use of public notices. As a special kind of context, it occurs quickly, exceeds normal expectations, disrupts the normal social order of life, and destroys the psychological safety of the public to a certain extent. This crisis context requires immediate response to stop the spreading of the pandemic. It also exerts great influence on many discourse practices such as the topic of discourse, the public’s demand for information, the timeliness
of news releases. Most of all, that accessible information on the crisis becomes the immediate background knowledge people utilize to interpret upcoming new information.

This study is a part of the project “Public discourse in the crisis context”, which aims to explore the interaction of the public discourse and the crisis context, to uncover how the crisis context shapes public discourse on the one hand and how the public discourse constructs the crisis context on the other hand. In this paper, we focus specifically on the COVID-19 public notices on the banners in China as a case to explore features of public notices in the crisis context. The questions that guide our exploration are: (1) What kind of speech acts were performed by public notices on the banners in the crisis context? (2) What features of those public notices on the banners can be found with a view to the crisis context? The first question aims to explore the role played by public notices on the banners in the crisis context, and the second one intends to examine the shaping role of crisis context in public notices on the banners. Before presenting the findings in detail, we will first define the scope of public notices, the context of the study, the theoretical framework, and the data. Then, preliminary findings will be presented. Finally, we will conclude this paper by summarizing the findings and significance of this exploration.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Public Notices

Public notice is often used to refer to various forms of notices given to the public in rulemaking or lawmaking proceedings. “Public notices refer to messages and figures released to the public which are closely related with their life, work and other aspects, such as information concerning food, accommodation, transportation, traveling, entertaining and shopping, so on and so forth.” (Qian, 2017, p.188). The defining feature of public notices is their accessibility to the general public. Whenever a notice is made accessible to the general public, it can be referred to as public notice.

In this study, we use “public discourse” to refer to notices released to the public in the form of banners during the epidemic, which is a kind of crisis communication at the community level. When COVID-19 was formally announced by the Chinese government in January 2020, plentiful banners were designed and put up in the community to caution the public against activities that might get them infected, such as going out, gathering, not wearing masks, staying too closely, etc. The following example is one asking the public to stay at home: “There is no specific medicine for novel coronavirus, and home isolation is the most effective way.” (新冠没有特效药,居家隔离最有效xīn guàn méi yǒu tè xiào yào, jū jiā gé lí zuì yǒu xiào). At that time, banners were used to mobilize the general public to fight against the epidemic. An examination of the use of banners during the epidemic can reveal how public notices are used to mobilize the public in the crisis.

2.2 Public Notices as Speech Acts

In lectures posthumously published as How to Do Things With Words, Austin (1962) proposed that some ordinary language sentences are not used to make true or false statements, but rather used to do things. These sentences were termed performatives. In performatives, Austin isolated three layers as to how to perform acts with speech:

1. **Locutionary act**: The utterance of a sentence with determinate sense and reference.
2. **Illocutionary act**: The making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence, by virtue of the conventional force associated with it (or with its explicit performative paraphrase).
3. **Perlocutionary act**: The bring about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence, such effects being special to the circumstances of utterance (Levinson 2001, p.236).
To put it in simple terms, the locutionary act focuses on the utterance itself, the illocutionary act focuses on what the speaker does by making the utterance, and the perlocutionary act is concerned with the actual effect of the utterance.

Public notices are speech acts asking the public to do something. They are directives, which according to Searle (1976), refer to utterances getting the addressee to do something, like requesting and questioning. In Austin’s sense, in the locutionary act of issuing a public notice, an illocutionary act of getting the public to act in a certain way is performed. If the public has done that, a perlocutionary act is performed. This is especially the case of the public notices in the Covid-19. By issuing public notices, the agency asks the public to do something to fight the pandemic, such as staying at home, wearing a mask, keeping interpersonal distance, etc.

2.3 An Overview of Studies on Public Notices

Public notices are generally studied in two perspectives: public notices as living environment, and public notices as a form of public communication. From the living environment perspective, public notices are not only taken as linguistic environment accompanying our living environment, but part of our living environment as well. Public notices like street signs, warning notices and prohibitions, billboards, shop signs, and other linguistic landscapes in the living environment were discussed to uncover the interconnection between the environment of public notices and society (El-Yasin and Mahadin, 1996; Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Akindele, 2011; Dubrovskaya, 2012; Kayam et al., 2012).

There is also the view that public notices are forms of public communication. In this vein, public notice is taken as a form of communication to the public and through public notice, specific norms of behavior are conveyed (Dubrovskaya, 2012; Susanto 2015; Gruodytė, 2016; Kim, 2019). In these studies, different speech acts performed by public notices and pragmatic strategies involved were examined. Public notices, written on the signposts, signboards, and banners in three languages (Chinese, Portuguese and English) in Macao, were collected as the data to examine the translation of public notices (Zhang, 2009). The study made a functional classification of public notices: informative function, expressive function, operative function, and poetic appellative function. A more nuanced classification is offered by Dubrovskaya (2012). Based on the various communicative purposes, the study distinguished five illocutionary forces of public notices: instructions proper, warnings, prohibitions, requests, and informative notices. Each illocutionary force has its locutionary pattern, i.e., semantic formula, as is shown in Table 1 (Dubrovskaya, 2012, p.310-312).

Apart from the functional classifications, the study also paid attention to the linguistic impoliteness on the account of the imposition on the recipient. “The more the situation is connected with life, health and safety, and security measures, the more straightforward and less polite the notice is.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illocutionary Forces</th>
<th>Locutionary patterns</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructions</td>
<td>‘I want you to do something and tell you about it. You should follow what I say because it is the rule.’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I want you to do something. I say: If you do otherwise something bad may happen.’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I want you to do something. I say: If you do what I want nothing bad will happen.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Warnings</td>
<td>‘I do not want you to do something because it is against the rule/law. I say: You must not do it (because it is against the rule/law.).’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prohibitions</td>
<td>‘I do not want you to do something because it is bad for me/somebody. I ask you not to do it.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I want you to do something because it is good for me/somebody. I ask you to do it.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requests</td>
<td>‘I want you to know something. Therefore, I tell you this.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informatives</td>
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Table 1. Illocutionary forces and locutionary patterns of public notices
(Dubrovskaya, 2012, p.315). For the face-threatening nature of the imposition, mitigating strategies are often employed to mitigate the offense (Dubrovskaya, 2012; Kim, 2019). In Russia and Poland, notices were made more polite by adding “we request” and in English, this was done by putting “Thank you” at the end (Dubrovskaya, 2012). Similar results have been found in Korean as well. Kim (2019) analyzed the structure and language strategies of public notices posted in Korean public restrooms. The study showed that public notices in the restrooms were presented in the form of a statement, command, and description from the listener’s point of view. Besides, mitigation strategies like asking, praising, providing clues, inducing laughter, and expressing gratitude were also used, which were indications of Korean culture and restroom context.

3. DATA AND ANALYTIC PROCEDURE

Banners posted in the communities in China during February and April 2020 were collected. For the lockup in February, some data were collected on Weibo (the most popular microblog in China), and some were collected from the authors’ living communities by the researchers. We firstly downloaded or took photos of those banners, and then transcribed them into texts. Finally, a total of 131 notices were collected for the current analysis.

In the follow-up analysis, based on Dubrovskaya’s (2012) five categorical classifications, (instructions proper, warnings, prohibitions, requests, and informative notices), we firstly coded the public notices in terms of their illocutionary forces. Later, we examined linguistic features and pragmatic strategies used in those public notices as an endeavor to look at the locutionary forces of public notices in the crisis context. Finally, combining the analysis of illocutionary and locutionary forces of public notices with the contextual factors, we explored the interconnection of public notices and the crisis context.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Illocutionary Acts and Their Locutionary Features

In line with Dubrovskaya’s (2012) five categorical classifications of illocutionary acts, we found in China, banners during the Covid-19 performed 4 categories of illocutionary acts: Instruction, Warnings, Prohibitions, and Appeals. Interestingly, there were no Informatives in our data, which indicates that no banner was used to deliver the latest update to the public. For some of the banners were used not solely as requests, but as appeals to call for some actions to be taken to fight against the epidemic, we labeled the speech acts as Appeals instead of Requests to signify those serious and urgent requests made to the public.

During the epidemic, language has been put on the banners to perform the speech acts of Warnings, Instructions, Appeals, and Prohibitions. In descending order, banners were mostly used as Warnings (36%) to prevent the public from taking some risky actions that might get themselves or others infected, then as Appeals (25%) to call for the public to take some initiatives to fight against the epidemic, as Instructions (25%) to tell the public what should be done to guard oneself against the infection, and lastly as Prohibitions (14%) to forbid some risky behaviors.

4.1.1 Banners as Warnings

A warning is the words written on the banner to tell people a potential danger of the epidemic. The illocutionary act of warning follows the locutionary pattern of:

*If you do X, you are asking for infection or death.*
This is similar to Dubrovskaya’s (2012) pattern—“I want you to do something. I say: If you do otherwise, something bad may happen”. The difference lies in that in our data, it is more straightforward by telling people if you do something risky, you will die. Those warnings were used to warn people against the potential risks of:

4.1.1.1 Eating Wild Animals

1. 野味一时爽,隔天医院躺 yě wèi yì shí shuǎng, gé tiān yī yuàn tāng  
   Translation: If you feast on wild animals, you will lie in the hospital the next day.
2. 今天沾一口野味,明天地府相会 jīn tiān zhān yī kǒu yě wèi, míng tiān dì fǔ xiāng huì  
   Translation: If you take a bite of wild animals today, you will be in hell tomorrow.

In 2003, most of the 11 cases of the SARS epidemic that first appeared in Guangdong had a history of contact with wild animals, eating of wild animals, which has been strictly forbidden by The Wildlife Protection Act. Eating wild animals was regarded as the culprit of the SARS and has been taken as the source of many epidemics. On January 22, 2020, at a press conference held by the State Information Office, Gao Fu, an academician of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the director of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, stated that the new coronavirus spread from the South China seafood market, and wild animals played a key role in it. In light of the high risk of eating wild animals, banners were used to warn the public against eating animals. The commonly used pragmatic strategy was telling the public seriously and directly that you would die once you take a bite of the wild animals.

4.1.1.2 Not Wearing Masks

Wearing a mask during the COVID-19 can effectively prevent droplet transmission, which is the most effective way of personal protection against the epidemic. Yet, at the beginning of the epidemic, the public had to be informed of the protective role of masks and even if they were informed, it takes some time for them to form the habit of wearing masks; therefore, banners played the role of warning public the risks of not wearing masks. As is shown in (1) and (2) below, the pragmatic strategy was telling the public seriously and directly that by choosing not to wear a mask, they were choosing death.

1. 不戴口罩你试试,试试就逝世 bù dài kǒu zhào nǐ shì shì, shì shì jiù shì shì  
   Translation: Try it without a mask, try and die.
2. 口罩还是呼吸机,您老看着二选一 kǒu zhào hái shì hū xī jī, nín lǎo kàn zhe èr xuǎn yī  
   Translation: Mask or ventilator, it’s your choice.

4.1.1.3 Getting Together

The epidemic was at its worst during the Chinese Spring Festival. In Chinese culture, it is time to go back home, get a reunion with families and visit relatives and friends. Usually, there will be quite a lot of parties for people to get together. However, during the epidemic, the gathering will increase interpersonal transmission of the virus and thus increase the risk of getting infected. It is a rather challenging task to keep Chinese people from gathering during the Spring Festival. To stop the spread of the virus from person to person, banners were used to warn the public against any festival gathering, as is shown in (1) and (2) below.

1. 拜年就是害人,聚餐就是找死 bài nián jiù shì hài rén, jù cān jiù shì zhǎo sǐ  
   Translation: To pay a Spring Festival visiting is harming others and to dine together is to seek death.
2. **今年过年不串门,来串门的都是敌人,敌人来了不开门**

   **Translation:** No visiting this year. If you come, you will be the enemy, and we will not let the enemy in.

On the banners, festival visiting was described as harming others and those who pay a visit to their relatives would be regarded as the enemy that others have to watch off. The pragmatic strategy use is identifying those who pay a festival visit as someone evil. The metaphor of “visitors as the enemy” was adopted to invoke the sense of alert to stop people from visiting others.

### 4.1.2 Banners as Appeals

An appeal is a serious and urgent request made to the public to ask them to perform some urgent tasks. Similar to Dubrovskaya’s (2012) summary of the two semantic patterns of requests, “I do not want you to do something because it is bad for me/somebody. I ask you not to do it” or “I want you to do something because it is good for me/somebody. I ask you to do it”. The illocutionary act of Appeals follows the locutionary pattern of: “Do X please.” or “Do not do X please”. The locutionary patterns of Appeals during the COIVD-19 differ from common requests in that the initiator of the appeal was omitted, and the benefits of taking the actions were omitted as well. Because in the crisis context, the whole community as a whole acted as the initiator of the requests. The benefits of taking the actions that were requested were assumed to be quite clear to the public: to fight against the epidemic. In other words, the crisis context provided the background information for the initiator and benefits. Therefore, they were omitted. Banners were used to appeal for the following.

#### 4.1.2.1 Stopping Rumors

During the fight against the epidemic, the public had an increasing demand for information updating and paid close attention to the spread of the virus. Accompanying those timely press releases from government agencies, there were also plenty of rumors concerning the possible sources of infection (some rumored cats and dogs as the sources of the epidemic), possible ways to fight against the virus (like drinking alcohol), exaggeration of the number of infections, exaggeration of the shortage of the epidemic prevention materials, etc. Although government agencies publish information promptly to dispel rumors, some people still believe in rumors and spread rumors, which may cause public panic and chaos. Therefore, to enhance the ability of information discrimination and control rumors, appeals were printed on the banners to ask the public not to believe in rumors and spread rumors, see (1) and (2) below.

1. **病毒疫情不可怕,谣言信息切莫发。**
   **Translation:** Virus is not frightening, and rumors should not be spread.

2. **严阵以待,科学防治,不信谣,不传谣。**
   **Translation:** Please be fully prepared, prevent and control the epidemic in scientific ways. Do not believe in rumors, and do not spread rumors.

#### 4.1.2.2 Stopping Gathering

As we have already explained, the outbreak of the epidemic was exactly the time of the Spring Festival in China, which was a time for people to go back to their hometown, visit relatives, and get together with friends. Yet, anyway of gathering means potential risks of droplet transmission, as a result of which people might get infected in large numbers. Therefore, appeals both in a severe tone and easy-going tone were made on banners to persuade the public not to get together at the moment, and put off the visiting and gathering to the next year when the epidemic was over (see (1) and (2) below).
1. 勤通风,勤洗手,扎堆聚集不可有。
   **Translation:** Ventilate, and wash hands frequently. Please do not get together.

2. 亲戚不走,来年还有。朋友不聚,来年再叙。
   **Translation:** Please do not visit relatives for there will be opportunities next year. Don’t party with friends for you can still get together next year.

4.1.2.3 Wearing Masks

Wearing a facial mask can stop the spreading of the virus through the droplet. Asking people to wear a mask was of first importance to prevent more individuals from getting infected. In addition to warning the public of the severe consequences of not wearing a mask, appeals were made on banners to tell the public that, during the epidemic, wearing a mask would be an act of both loving oneself and others, see (1) and (2) below.

1. 出门就把口罩带,于人于己都是爱。
   **Translation:** To wear a mask when you go out is to love yourself and others.

2. 乖!戴好口罩!
   **Translation:** Be good! Wear a mask, please!

4.1.3 Banners as Instructions

Instructions are simple written information on the banner telling people how to fight the epidemic. Similar to Dubrovskaya’s (2012) formulation “I want you to do something and tell you about it. You should follow what I say because it is the rule”. The locutionary pattern of Instructions was “Do as what is said on the banner because it is the scientific way and rule of fighting the epidemic”. Some scientific measures for preventing the epidemic were informed to the public. (1) and (2) below are examples of instructions telling the public how to do a better job of personal protection, and the necessity of registering for those who have returned home during the epidemic.

1. 个人防护三要素:戴口罩、勤洗手、多通风。
   **Translation:** Three elements of personal protection: wearing a mask, washing hands regularly, and more ventilation.

2. 外来人员请主动报告,主动登记。
   **Translation:** Any visitor shall take the initiative to report and register.

(1) was an instruction telling people three important elements of personal protection and (2) was an instruction asking visitors to report and register to the community, which was an essential way to trace those who might come from epidemic areas and might have the potential of getting others infected. There were some other instructions asking people to have an observation of 14 days like “When you return home, you have to observe for 14 days and report any symptoms of COVID-19”, some telling people to wear a mask to stop the droplet transmission like “Wearing a mask when going out, and droplet transmission can be stopped”, some asking people to wash hands regularly like “More disinfection, frequent hand washing, then the virus will be killed”, etc.

4.1.4 Banners as Prohibitions

Prohibitions are written information on the banner to prevent something from being done. Prohibitions on the banner follow the locutionary pattern of “You must not do X”, which was similar to Dubrovskaya’s (2012) formulation of “I do not want you to do something because it is against the
rule/law. I say: ‘You must not do it (because it is against the rule/law).’” Prohibitions printed on the banner were phrased in much shorter and simpler terms, telling people that some risky and infectious behaviors were prohibited during the epidemic. (1) and (2) below are examples of prohibitions telling people not to enter their neighborhood, not to visit a family who has a member from Wuhan.

1. 疫情严峻,非本小区业主严禁入内。yì qíng yán jùn, fēi běn xiǎo qū yě zhǔ yán jìn rù nèi。
   Translation: For the severe epidemic, non-owners of the community are strictly prohibited from entering.

2. 本户有武汉返乡人员，请勿相互来往。běn hù yǒu wǔ hàn fǎn xiāng rén yuán, qǐng wù xiāng hù lái wǎng。
   Translation: There lives a man back from Wuhan here, and do not visit.

(1) was the transcript of a banner during the lockdown. The actual lockdown was carried out in the neighborhoods. The neighborhoods administration decided whether it should be locked down or not according to the update of the epidemic. A severe lockdown would allow no residents in the neighborhoods to go out while a moderate one would allow no one from other neighborhoods to enter. The prohibition in (1) was put up at the gate of a neighborhood to tell visitors that non-owners of the community were strictly prohibited from entering. (2) was a banner put up at the door of a house. During the Spring Festival, many people had traveled a long way back home for the reunion, of which many were from Wuhan. Thus, those who had already come back home from Wuhan were required to stay home for observation for 14 days and no visitors were permitted. The prohibition in (2) was put up at the gate of such a family to prohibit visitors by saying “There lives a man back from Wuhan, and do not visit”.

Apart from those banners which prohibited people from approaching the potential infection, there were also other prohibitions preventing people from eating wild animals like “It is forbidden to eat wild animals”, from visiting relatives like “No Spring Festival visiting”, from traveling a long way back home like “Stop your steps back home”, from believing and spreading rumors like “No trusting and spreading of rumors”. Those banners acted as measures prohibiting people from taking some risky actions, which might get themselves or others infected.

4.2 Achieving One Purpose With Multiple Speech Acts

During the epidemic, language was put on the banners as a kind of public notice to fight against the epidemic. More specifically, banners were set up to ask people to take some personal protection measures like wearing masks, washing hands, ventilating, and asking people not to do something risky like stopping eating wild animals, stopping gathering and Spring Festival visiting, and stop spreading rumors. In COVID-19, informing the public of the risky actions and essential epidemic prevention measures is of the same importance as the medical treatment of those who have already got infected. This is especially the case at the initial stage of the epidemic when the public still has inadequate knowledge about the prevention of the epidemic. What’s more, Chinese people traveled frequently for the Spring Festival gathering at that time. Banners put in the neighborhoods, gateway, roadsides, countryside have played an essential role in disseminating the prevention knowledge of the epidemic.

Interestingly, multiple speech acts have been used to realize a specific epidemic prevention measure like wearing masks. Table 2 shows four major epidemic prevention measures performed by multiple speech acts.

As we have already stated, at the initial stage of the epidemic, it was proved that wearing masks can effectively stop droplet transmission. To let everyone wear masks, language was used to perform the speech acts of warnings, appeals, and instructions. The exaggerated negative consequences (usual death) like “Take a posthumous photo if you do not wear a mask” were stated in the warnings like a curse to make people realize the serious consequences of not wearing a mask. Apart from the curse-like warnings, appeals were made as well to invite more people to wear a mask. For instance,
in the appeal “If the senior citizens in the family wear a mask, the blessing will be extended to three generations”, blessings of wearing masks were stated to invite more senior citizens to wear masks. Furthermore, banners were put as instructions to educate people on the benefits of wearing masks.

Eating wild animals, which has already been forbidden by law, was again brought into the focus at the initial stage of the epidemic. Two speech acts, namely, warnings and prohibitions were used together to ask people not to eat wild animals, such as the warning “A bite of wild animals today will make you lie in the hospital tomorrow”, and the prohibition “No eating wild animals”.

The outbreak of the epidemic in China was at the Spring Festival. Preventing the infections caused by festival gatherings was of utmost importance. Warnings were used to make people realize the negative consequences of gathering, appeals were made to invite more people to join the group of not gathering, and prohibitions were used directly to forbid any gatherings.

Amounts of rumors pervaded in the social media about the discovery of infections of somewhere, the increasing number of infections, and the shortage of medical resources, which were extremely panic-inducing. Thus, appeals and prohibitions were used to control rumors. Appeals like “Virus is not scary, and rumor information should not be spread.” were put on the banner to appeal to people not to trust and spread rumors, and the forbidden of spreading rumors was clearly stated in banners like “No trusting and spreading of rumors”.

In sum, wearing masks, not eating animals, not gathering, and having no rumors were four crucial aspects as important as medical assistance. To achieve those purposes, multiple speech acts of Warnings, Appeals, Instructions, and Prohibitions were used in an integrated way. For those risky actions, Prohibitions and Warnings were used to prohibit those risky behaviors on the one hand, Appeals were used to request people not to take those actions on the other hand. For those preventive measures, they were realized by three speech acts: Warnings were used to warn the public of risks of not taking those preventive measures; Instructions were used to educate people of the benefits of taking those measures, and Appeals were made to request people to take those measures. This is an indication that public notices on the banners resorted to both the general public’s rationality and emotion to mobilize them to join in the fight against the epidemic. When resorting to rationality, the speech acts of Warning, Prohibition, and Instruction were used. When resorting to emotion, the speech act of Appeal was used.

### 4.3 Impoliteness as a Vehicle for Warning

It was rather a challenging task to warn the public of potential risks because, at the initial stage of the epidemic, the public knew little about the ways of personal protection, and they were also unaware of the potential severity of the disease. In this context, impoliteness, such as prohibitions and warnings, was used to alert the public to the potential risks and to take preventive measures. The use of impoliteness was effective in mobilizing the public to join in the fight against the epidemic.

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<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Speech acts</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wearing mask</td>
<td>Warning, Appeal, Instructions</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>No eating of wild animals</td>
<td>Warning, Prohibition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>No gathering</td>
<td>Warning, Appeal, Prohibition</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>No rumors</td>
<td>Appeal, Prohibition</td>
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the severe consequence of taking risky actions. In this case, some impolite utterances like “Gathering is heading for death”, “If you do not wear masks, you will soon take posthumous photos” were used as a vehicle to instill the addressees with a sense of frighten. Death or getting infected would occur if they eat wild animals, gather, or do not wear masks.

In those warnings put on the banners, we found that impoliteness, the use of language to offend (Culpeper 2011), was used as a vehicle to warn the public of potential risks of some actions. For instance, in warnings of wearing masks, there was a pattern of “if you do not wear a mask, you will soon lie in hospital / take posthumous photos / pass away/ be remembered seven days after death / be loved by the virus”; in warnings of not to eat wild animals, a similar pattern like “if you eat wild animals, you will soon go to the hell / lie in the hospital / infected by virus” appeared; in warnings of not gathering, utterances like “To gather is to kill each other and to party is to kill themselves”, “Gathering is looking for death” appeared frequently.

Those impolite utterances were face-threatening to the public and regarded as uncivil in the general context. However, in the crisis context constructed by the COVID-19, they were utilized as a vehicle for warning the public of some risky actions, like eating wild animals, gathering, not wearing masks, which might get them or others infected. In the emergency of COVID-19, the face-threatening and uncivil nature of those utterances were mitigated given the utmost importance of protecting more people from getting infected.

Impoliteness was a vehicle for warning the public of the potential risks. This was realized by adopting what is termed by Culpeper as “Frighten” in the taxonomy of impoliteness strategies. By linking some potentially risky actions to death, instead of instilling “a belief that action detrimental to the other will occur” (Culpeper, 1996, p. 358), those warnings instilled a feeling of cursing to death if some risky actions were taken during the epidemic. In the crisis context, rather than being taken as an offense, those warnings were taken as effective warnings. The contextual factor changed the perception of those impolite warnings. During the epidemic, it was a consensus that those who had taken risky actions not only endangered their own lives, but also made the whole community live in the risky situation. They were taken as the risky factors in the environment. An imagined risky group, which was standing opposite to the addressee of the warnings, was made by the impolite warnings. Not only did the actual addressees not want to be a part of the imagined risky group, but they also took the cursing-like utterances as a punishment for the imagined group. Therefore, those impolite warnings became effective acceptable measures to warn people of risky actions.

5. DISCUSSION

We have probed into public notices putting on the banners during the outbreak of COVID-19 in China and found that, firstly, notices put on the banner have performed the speech acts of Warnings, Instructions, Appeals, and Prohibitions in descending order. Previous literature showed that through the communications created by public notices, specific norms of behavior are conveyed (Dubrovskaya, 2012; Kim, 2019). Our analysis also found public notices on the banners are forms of crisis communication, through which the protection measures are communicated to the public during the COVID-19. What’s more, a step forward from Dubrovskaya’s (2012) classification of the speech acts performed by public notices, we have recognized a descending order of the four kinds of speech acts, namely, Warning, Instruction, Appeal, and Prohibitions. The proportions of speech acts might be linked to the crisis context. During the COVID-19, warning the public of the potential risky actions seems to be the most urgent, which then gives rise to a large number of warnings on the banners.

Besides, we have also found that multiple speech acts were used to achieve the same purpose. For instance, to make more people wear masks, warnings, appeals and instructions were utilized in an integrated way. In the crisis context of COVID-19, the urgent need of dissemination of the epidemic prevention measures called for multiple speech acts to warn the public of the risks, invite them to join in the prevention of the epidemic, and instruct them the ways of personal prevention, all at the
same time. This could also be taken as the diverse forms of crisis communication in China during the COVID-19, which were not transmitted from the government to the public, but communicated by the community to the residents.

Lastly, impolite utterances were used as a vehicle in the warnings. Researches on public notices have yet not uncovered the use of impolite utterances as a vehicle in the speech act of warnings (e.g., Zhang, 2009; Dubrovskaya, 2012). Our analysis of banners in China during the COVID-19 showed that in the crisis context, to warn the public of the risks involved in the emergency, a sense of fright has been instilled by some face-threatening utterances like lying in the hospital, going to hell, looking for death, to prevent the public from taking risky actions. The link of impoliteness and emergency in our analysis is consistent with findings in the politeness research literature that face concerns might be suspended in the emergency (Brown and Levinson, 1978; Culpeper, 2009. Moving a step forward, we have found that during the COVID-19, impoliteness has been used as a vehicle to instill fright and raise awareness in the warnings.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the use of public notices on the banner as a special kind of crisis communication. The analysis has identified four speech acts performed by public notices on the banners during the outbreak of COVID-19 in China. As a media of crisis communication, banners set up in the neighborhoods have worked mostly as Warnings, then as Appeals, Instructions, and lastly Prohibitions to precaution the public from some risky behaviors like not wearing masks, eating wild animals, gathering and spreading rumors. Besides, multiple speech acts were performed to realize one epidemic prevention measure, which could be taken as the diversity of crisis communication at the community level during the epidemic. In addition, impoliteness utterances were used as a vehicle in the warnings to instill a sense of fright to prevent the public from taking some risky actions.

China is the first country to fight the epidemic. Facing the crisis of the COVID-19, what is of the same importance as medical assistance is to raise public awareness to protect themselves from the virus. Apart from the official release and news from various channels transmitting from the official agency to the public, public notices on the banners emerged as measures taken at the community level to direct people’s behavior, which was an indication of the community’s participation in fighting against the epidemic. In this fighting, language has been used to mobilize the public to join the battle. Our study has examined how public notices on the banners have taken up part of the role to mobilize the public, and by the examination of banners in China, we contributed to the understandings of public notices in the crisis context by outlining forms, functions, features and the influence of crisis context on public notices. The COVID-19 has become a global pandemic and it would both be interesting and essential to examine public notices issued in other cultures to unravel the influence of crisis and culture on public notices on the one hand, and to enhance the use of language in crisis communication to save more lives on the other hand. Although the use of banners might be unique in the Chinese context, the result of our analysis as a preliminary attempt to examine the language used during COVID-19 would be meaningful for further linguistic inquiry of language used in the crisis context.

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ENDNOTE

1 https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1657023979827029338&wfr=spider&for=pc

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