

How has the Nation Been Coping? A Corpus Analysis of Malaysian Letters to the Editor in Another COVID-19 Community-Wide Containment

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ABSTRACT

With the development of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen a rise in digitalisation that includes receiving and/or reading information online. There is a wealth of citizen journalism such as letters to editors that are garnering wider readability based on availability of news offered online as well as netizens' independence to search for more credible sources on the web. The present study aims to examine a corpus of Malaysian online letters to editors that reflect public expressions of the second community-wide containment, also known as the Movement Control Order (MCO2.0) in the country. Following the corpus linguistics approach, frequency word lists are firstly extracted from public online letters in a popular national newspaper, which are further investigated in terms of collocational analysis and close inspection of words and phrases that are used in context via concordancing. This analysis is comparable to highlighting any similarities or differences expressed among Malaysians in a previous study conducted during the first MCO. Findings showed that letters during MCO2.0 were more about COVID-19 vaccines compared to the crisis and restricted movements in the first MCO. In-depth speech acts analysis, according to Searle (1979), revealed that discussions related to vaccination are mostly in favour of the government's plan in making vaccines free and accessible regardless of citizenship.

Keywords: Citizen journalism; corpus-based studies; COVID-19; Lancsbox 5.0; speech acts

INTRODUCTION

Similar to the rest of the world, Malaysia is not exempted from the social ramifications caused by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Numerous lockdowns at various levels were implemented in the country since the first positive case was recorded on 23 January 2020, less than 48 hours after the first positive case was recorded in Singapore (Shah et al., 2020). This first wave of COVID-19 cases in Malaysia ended on 27 February 2020. However, by 11 March 2020, positive cases of local transmissions began to rise following a religious gathering held at the Seri Petaling Mosque, Selangor, Malaysia, that was attended by 10,000 participants from different countries, with more than 100 cases reported daily. The first fatal case in Malaysia was recorded on 17 March 2020, and the very next day, the Movement Control Order or MCO hereafter (the Malay equivalent is PKP) was implemented by the government on 18 March 2020 (Shah et al., 2020), aimed at restricting the movement of people into or out of an area.

Under the first MCO regulations as implemented in March 2020, the general public was restricted by the following measures: (1) a general prohibition of activities involving physical contact or mass gatherings; (2) closure of all business sectors except for those recognised as “essential services”; (3) need to practice self-quarantine and health checks for those returning from overseas; (4) a general ban on travel, including restrictions of tourists into the country;

and (5) closure of all institutions of learning (Ganasegeran et al., 2020). This MCO, which lasted until 14 April 2020, led to a visible rise in access to online local news sites for obtaining official news and latest information revolving around the pandemic. At the time of writing, a report by Hootsuite and We Are Social (2020) cited *The Star* as the 10th most highly viewed website in Malaysia in 2020 after websites such as Google that ranked in first place, YouTube in second, followed by Facebook in third.

Following the end of the MCO in April 2020, Malaysia implemented the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO, the Malay equivalent: PKPB) to re-open economic sectors in several phases. Standard operating procedures were implemented, with focus given to avoiding crowded spaces and enforcing the use of masks, hand sanitisers, temperature checks, and social distancing measures. Since then, various other movement restrictions were implemented, such as the Enhanced Movement Control Order (EMCO, the Malay equivalent: PKPD) and the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO, the Malay equivalent: PKPP) depending on the severity of COVID-19 cases in the country. On 11 January 2021, for the second time since the first case reached Malaysia in January 2020, the then Prime Minister Tan Sri Dato' Dr. Hj. Muhyiddin Yasin announced the reimplementing of MCO in six states (Penang, Selangor, Federal Territories, Melaka, Johor and Sabah), with the CMCO and RMCO implemented in other states beginning 13 January 2021.

Although movement in the country was restricted for the second time, social sentiments on the events may have changed among the public who are now more informed of SOPs, risks and guidelines compared to the first time a community-wide containment (other similar terms are quarantine, lockdown and isolation) was implemented in the country. Hence, this paper explores themes surrounding what people are most concerned about during the second COVID-related community-wide containment phase through investigating letters written to the editor of a popular online English news portal (*The Star*) in the country. We also compare the salient issues and its connection to the conceptualisation of the pandemic from the first phase of MCO (henceforth, MCO1.0) with the current MCO phase (MCO2.0) using LANCSSBOX 5.0, particularly through keywords and collocation network analysis. The way in which people communicate in their letters during this extended health crisis exemplifies Malaysians' current situation and is found to be worth exploring. The current study then extends by doing close readings of selected texts that highlight typical recurring speech acts found in these letters, emphasising what is intended (or intended meaning) within those letters. Through this form of corpus-based pragmatic analysis, we hope to shed light on how Malaysians are coping and how the Malaysian government managed the crisis during that period.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: the next section reviews related work that motivated this study and describes the corpus methods taken. Then, the theoretical background underpinning the corpus-based pragmatic analysis is delineated. Methodological explanations are then presented, followed by descriptions of findings in relation to the themes, speech acts and collocation networks in more detail. The final section draws conclusions and offers recommendations for future research.

RELATED WORK

One of the outcomes of globalisation was the evidence of more information being digitised and spread via the internet. This includes how news is disseminated and, likewise, read online. As Hall (2008, p. 204) notes, “[m]edia convergence and the shift online have radically changed the way we read our news and where we get it from” and “[o]ne factor that few [people] foresaw was that news journalism would no longer be the exclusive domain of the media companies”. A decade later and with social media mushrooming, citizen journalism has become the norm—

although new formats like emails, websites, newsletters, blogs, other social media, and so on present numerous sites for research (Mutsvairo & Salgado, 2020; Roberts, 2019), standard “letters to the editor” are now available online for reference. Elements that add to the (news) coverage like public views and comments, photographs, messages of consolation, and eyewitness accounts of the event, were according to Hall among reasons to support and comfort readers more quickly, which in turn have been predicted to give “indications of a potential that would be realised repeatedly in the reporting of the important stories of the succeeding decade” (Hall, 2008, p. 206).

In terms of COVID-19 news, numerous information can be seen to occupy us every day, either from the media, television, and reading sources. From the lens of citizen journalism, this is where analysing pieces of writing mainly from non-professional writers provides us with insights on how the pandemic has affected the society (at least from the grassroots level). Research has shown that investigating opinion letters is beneficial in that it offers more opportunities to show the voice of ordinary citizens (Hayek et al., 2020) as they reflect on a broad spectrum of public opinion (McNair, 2008; Wilding et al., 2018). In turn, this would reveal the citizens’ thoughts and attitudes as they present various opinions and arguments on a particular issue. Recent studies have been conducted on the reporting of COVID-19 globally, specifically in media and journalism studies (e.g., Katermina & Yachenko, 2020; van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020). Meanwhile, studies on the linguistic representation of COVID-19 through the use of metaphors in newspaper reports, social media platforms, and speeches of nation leaders have gained more attention (e.g., Leo & David, 2020; Aziz, 2020; Wicke & Bolognesi, 2020; Rajendran, 2020), with other studies proposing alternative metaphors to reframe COVID-19 (Semino, 2020).

Methodologically, studies that have been cited earlier have mostly examined COVID-19 discourse in relation to media and journalism studies, content and metaphor analysis, and critical discourse analysis. More recently, trends to investigate language used in reporting COVID-19 in media texts have employed empirical means like the corpus linguistics approach. These include studies of news reports about COVID-19 (e.g., Yu et al., 2021; Kim, 2020) through collocational analysis, and the language used during the pandemic such as ‘lockdown’ (e.g., Cappuzzo, 2020). Given that the COVID-19 pandemic has garnered much attention in local news and press—also in part that they are distributed more online than in print—this paper presents findings of samples of citizen journalism, i.e., letters to the editor of *The Star* that was published during the second phase of MCO (13 January 2021 to 4 March 2021) before the community-wide containment was reduced to a more controlled MCO (CMCO) version in Malaysia. Using corpus linguistic techniques, public expressions exemplified through Searle’s (1979) speech acts can reveal to us how Malaysians experience the pandemic and whether there are differences or changes since the first MCO. As Yule (1996, p. 48) notes, “[w]e form an utterance with some kind of function in mind”, so by analysing this in public letters to the editor, we may find what types of speech acts were made by Malaysian writers and in turn, what perlocutionary acts were intended, i.e. how readers or the government should respond to this online discourse that were written by everyday Malaysian writers.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The study of pragmatics is, according to Yule (1996), “concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader)” (p. 3). Speech acts, by extension, therefore, is the study of actions and intentions performed behind a particular utterance (e.g., requests, directives, and others). Essentially, in every piece of communication, a speech act can be discerned between a speaker and hearer (or writer and

reader) by evaluating utterances that function to serve a specific purpose or action. “The speaker [or writer] and the hearer [or reader] share a mutual knowledge of those facts together with a mutual knowledge of the rules of performing the various kinds of speech acts” (Searle, 1979, p. 167) and so analysing speech acts is useful “in illustrating the kinds of things we can do with words and identifying some of the conventional utterance forms we use to perform specific actions” (Yule, 1996, p. 58). Contemporary studies in linguistics have extensively adopted Searle’s (1979) speech acts in various discourse, for instance in analysing speech acts and hegemony in Twitter (Zheni, 2020), speech acts in news headlines of a political crisis (Al-Hindawi & Ali, 2018), and speech acts in online advertisements (Prastio et al., 2021). In the present study, letters to editors are examined more closely with reference to speech acts to further supplement corpus findings.

The first theory of speech acts was introduced by Austin (1962) who posited that behind every utterance, there are three forces at play, which are the locutionary act, illocutionary force, and perlocutionary effect. The locutionary act, which is to produce a linguistic expression that is meaningful to the hearer, is the first step behind speech, by which certain utterances may then have an illocutionary force (also referred to as speech acts), which is the function behind the utterance made. Such utterances may then have a perlocutionary effect, which is the effect that is intended behind the utterance, also recognised by the hearer or reader. Analysing speech acts is thus often employed to examine the propositions or locutions that are performed by a speaker based on his or her own intention and context in uttering the speech.

Searle (1979) expanded Austin’s (1962) theory and refined the illocutionary forces into five broad classes, which are (i) declaratives, (ii) representatives, (iii) expressives, (iv) directives, and (v) commissives as can be seen in Table 1. Declaratives, according to Searle (1979), refer to speech acts that change the world via their words or utterances or make changes in reality. An example of this is when a priest declares, “I now pronounce you husband and wife” where the proclamation of utterance resulted in the two hearers officially married. Representatives, on the other hand, include utterances that denote a person’s belief of something to be true or not, usually like statements of facts, assertions, or conclusions (e.g., *It was a warm sunny day*). Next, expressives are utterances that state what the speaker feels, and these are mostly denoted by linguistic choice of words/phrases expressing psychological states or emotional statements of pleasure, pain, and so on (e.g. *Congratulations!*). Directives are mainly utterances that speakers use to get someone else to do something (e.g., *Could you lend me a pen, please?*) while commissives are those that speakers use to commit themselves to some future action (e.g., *I’ll be back*).

With this in mind, the attempt made in this study is to understand the general speech of the Malaysian online community at a time of recovery from a crisis as a way to identify the nation’s common response as a collectivist community (owing to the wide readability of the public newspaper). Thus, the “speaker” in this paper does not only refer to a singular person’s speech; rather, we argue that it represents the voice of Malaysians who faced the same pandemic in the country, and thus presupposes the same mutual knowledge and context as the “speaker” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2008). The table below shows the definitions of the speech acts as classified by Searle (1979), with simple explanations by Nordquist (2020), along with several identified speech acts from the corpus used in this study.

TABLE 1. Identification and samples of speech acts from the corpus

Speech Act (Searle, 1979)	Explanation & Example (Nordquist, 2020)	Example (from the corpus of this study)
Declaratives, which change the world via their words/utterances.	Performs an act in the world at the moment the person's utterance is made by virtue of saying that they do. e.g. <i>I now pronounce you husband and wife.</i>	<u>With effect from March 8</u> , EPF members who apply for the i-Sinar facility to help tide them over the current tough times <u>will be given</u> automatic approvals subject to certain conditions.
Representatives, which state what the speaker believes to be the case or not.	Presents a finding or represents how things are in the world. e.g. <i>It is a warm sunny day.</i>	We <u>have to ensure</u> that our desire for normalcy does not come at the expense of public health.
Expressives, which state what the speaker feels.	Expresses attitudes about objects in the world. e.g. <i>Congratulations!</i>	We <u>are happy</u> to assist the vaccination programme.
Directives, which speakers use to get someone to do something.	Making an attempt to get someone to do something. e.g. <i>Could you lend me a pen, please?</i>	I am writing in <u>to alert the</u> postal service management to this issue so that they will hopefully look into it.
Commissives, which speakers uses to commit himself/herself to a future action	Relates to a promise or commitment to do something. e.g. <i>I'll be back.</i>	The government <u>will</u> introduce heavier penalties for those who violate the COVID-19 SOP from March 11.

In order to understand Malaysians' experience or perspectives during this second MCO, the paper extends from Joharry and Turiman's (2020) study by firstly identifying statistically significant keywords among the different letters that were written in the second community-wide containment in contrast to what was experienced one year prior. Selected collocations are then further explored in terms of their typical occurrences in the letters through examining speech acts (via close examinations of concordance lines). In other words, significant collocates can be analysed in terms of the speech acts (illocutionary force) to examine how actions are performed through these utterances—thus, providing a more linguistic, corpus-based pragmatic analysis of the sentiments revealed in these letters.

METHODOLOGY

To recapitulate, the present study examines speech acts in a corpus of online letters to the editors of *The Star* consisting of public opinion during the second phase of community-wide containment or MCO2.0 in Malaysia through use of a corpus linguistics approach. Typically, we begin with a quantitative analysis of extracting keywords and collocation analysis followed by a qualitative analysis of salient collocations that are then explored in terms of speech acts. Keeping to the criteria that was set in an earlier study (Joharry & Turiman, 2020)—mainly that letters are selected based on their authorship, four letters were taken out because they were not written by Malaysians. As a result, the corpus comprises 157 letters, amounting to approximately 77,062 words uploaded on LANCSSBOX 5.0 (Brezina et al., 2020). This study extends from the previous similar study that examined Malaysian letters to the same newspaper during the first MCO (18 March 2020 to 9 June 2020). As described earlier, the second implementation of MCO in the country was announced (13 January 2021 to 4 March 2021) as statistics showed a rise in the number of COVID-19 infected and death cases. It is also important to point out that during this time, the first mass COVID-19 vaccination programme started globally in early December 2020 and as of 15 February 2021, 175.3 million vaccine doses had been administered worldwide (World Health Organisation, 2021) with Malaysia

implementing its vaccination program on 24 February 2021 beginning with the vaccination of the frontline workers (Carvalho, 2021).

What makes this study interesting is that the collection of public letters during two phases of the MCO in Malaysia would allow us to make comparisons of how the nation coped between these two moments in time. Using LANCsBOX 5.0, typical corpus linguistic techniques are employed, namely investigating keywords that are suggestive of different or similar topics discussed in these letters as well as a closer examination of collocation networks surrounding the issue of ‘COVID-19’. ‘Keywords’ from the corpus linguistics view are defined as statistically significant words occurring more frequently in one corpus relative to its occurrence in the reference one. This means that positive keywords are words that appear more salient in letters during MCO2.0 compared to letters collected from the previous MCO1.0 (negative keywords would then show words that are more salient in letters from MCO1.0 than from MCO2.0). Investigating keywords is considered a typical starting point with many corpus studies and similarly, a look at the differences or similarities in these two separate corpora provides us with an overview of what these letters are mostly about (Culpeper, 2009).

Table 2 shows the two corpora in detail. To reiterate, these corpora are comparable in that they are collections of letters written by Malaysians to the editors of *The Star* during both MCO1.0 and MCO2.0. Hence, comparing MCO2.0 letters against the former collection during MCO1.0 would tell us how Malaysians experienced these two quarantine periods and if there are any similarities or differences between them.

TABLE 2. Description of corpora

Corpus	Dates	Size
MCO2.0 Letters	13 January 2021~4 March 2021	157 letters, 77,062 words
MCO1.0 Letters (Joharry & Turiman, 2020)	18 March 2020~9 June 2020	303 letters, 169,306 words

Since the present study extends from Joharry and Turiman’s (2020) paper of COVID-19 collocation network in letters from MCO1.0, we decide to continue looking at ‘COVID-19’ as the key search term when examining collocates in the second corpus (henceforth, MCO2.0). As we have discussed in that paper, the process of producing collocates was standardised using the same criteria, mainly that they are automatically extracted through use of GraphColl—a feature under the freely available LANCsBOX 5.0, where they were restricted to words occurring five to the left and right of the (node) word, and that the MI statistical measure was chosen to better suit the nature of a specialised corpus (Williams, 2001, p. 68). In addition, collocational networks—through use of GraphColl—are included as they reveal types of possible cross-associations (described as second-, third-order collocates) that may be unnoticed through previous one-way collocational analysis tools (Joharry & Turiman, 2020, p. 6). These identified collocates (and their networks) from the same procedure mentioned are discussed in greater detail under the section: COLLOCATION NETWORK OF COVID-19: PATTERNS OF RECURRING DISCOURSE.

Following this, concordance lines based on salient collocates, more specifically the first and second-order collocates, are further discussed in terms of speech acts. To reiterate, speech acts, or more commonly described as actions expressed through utterances, are generally known as apologies, complaints, compliments, and so on. Speech acts are indicative of a speaker’s communicative intention in producing any utterance whether it be declarations, representatives, expressives, directives, and commissives. By analysing these in public letters

to the editor, we are able to explore what types of speech acts were made by writers and in turn, what perlocutionary acts, if any, were intended (i.e., how readers/government react or respond to online COVID-19 discourse).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results in three main parts. The first section examines a list of keywords (words that were statistically more frequent in one set of data, when compared against each other) that was derived from the software and then subjected to more detailed analysis of context through collocation and concordances. By doing this, we can find recurring themes or topics that are shared or not shared between the two corpora. This is then followed by a discussion of collocational analysis and more importantly, the collocation network that is a feature of LANCSSBOX 5.0. Finally, close inspection of statistically significant collocates is carried out in terms of pragmatic functions, i.e., speech acts in these letters through concordance lines.

THEMES/TOPICS DURING MCO1.0 VS MCO2.0

Table 3 presents the top 10 keywords extracted from LANCSSBOX using Cohen's d. As a reminder, positive keywords represent typical words found in letters from MCO2.0 compared to their occurrence in letters during MCO1.0 and vice versa (negative keywords represent more salient words in the previous corpus).

TABLE 3. Top 10 positive and negative keywords of MCO2.0

Positive keywords	Values (Cohen's d)	Negative keywords	Values (Cohen's d)
2021	2.36	2020	-1.49
Feb	0.98	Apr	-1.19
Jan	0.61	MCO	-0.75
programme	0.43	April	-0.56
vaccination	0.41	movement	-0.55
vaccines	0.34	period	-0.49
note	0.34	crisis	-0.48
vaccinated	0.31	stimulus	-0.43
was	0.30	coronavirus	-0.39
year	0.30	distancing	-0.38

Overall, at first glance, we can see a number of temporal deictic expressions that mainly refer to time such as years (2021, year, 2020), months (Feb, Jan, Apr/April) and even words referring to duration like 'period'. While years and months were mostly identified as part of the letter format like date of publication that is typical of the genre, 'period' however points to more use in the first MCO phase (7.7 more times compared to letters in MCO2.0). A closer inspection reveals that 'period' was used mainly to refer to the Movement Control Order or 'MCO period' in MCO1.0 in contrast to letters in MCO2.0, where the MCO seems to have been normalised. Meanwhile, other occurrences appeared in terms of monetary schemes (e.g., *income of more than RM22bil in the same period; payments will be staggered over a period of six months*), routine practices (e.g., *poaching appears to have dropped after a period of intensive patrolling; machinery inspection period was extended*), agreements or negotiations (e.g., *property agreement for a defined period; three-month limitation period for a judicial review*), transitions or processes (e.g., *who straddled the transition period between English-*

medium and Bahasa Malaysia-medium education; the best *period* for learning) and other expressions related to time (e.g., *speaking for a period of time*; *only arrived after a substantially long period of time*).

Remaining negative keywords also relate to the ‘MCO period’ (i.e., *MCO*, *movement*, *distancing*) that typically suggest the recurring keywords ‘crisis’ and ‘coronavirus’, which appeared more in the MCO1.0 letters. In addition, it is not surprising that ‘stimulus’ was identified as more salient in the previous MCO letters as we have found numerous texts written about the (economic) stimulus package to be among the key topics during MCO1.0 (Joharry & Turiman, 2020). Interestingly, key topics in the MCO2.0 corpus suggest that letters are more about the COVID-19 vaccine (*vaccination*, *vaccines*, and *vaccinated*) and are arguably indicative of what the opinion letters are about during this particular time. The keyword ‘programme’ was used 40% of the time in relation to the COVID-19 vaccine (e.g., *National COVID-19 Immunisation/Vaccination Programme*) whereas other uses of ‘programme’ were found referring to the EPF’s i-Sinar withdrawal programme, United Nations Environment Programme, Biodiversity Protection and Patrolling Programme, DidikTV programme and so on. In short, the first corpus analysis has shown a difference in terms of keywords that were found in the two corpora with more emphasis on vaccines (that corresponded with the rollout/timeframe of the vaccination programmes in the country) in the MCO2.0 corpus compared to MCO1.0. These became useful to compare and contrast between the kinds of issues people were writing about during these two separate MCOs.

COLLOCATION NETWORK OF COVID-19: PATTERNS OF RECURRING DISCOURSE

Following the analysis of keywords from the corpus, LANCSBOX is further used to examine collocation analysis and networks that show relationships between selected keywords and its salient co-occurring words, also known as ‘collocates’. Collocates, briefly, can be defined as a certain word or words that occur alongside a particular target word not likely due to chance. One significance of studying collocations is that it enables for more understanding of how words co-occur together to build a sense of meaning of the whole text (Brezina, 2018). As described earlier, GraphColl was used with a number of parameters to identify the collocates for ‘COVID-19’ in the present corpus. These include limiting the span of co-occurring words to five words to the left and right of the search term and Mutual Information (MI) was selected as the type of statistical measure used, keeping to the study of collocation networks of COVID-19 in the first MCO for comparison. MI value was increased to 6 rather than the default 3 following Baker (2016), which would result in a more reasonable as well as more restricted number of collocates.

TABLE 4. 16 most statistically significant collocates of ‘COVID-19’

	Collocate	MI
1.	contracting	7.73
2.	battle	7.51
3.	apart	6.99
4.	clusters	6.99
5.	stigma	6.82
6.	infections	6.73
7.	spread	6.62
8.	pandemic	6.43
9.	cases	6.32
10.	fight	6.32
11.	response	6.32
12.	situation	6.29
13.	vaccines	6.27

14.	infection	6.23
15.	manage	6.12
16.	26	6.07

Table 4 presents 16 most statistically significant collocates of ‘COVID-19’ that could be categorised into general parts of speech. These include nouns (e.g., *battle*,* *clusters*, *stigma*, *infection(s)*, *pandemic*, *cases*, *fight*,* *response*, *situation*, *vaccines*) that point to different noun collocates not found in the previous MCO1.0 collocation analysis like ‘vaccines’ and ‘stigma’, where asterisks denote collocates identified as possible nouns or verbs. ‘Clusters’ is another word that is highly associated with COVID-19 (pointing to an aggregation of COVID-19 cases, following World Health Organisation’s use of the word) especially when the letters address the emergence of new and active clusters, specifically at the workplace and among foreign workers (e.g., *workplace clusters now a major concern*, *new clusters originate at workplace*, *COVID-19 clusters have originated in foreign workers environment*). Another observation of these collocates is that noun collocations do not necessarily occur immediately to the right of ‘COVID-19’ like ‘COVID-19 clusters/stigma’ for instance, but nominalisations like ‘the *spread* of COVID-19’ (instead of the more active verbal ‘COVID-19 spreads’) were found. Also, certain verb collocates (in the case of ‘fight’) act as a noun phrase such as in this construction: ‘the *fight* against COVID-19’, which adds to the frequent use of nominalisations in these letters. One observation from these examples is that use of nominalisations, which often “depersonalizes the agent” could “cause ambiguity or obscurity” (Sušinskienė, 2010, p. 146) and in turn, reveal interesting patterns in the way letters were written. This kind of writing is quite typical in the corpus and would be argued as a form of soft-directive that writers do when expressing their opinions.

Verb collocates (e.g., *contracting*, *battle*,* *spread*, *fight*,* *manage*) still showed some associations to metaphorical uses of war-like discourse as described in the previous 2020 study, particularly in the use of ‘battle’ and ‘fight’ while collocates ‘contracting’, ‘spread’, and ‘manage’ state what writers believe to be the case or not. For instance, among the things that Malaysians would write during the second MCO was about the risk of contracting COVID-19, how to control or stop the spread of the virus, and even ways to manage the cases/patients. Other collocates that do not fall within these two categories like ‘apart’ and ‘26’ point to stylistics and genre-based reasons (e.g., *apart from*; *on Jan 26*) for why they were occurring significantly more with ‘COVID-19’—an instance showed that readers should not forget other medical conditions like patients of heart attacks, stroke, cancer and many more that may have “a larger percentage of sufferers if not treated”:

We must not forget that apart from Covid-19 infections, which may have a mortality rate of just 1.6%, there are heart attacks, strokes, cancer, infections, acute trauma cases and other problems that can kill and cripple a larger percentage of sufferers if not treated. (15.01.2021_Not suited to Covid-19 care)

Among the 16 statistically significant collocates of COVID-19, ‘vaccines’ was chosen for further qualitative analysis. Apart from being strongly associated with ‘COVID-19’, keywords analysis has previously shown that the letters during this second MCO revolved around more talk about the vaccination and so is worth investigating in more detail. Figure 1 presents the collocation network between ‘COVID-19’ and ‘vaccines’, indicating that the latter shares two other collocates (*access* and *free*) apart from ‘COVID-19’. This roughly suggests that letters related to the mention of vaccines would typically point to discussions of accessibility and whether they (vaccines) would be free. In order to find out how writers discussed them in more detail, in-depth analysis of concordance lines for these second-order collocates of ‘vaccines’ (*access* and *free*) are investigated alongside the first-order collocate ‘COVID-19’ in terms of speech acts within the texts.



FIGURE 1. Collocation network of vaccines with COVID-19 and another two collocates

FREQUENTLY USED SPEECH ACTS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS IN THE CORPORA

One way to look at speech acts in our corpus findings would be to zoom in on the talk about COVID-19 and vaccines. To be more specific, ‘COVID-19 + vaccines’ collocations were explored further in terms of concordance lines. Since these were found to be the most salient keywords in MCO2.0 letters compared to in MCO1.0 letters, close examination of these specific lines of the suggested collocation network above would be sufficient and representative to conduct a corpus-based pragmatic analysis (according to Searle, 1979). The context of ‘vaccines’ and its three collocates (first-order collocate: *COVID-19*, second-order collocates: *access*, *free*) were investigated in more detail, and the results show two main emerging themes: (1) request for free and accessible vaccines irrespective of nationality, and (2) evaluations of the COVID-19 vaccines.

REQUEST FOR FREE AND ACCESSIBLE VACCINES IRRESPECTIVE OF NATIONALITY

Upon close examination of the concordance lines based on the two first collocates (*free* and *access*), it can be seen that both collocates are also in close proximity of each other to ‘COVID-19’ and are thus suggestive of how access to the vaccines should be made free, such as in lines 1, 4, and 5 (see Figure 2). These lines also point to an argument for free access to vaccines not only for Malaysians but other people as well (i.e., foreigners and migrants). Instances show that access to COVID-19 vaccines should be made free “regardless of nationality” because “no one is safe until everyone is safe”, in relation to concerns of the multiple nationalities living in the country to the collective health at large. In fact, one letter pointed out that the relationship between Malaysia’s economy is “highly dependent on foreign labour” and therefore points to the importance of having everyone vaccinated.

Though the letters were written by different people, collectively, it can be seen that expressives and soft directives (mostly functioning as requests) were used in emphasising the need to ensure that vaccines are given free regardless of nationality. The sentiment was observed to be explicit, given the writer’s expression of wants and feelings that are directed to the government and authorities such as in the following:

*With the vaccine landing on our shores soon, **the government** has rightly prioritised economic recovery. And for an economy still highly dependent on foreign labour, providing free vaccines to these workers is sending the right message that we are serious in getting our economy back on its feet. **Well done!** (16.02.2021 Free doses for foreign workers a great help)*

Writers also use ‘Malaysia’ as reference to the government such as in line 6, with emphasis of the modal verb ‘must’. This adds to the use of directives (signalling obligation) in their writing that is more explicit and direct in an attempt to make someone (in this case the government/authority) to do something. This, in turn, suggests to readers that the perlocutionary effect would be that the government should make the COVID-19 vaccination programme available and free for everyone, irrespective of where they come from.

1)	are documented, will be ensured free access to the Covid-19 <u>vaccines</u> under the country’s National Immunisation Programme. This move by the
2)	16 Feb 2021 The government recently announced that the Covid-19 <u>vaccines</u> will also be given free to foreigners in Malaysia. As
3)	an economy still highly dependent on foreign labour, providing free <u>vaccines</u> to these workers is sending the right message that we
4)	The most effective option is to ensure free access to <u>vaccines</u> regardless of nationality. No one is safe, until everyone is
5)	until everyone is safe. Ensuring free and equitable access to <u>vaccines</u> for migrants is especially important considering that not all Malaysians
6)	this pandemic, Malaysia must commit to provide equitable access to <u>vaccines</u> for everyone in the country, regardless of nationality, or we
7)	economy. There are those who want to restrict access to <u>vaccines</u> to Malaysians only and some who want non-citizens to pay

FIGURE 2. Concordance lines of ‘vaccines’ with second order collocates ‘free’ and ‘access’

EVALUATIONS OF THE COVID-19 VACCINE

Another common theme found in the letters relates to the evaluation of the COVID-19 vaccine, namely around issues of accessibility (Figure 3; lines 8, 9, 11 and 19), effectiveness (Figure 3; lines 15, 17 and 18) and its relationship with the critical/high-risk groups (Figure 3; lines 13 and 14), as well as intellectual property (Figure 3; line 10). It was also found that collocations suggest talk about the safety of the vaccines (Figure 3; line 17).

Interestingly, statements evaluating the COVID-19 vaccine were mainly representative (and equally expressive) as they were used widely in the letters through use of lexical items expressing evaluation and stance (e.g., *a greater hope*; *very optimistic*). Since representatives include utterances to indicate the speaker’s belief or opinion on something, it was found that the writers also expressed their feelings (of hope and feeling of optimism) when carrying out this speech act to describe confidence in the vaccine’s effectiveness as seen in the example below:

*As we move into our second year of living with COVID-19, there is **a greater hope** with the emergence of additional tools for fighting the virus. As frontline workers are being vaccinated, we are very optimistic about the rollout of new, safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines, and the people of Malaysia echo that statement (27.02.2021_Vaccines offer hope but not silver bullets)*

Ultimately, it can be said that these letters promoted the COVID-19 vaccine and that the call for vaccination was well-received (i.e., letters indicating vaccines to be ‘easily available’; ‘effective’ and so on). There seems to be a push for the vaccines to be distributed as swiftly as possible to the general public (in the 12 lines below), which relates to the previous theme of making the vaccine widely available irrespective of nationality.

8)	both the Covid-19 pandemic and corruption curves. As	<u>vaccines</u>	for Covid-19 are now available, the pandemic of
9)	to help them keep afloat until the Covid-19	<u>vaccines</u>	are easily available. Everyone is afraid now with
10)	Covid-19	<u>vaccines</u> :	Temporary suspend intellectual property rights so all nations
11)	at the forefront in the race to find	<u>vaccines</u>	for Covid-19 . Last year, the scientific community was
12)	first doses of vaccines arrive at the airport. Debunking Covid-19 and	<u>vaccines</u>	disinformation would empower our rakyat with informed
13)	our rakyat with informed consent when the Covid-19	<u>vaccines</u>	arrive. Apart from prioritising the high-risk groups,
14)	TAC organised a forum on Sunday on Covid-19	<u>vaccines</u>	and cancer patients. The forum panelists were a
15)	just one year, science has delivered effective	<u>vaccines</u>	against Covid-19 , a record-breaking achievement and a
16)	can. It is quite likely that the Covid-19	<u>vaccines</u>	rollout in various countries may bring back a
17)	the rollout of new, safe and effective Covid-19	<u>vaccines</u>	and the people of Malaysia echo that sentiment.
18)	down. Current data shows that the existing Covid-19	<u>vaccines</u>	are effective at protecting individuals against the disease,
19)	economic recovery Tuesday, 9 Feb 2021 While Covid-19	<u>vaccines</u>	are becoming available globally, supply issues may mean

FIGURE 3. Concordance lines of ‘vaccines’ with first order collocate ‘COVID-19’

CONCLUSION

The web is rapidly changing the basic forms of news writing in terms of how it is read, how it looks and how it works. “Stories have become shorter and are constructed to conform to the demands of search engines” (Hall, 2008, p. 208). With regard to online citizen journalism, letters to the editor present a wealth of information as to how the public perceive and express their views on the pandemic in general, more specifically during a community-wide containment that has been continued in the case of Malaysia.

This article has analysed letters to the editor of *The Star* during the second MCO in Malaysia. More precisely, the study has focused on the different sentiments found in letters from MCO1.0 and MCO2.0 via a corpus-based pragmatics approach, with emphasis on speech acts that we have found to be a novel contribution. Findings revealed that letters during MCO2.0 were more about vaccines, which resonate with the time in which the country began its vaccination programmes compared to earlier talk about the novel coronavirus during MCO1.0. Collocational analysis yielded similar results as to recurring use of war-like metaphors (e.g., *The COVID-19 battle; fight against COVID-19*), but new salient collocates appear like ‘stigma’ and ‘vaccines’. Since ‘vaccines’ was also identified as a highly significant keyword in the corpus, further examination of collocation networks was employed. This revealed that letters in MCO2.0 talked about vaccines in relation to issues of accessibility and whether they (vaccines) would be free, which would not have been identified from a normal one-way collocation analysis without the help of LANCSSBOX.

A further expansion of the current study showed how in-depth speech act analysis was possible to be carried out based on concordance lines. This is where close readings of these lines (emphasis on COVID-19 + vaccines collocation) were further investigated in terms of the functions they serve to convey according to Searle’s (1979) speech acts as well as how the utterances function to take effect (Yule, 1996, p. 48). Overall, two overarching themes were found to be prominent, namely evaluations of the COVID-19 vaccines and the request for them to be free and accessible irrespective of nationality. Interestingly, most if not all lines in which ‘vaccines’ collocated with ‘COVID-19’ showed to function as representatives where letters described the extent to which writers know or believe something to be true, particularly with regard to the availability of COVID-19 vaccines. Lines in which ‘vaccines’ collocated with ‘free’ and ‘access’, on the other hand, seemed to function as soft directives where requests can

be seen “to ensure free access to vaccines” and positive expressives support such requests because it “is sending the right message”.

For the main part, our findings have shown that it is possible to explore public sentiment or opinion—as far as the themes in this corpus study have shown—on COVID-19 issues via empirical means, more notably through corpus linguistics. We have also demonstrated how close readings of the concordance lines can also be examined pragmatically, i.e., based on Searle’s (1979) speech acts to explore writers’ actions performed through utterances (in this case letters to editors). Future studies can look at letters to different newspaper agencies that could be more telling of how the larger population contributes to this type of discourse.

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