

‘Only idiots get vaccinated w’: Emotive uses of laughter in Japanese online (anti-)vaccination discourses

The present study targets laughter in written (digital) settings, focusing on how it can display ‘emotive communication’, i.e., “the intentional, strategic signalling of affective information in speech and writing” (Caffi & Janney 1994, 328). More specifically, it looks at the character ‘w’ (which comes from the first letter of the transcription in the Roman alphabet of 笑 wara ‘laugh’ and conventionally denotes laughter in Japanese) in a corpus of 4,008 comments (298,949 tokens), retrieved from the thread *korona wakuchin yabaku nai? ‘isn’t the COVID vaccine insane?’* on the web forum 5channeru ‘Channel 5’. Channel 5 is chosen as data source for two main reasons. First, participants interrelate mainly in an interactional – as opposed to transactional (Brown & Yule 1983) – mode. Second, the normative standards of the community encourage an informal and direct way of talking. Furthermore, the COVID vaccine is a highly controversial topic that may foster aggressive behaviour (laughing at). These aspects are expected to favour the production of laughter as a marker of emotive communication.

The analysis of concordances (produced with AntConc) shows that the laughing character ‘w’, either as a single character or in ‘strings’ (e.g., ‘ww’), is employed 373 times in the data. Functionally, it covers a wide range of meanings, one of which is promoting group inclusion/exclusion by signalling (dis)affiliation with the (no-vax) stance shared by the majority of users. This type of laughter is often associated with explicitly aggressive messages, with the aim of creating/maintaining a sense of solidarity among in-group members by attacking (hence disaffiliating from) external pro-vaccine entities. Laughter can thus be framed as an emotive device which acts as social glue but also exacerbates social conflict (Raz 2002).

References

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