Investigating ‘mob rule’
The use of the phrase and its effects

Sing Tsun Derek Wong
University of Hong Kong

Abstract
This paper analyses a public electronic dialogue between the Vice-Chancellor of a University in Hong Kong and a politician who is an alumnus of the University which sparked in response to student protests at a University Council Meeting in January, 2016. In particular, the essay looks into how the phrase ‘mob rule’ was used by different stakeholders to suit their needs in persuasion with respect to deixis and reference, and investigates the effects, unintended or intended, of such usage. Various references to other similar events were also made with respect to the key phrase, including the Occupy Movement in Hong Kong (2014) and the Hillsborough Disaster (1989). The essay finds that dysphemism, emotive language, modality, hedging and analogy, amongst other literary devices, were extensively used to appeal to the pathos and logos of possible readers and rallying support.

1 Introduction

On January 26, 2016, students and alumni from the University of Hong Kong barricaded the exits to the building where the University Council Meeting was held, demanding an open dialogue between both parties. The siege lasted for hours, and was the aftermath of a class boycott movement which followed the appointment of Professor Arthur Li as Council Chairperson of the University amidst waves of disapproval.1

The following day, Professor Mathieson, Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Hong Kong, sent an e-mail to staff members, students and alumni on the protests, Li is a well-known supporter of the current Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, who was widely accused as ‘pro-Beijing’ and criticized for his actions during the Umbrella Movement in 2014. Li’s hardline leadership style earned him the name ‘King Arthur’ and ‘the Tsar’, the latter a translation from the Chinese ‘沙皇’, which means King of Sha Tin. This originates from his former post of Vice-Chancellor of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, which is situated in the Sha Tin district in Hong Kong. He also allegedly declared ‘war’ on the University of Hong Kong in his former post. Subsequent to his post as Vice-Chancellor of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, he assumed post as Secretary of Education in the Hong Kong government, during which he was said to have tried combining two higher institutions in Hong Kong, yet to no prevail. He subsequently said, “You will pay for this” to related stakeholders.
in which he labelled that the event was ‘mob rule’ that could not be condoned. The following essay will first look into this e-mail, before analysing an exchange of open e-mails in response to it between Ms Eu\(^2\) and the Vice-Chancellor.

The phrase ‘mob rule’ refers to “control of a political situation by those outside the conventional or lawful realm, typically involving violence and intimidation” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). However, while the definition points to a negative connotation, the phrase seems to have different functions in various contexts. For further investigation and as the basis of this essay, the following two research questions were formulated and looked into:

1. What word items were the phrase ‘mob rule’ associated with?

This regards the noun, adjective and verb references that the phrase is associated with. The importance of this is that while it is originally associated with students and the siege, the students are in fact associated with positive, neutral and negative tokens.

2. What was/were the intended and unintended effect(s) of using such a phrase?

The first appearance of the phrase is likely to point to disapproval and condemnation of the siege. However, the fact that the phrase is linked with a strong stance may also radicalise supporters of the opposition, and does little in resolving conflicts between parties.

## 2 Analysis of Sources

The original e-mail\(^3\) follows the pragmatic argument structure, starting with a strong stance that condemned the protests. The stance is supported with data on what happened, and warrants that such an act is wrong. Framing the act as irrational, the Vice-Chancellor points out that students should have tried to “engage in rational discussion and debate with” them instead, and arrives at a conclusion that the action was “mob rule” that “cannot [be] condone[d]”. He then rebuts the popular thinking that civil disobedience can mobilise changes. Such an idea possibly originates from the Umbrella Movement in 2014, in which streets were occupied as a form of civil disobedience to force local authorities to listen to the people’s needs; the motives behind the student protest are very similar to that of the Umbrella Movement: both work to ask figures in authority to answer certain needs. With regard to such, the Vice-Chancellor makes arguments in a future e-mail,

\(^2\)Ms Audrey Eu Yuet-mee is a graduate from HKU and former legislative councillor of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. She was the Chairman of the Civic Party, a local pan-democratic political party.

\(^3\)The e-mail by the Vice-Chancellor can be accessed at https://www.facebook.com/hkucampustv/photos/a.280176058717764.63988.279926822076021/977167632351933/?type=3&__p=20&_ft_=top_level_post_id.1677071759216397%3Ahl_objid.1677071759216397%3Aclid.1614204005503173
drawing differences between the Umbrella Movement and the student protests, proving the illegitimacy of the latter. Nonetheless, the e-mail ends in a softer tone, pointing out that students “should be capable of better”. This seems like a sigh, effectively appealing to the readers’ pathos. Pathos, which refers to an emotional appeal, alongside logos (logical appeal) and ethos (appeal based on character and credibility of persuader) are categories of persuasive discourse that have stemmed from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*.

Eu’s first Open Letter could be separated into two sections: a response to a press conference on the issue, followed by a reply to the initial e-mail with comments on how to handle the situation. This essay will focus on latter as it is of closer relevance to the topic.

To start with, the structure of the Open Letter is of close resemblance to the e-mail, including a prologue outlining a stance that expressed Eu’s concerns, data that possibly legitimised the students’ actions, refutation of arguments against the labelling of ‘mob rule’, and a logical conclusion of plausible results followed by a general rule on the role of the Vice-Chancellor. The whole letter ends with a much softer epilogue that is aimed at appealing to the Vice-Chancellor’s pathos. This will be further elaborated in Section 4.

Nonetheless, in his response, the Vice-Chancellor stands by his condemnation and draws links to two other political events via syllogism: the Occupy Protests in 2014 and the Hillsborough Disaster in 1989. However, this is refuted in Eu’s final letter that subsequently ended the dialogue. The same events are used as a counter-argument, and this will be further looked into in Section 5.

### 3 Textual Analysis of Initial E-mail by the Vice-Chancellor

In the e-mail sent by the Vice-Chancellor, ‘mob rule’ refers to the student protests on January 26, 2016. The following analysis looks into the choice of pronouns, modal verbs and verb moods in the sources and their respective effects.

> On behalf of the Senior Management Team, I condemn the behaviour last night of HKU students who (amongst others) put the safety of Council members [...] at serious risk [...]. This is not the way to achieve progress: we will always be willing to engage in rational discussion and debate with students but we...

---

4This will be further elaborated in Section 5.

5The letter can be accessed at [https://www.facebook.com/audrey.euyuetmee/photos/a.10153806865399435.1073741898.197345194434/10153806865424435](https://www.facebook.com/audrey.euyuetmee/photos/a.10153806865399435.1073741898.197345194434/10153806865424435)

6The press conference was held a day after the initial e-mail was sent. Similar arguments as in the e-mail were made during the press conference, but members of the Civic Party were accused to have catalysed the student protests. Eu, being the Chairman of the Civic Party, responded to the accusation in the first part of the Open Letter.

7Both the reply from the Vice-Chancellor and the final e-mail by Eu can be accessed at [https://www.facebook.com/audrey.euyuetmee/posts/10153809047944435](https://www.facebook.com/audrey.euyuetmee/posts/10153809047944435)
cannot condone mob rule. [...] The scenes last night will have further damaged the University’s reputation and they bring no credit to those involved: HKU students should be capable of better. Video images were recorded and will be made available to the police.

To start with, negative, powerful references are used in describing the student protests. For example, it is framed as ‘mob rule’. This draws on the readers’ schemata and paints the issue in a negative light (Chilton 2004). The protests were also seen to be “totally unnecessary”, “bring no credit to those involved” and “further damaged the University’s reputation”; in other words, the Vice-Chancellor deemed the event unacceptable, or even illegal. The fact that the e-mail briefly mentions the police, confirms a possible criminal charge and reaffirms his solid stance. This is very likely to be an attempt to close the rhetorical distance between the Vice-Chancellor and his readers, as such choice of utterances with negative connotations may appeal to readers’ pathos and elicit a strong emotional response (Crowley & Hawhee 2012). In turn, the target audience may become more receptive to the arguments in the e-mail and thus be more likely to identify themselves with the stance.

Such negative references are intensified by the modality of the e-mail, as strong modal verbs are used to pinpoint the Vice-Chancellor’s assertive stance. For example, ‘will’ is used twice: when making a promise of dialogue, and when talking about the future of the University’s reputation with certainty. This gives a strong sense of judgement, which hints an equally strong degree of confidence in the Vice-Chancellor’s arguments. Such use of epistemic modality could be seen as a form of argument to logos while establishing his situated ethos as a figure of authority with power over the students (Wilamová 2005).

Nonetheless, near the end of the e-mail, a softer tone and a change in modalities can be seen. ‘Should’ is used once with reference to the students’ actions despite using an affirmative tone in expressing how the Vice-Chancellor thought that student behaviour that night failed to meet expectations. By indicating his desires of how the students should have acted according to behavioural norms (i.e. that “HKU students should be capable of better”), the Vice-Chancellor makes use of deontic modality to awaken pathos in his audience. This is likely to help rally support to his stance by leading audiences to share his thoughts on how the situation ought to be according to his standards (Loos et al. 2004).

The use of argumentation to logos is intensified by the indicative verb mood used throughout the e-mail while bringing up the logical conclusion that follows. While the past and future tenses are used to point out what happened on the night and its impacts respectively, the present tense is used to denote the Professor’s standpoint. Given that the present tense conveys a higher immediacy and gives the audience a sense of participation, the audience is led to share the standpoint of the Professor established from the logical
flow in the initial e-mail: that the event was undesirable and should not be endorsed.

As a further step to promoting identification of his stance, the Vice-Chancellor also uses two different types of pronoun when referring to the protesting students. The first-person singular and pronouns ‘I’ and ‘we’ are used in the e-mail to denote the Professor himself and the Council members, respectively. This can be extended to encompass the difference between those who side with the Vice-Chancellor’s condemnation and those who side with the protestors, as drawing stakeholders together to a more intimate distance can promote identification and provide a higher persuasive potential (Crowley & Hawhee 2012).

However, the demonstrative pronoun ‘those (involved)’ is used to denote student protestors. With such usage, it could be noted that the aforementioned degree of proximity within the Vice-Chancellor’s circle does not extend to student protestors. Instead, this could be interpreted as the Vice-Chancellor marking a clear boundary between the two stakeholders. This increases the distance between students and the Vice-Chancellor, and consequently creates a ‘we-they’ relationship between the Vice-Chancellor’s supporters and the student protestors. While this gives a sense of alliance with the Vice-Chancellor’s supporters, and effectively effaces the position for an objective presentation of the issue, on the other hand, given that such a clearly defined boundary is against the traditional relationship between teacher and student, it also brings the possibility of radicalising students.

In the whole picture, the e-mail may appear as a warning, or even a threat to protesting students and alumni. This is made explicit by bringing in the police, a third party that was not originally directly involved in the event. The overall assertiveness, use of dysphemism, and distance between participants created via the use of pronouns all share the function in strengthening the initial argument: the condemnation of the night’s events. However, such a strong tone does little in resolving the conflict between the authorities and the students and their supporters. In fact, it may have further radicalised the moods of the students. The next section will look into the Open Letter Eu wrote to the Vice-Chancellor.

4 Textual Analysis of the Open Letter

Grammatically speaking, Eu’s Open Letter is written in the first person, and uses the second person personal pronoun ‘you’ to denote the Vice-Chancellor. This can be seen as a move to directly address the Vice-Chancellor while maintaining a formal distance between the two. The usage of the first person pronoun ‘I’ is twofold: on the one hand it moulds the letter to seem more ‘honest’, which is especially important when Eu gives suggestions on what the Vice-Chancellor should do (during which ‘you’ then has a certain instructional tone). On the other hand, since the letter is ‘open’ and publicised by Eu
herself, the usage of the first person pronoun may also allow readers to identify with her more readily, thus drawing supporters to her stance.

Moreover, the use of verbs following the pronoun ‘I’ shows a certain power level. By ‘hoping’ and ‘believing’ in the Professor, it places the position of the Vice-Chancellor at a higher power level in a way that is very different from ‘demanding’ and ‘commanding’. While providing advice on how to resolve the current situation, Eu may be trying to draw herself and the Professor closer in order to better appeal to his emotional response.

In fact, this is coupled with the change in verb mood throughout the Open Letter. The letter starts off using the indicative, directly pointing out Eu’s standpoint that she is concerned with the events:

However, on this occasion, I am disappointed that you should allow yourself to confirm or, at least, be associated with the very scandalous and grossly defamatory allegations without more critical or independent verification.

However, it swiftly changes to the conditional when talking about possible consequences arising from current management procedures, and ends with the subjunctive as she makes polite requests to what she wishes the Vice-Chancellor to do, while expressing her emotions on the situation. This can be seen from how Eu mentions that the Vice-Chancellor has the role of guiding students “through this storm”:

As alumna I remain seriously concerned with the situation in the University. False and inflammatory accusations like those made by Arthur Li at the press conference will only make the situation worse. You may not approve of the actions or behaviour of some of the students but accusing them of being “poisoned” or “manipulated” or “mobs” is going to push them even further into a corner. After all, they remain your students, and in many ways, the University holds their futures on the line, what you do may have a devastating effect on their whole lives. I hope you will show them patience and leadership and guide them through this storm. I believe there are many in the University who can act as trusted go-betweens to help rebuild the trust and harmony that are sorely needed at the moment.

A change of tone from hard to soft is also noted. Strong, negative adjectives are used both in the title of the letter, ‘False and grossly defamatory allegations made at your Press Conference on 28th January 2016’, and in the first three paragraphs of the letter when talking about the accusations made during the Press Conference, and the adjective ‘ridiculous’ is used three times in the fourth paragraph when talking about past council decisions. However, near to the end of that paragraph, Eu personalises her arguments to the Vice-Chancellor by saying that they share the same values, and afterwards it can be
noted that the tone is much softer as Eu expresses her expectations for the Vice-Chancellor. ‘I hope’ (four uses) and ‘I believe’ (one use) are used when suggesting counterarguments, instead of stronger modal verbs like ‘must’. Such change in lexis and verb mood both point to one single function: after expressing her strong disapproval, Eu aims to appeal to the Vice-Chancellor’s pathos.

It should be noted that whenever the Open Letter touches on opinions of the Vice-Chancellor, modal verbs are used as hedging devices. In particular, ‘may’ is used twice: when commenting on the Vice-Chancellor’s disapproval of the protests, and what he could choose to do. ‘Would’ is also used to infer the Vice-Chancellor’s possible agreement to Eu’s counterargument that it would be impossible for them to “manipulate university students”. In this case, hedging is used to imply that the utterance is a personal opinion and interpretation that is open to further negotiation (Urbanová 1995). This is in contrast with the affirmative ‘will’ and ‘is going to’ when talking about the possible consequences of the Vice-Chancellor’s actions. Without softening the tone, the communicative intention is clear: the Vice-Chancellor should not further aggravate students.

In lexical terms, vocabulary that carries a progressively positive reference from the beginning to the end of the paragraph is used. For example, while words and phrases that carry negative connotations like “false and inflammatory accusations” and “accusing” are used with reference to what the professor did, it progresses to more neutral terms like “hold [...] futures on the line” and finally positive terms like “patience”, “leadership” and “guide”. The same goes for words associated with “the situation”, which refer to the whole issue in general: it starts off as a “concern”, which escalates to “[made] worse” and “storm”, before stepping down to “rebuild”, which is a considerably more positive term.

However, it can be seen that in the same paragraph, the choice of words associated with students does not follow the same formulae: passive phrases are used, like “push[ed] [...] even further into a corner” and “accuse[d]”. Students are also portrayed to need help from others, namely the Vice-Chancellor, and this can be seen as Eu sympathising with the students’ position. Effects of this are twofold: it could be a further appeal to the Vice-Chancellor’s pathos, that while he may have caused the situation to worsen, he can also change it for the better; however, with its nature as an Open Letter instead of as a private dialogue, it could be that through such usage of sympathy, the letter also intends to appeal to students, giving a sense of understanding and support. Through showing that she shares a common stance with the students, this can rally support and thus add power of the people to the argument. In short, through appealing both to the students and their supporters, the use of emotive language in this case may appeal to the Vice-Chancellor’s pathos, while indirectly pressurising him to resolve the issue.

In the larger picture, the Open Letter is aimed at voicing the writer’s concerns, while prompting the Vice-Chancellor to make changes. Compared to his first e-mail, apart from
using a stronger tone in pointing out the consequences, a less assertive tone is used. The students, in this discourse, are portrayed to require extra help and sympathy; this is very different from the reference to the phrase ‘mob rule’ as used in the original e-mail.

Nonetheless, in the response from the Vice-Chancellor, he “stand[s] by [his] condemnation” and draws reference from two other political events, the Occupy protests in 2014 and the Hillsborough disaster in 1989. The functions and impacts will be elaborated in the next section.

5 Associated Events and Related Arguments

In his response to the Open Letter, the Vice-Chancellor reiterates his stance that he “genuinely thought there was a risk of death or serious injury” during the student protests. In support, he relates the issue to the Occupy protests and the Hillsborough disaster. The following will look into the relationships between these two associated events and the core argument of the student protests being ‘mob rule’, before looking into the counterarguments based on these associations in future e-mails or objective evidence.

The ‘Occupy protests’ as noted in the e-mail refers to the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in 2014, which lasted from 26 September 2014 to 15 December 2016. The Umbrella Movement was a large-scale civil disobedience movement which included sit-ins, street protests, hunger strikes and occupations. It was proclaimed as ‘illegal’ by local authorities and there were multiple attempts by the local police to clear the protest sites, resulting in over 470 injuries, and nearly 1000 arrests. During the protests, the Vice-Chancellors of the University of Hong Kong and Chinese University of Hong Kong visited the protest sites.\(^8\) This was widely reported by the local media at the time as a move to assure that students at the protests were safe, which was used by the Vice-Chancellor in support of his argument that he values safety:\(^9\)

\(\text{I have been consistent in my attitude to the sanctity of preserving people’s safety: that dominated my attitude to the Occupy protests and it was that which took me to the site of the protests with Joseph Sung on 2nd October 2014 [...] I have not, as accused in the press, “taken sides”: instead I have remained consistent on the primacy of safety considerations and I have condemned the crossing of a line in the behaviours that evening.}\)

The student protests, according to the Vice-Chancellor, however, resembled a less safe environment. Instead of a place in which the Vice-Chancellor could walk freely, the student

---


\(^{9}\)It was reported that a large majority of protestors in the Umbrella movement were students from local institutions in Hong Kong.
Investigating ‘mob rule’

protests are described as a “large noisy crowd”, which caused him to find “great difficulty staying on my feet”. This is very likely referring to the helplessness he felt. In other words, such expression is a further attempt in appealing to the reader’s *pathos*. Nonetheless, this is in fact in contrary to objective evidence, given that over 470 civilians were reported injured in clashes with the police during the Umbrella Movement, while there was only one reported injury in the student protests (Apple Daily 2014; Ng & Zhao 2016).

The Vice-Chancellor also draws reference to the Hillsborough Disaster, the human crush that happened at Hillsborough football stadium at Sheffield, UK on 15 April, 1989 as equivalent to the student protests, pin-pointing that 96 died as a result of the disaster. The crush was due to overcrowding in central pens of the spectator stand, and caused 96 deaths and over 700 injuries. In fact, at the time, Liverpool fans and their ‘mob behaviour’ were blamed for the disaster. This is a form of syllogism in which the student protests that are framed as “mob rule” had “unpredictable” results, and were potentially as disastrous as the Hillsborough Disaster. This seems to be packaged as a logical conclusion that can make an argument seem more ‘believable’ to the audience by appealing to *logos* (Ball et al. 2006). This is due to the belief bias, as people tend to judge the strength of arguments based on the plausibility of the conclusion, instead of how strongly the arguments support a certain conclusion (Sternberg & Leighton 2004: 300). In other words, readers were led to believe that the student protests had the potential to cause a tragedy of a similar scale to the Hillsborough Disaster.

Nonetheless, the argument is refuted in Eu’s final letter of the dialogue, pointing out the reality behind the Hillsborough Disaster. In 2012, an independent panel that was established in order to re-evaluate the disaster found that illegal alterations were made to cover up the disaster, and Eu states that the “real culprit” behind the disaster was “the Police who created the situation ripe for a disaster”: poor placement of police forces, and poor crowd management (Hillsborough Independent Panel 2012). The same logical flow is once again used, but this time as a counterargument that the ‘mob’, which refers jointly to the student protestors and the Hillsborough Liverpool fans, should not be blamed right away. In this case, the counterargument is wrapped up with a final appeal to *pathos*, as Eu points out her standpoint once again and gives further advice on how to solve the problem in a considerably soft tone, even ending the letter wishing the reader peace.

In short, while the Vice-Chancellor drew reference to an opposite (the Occupy protests) and a possibly similar (the Hillsborough Disaster) event in his appeal to *logos*, the same argumentation was used in opposition as a counterargument.
6 Concluding Remarks

While ‘mob rule’ itself has a negative connotation, the student protests could actually be interpreted very differently. Throughout the dialogue, the phrase and its related arguments were used extensively by both parties to appeal to one others’ pathos and logos. The similar logical flow of arguments and appeal to emotions using emotive language was particularly common in the exchange of letters between both parties. It is very likely that both sides, through their language, wished to rally supporters to their stance. Nonetheless, it should be noted that not much was actually discussed when it comes solving the situation. The mere coining of students as rioters and the whole event as ‘mob rule’ does bring the side-effect that it may further radicalise students, instead of bridging the gap between council members and the pro-Vice-Chancellor camp, and the pro-students camp.

The verdict was arrived at on 20 July 2017. The student leader involved in the siege was convicted guilty for Disorderly Conduct in Public Place, Criminal Damage and Attempted Forcible Entry (see Hong Kong Judiciary, case number ESCC 2357/2016).

References


Ng, J. & S. Zhao. 2016. ‘Surrounded: University of Hong Kong students besiege governing council meeting, demand talks with Arthur Li’. South China


Derek Wong is currently an undergraduate student studying English language, linguistics and English language education at the University of Hong Kong. He was on exchange at the University of East Anglia in the Spring semester of the 2016/2017 academic year. His main areas of interest include the use of metaphors in political discourse and Chinese literature, classroom pedagogy and small class teaching.