SOME WORDS OLD, SOME WORDS NEW: THE PANDEMIC'S LINGUISTIC FOOTPRINT

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Abstract. The article discusses the impact that the coronavirus pandemic has had on the vocabulary of the English language. The identified trends include increased frequency in the use of some outdated and specialized vocabulary and the creation of numerous neologisms, mostly by blending.

Keywords: blending, coronavirus pandemic, English language, neologisms.

Аннотация: В статье рассматривается влияние, которое пандемия коронавируса оказала на словарный состав английского языка. Выявленные тенденции включают увеличение частоты употребления некоторых устаревших и специализированных лексических единиц и создание многочисленных неологизмов, в основном путем словослияния.

Ключевые слова: английский язык, неологизмы, пандемия коронавируса, словослияние.

Introduction

Language has always responded immediately to the changes happening in the world, and in the year 2020 our lifestyle and social environment have certainly experienced immense changes. Of course, this refers to the ongoing pandemic of coronavirus which left its footprint on all languages. English, being one of the most flexible, 'fluid' languages, was quick to come up with various linguistic means to reflect the new reality. Recently it has already demonstrated its unique ability for linguistic creativity, with Brexit leading to a flowering of new words, including the inevitable bremain and bregret. Yet the pandemic has also repurposed the existing English words, giving them new topical meanings, and 'resurrected' some of the words that were falling out of use or belonged to highly specialised areas of usage.

Old words revisited

The creation of new lexical units for the new reality may seem to be the most interesting aspect of linguistic change, and will also be discussed in this paper, but one of the first notable features of the 'coronavirus speak' became the use of the existing specialized words and terms by the general public. And the word coronavirus is a good example of this trend, as the word has been coined in and known since the 1960s, when the family of these viruses was discovered by scientists. However, only in 2020 it

became a household term, after being used to designate the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the Oxford Languages Word of the Year 2020 report suggests [5].

Quarantine was also among the leaders. The word is of Venetian origin, referring to the policy (first enforced in 1377) of keeping ships from plague-stricken countries waiting off its port for 40 days to assure that no latent cases were aboard (quaranta meaning 'forty' in Italian). It has been used in English since the 15th century - the word quarentyne meant 'desert in which Christ fasted for 40 days,' and later 'period of 40 days in which a widow has the right to remain in her dead husband's house' (1520s). It was used in the extended sense of 'any period of forced isolation' from 1670s, according to the Oxford Dictionary of English. However, out of 265 mln webpages on Google with this word, approximately 133 mln pages were created in 2020, which indicates a dramatic increase in the relevance of the term. Some nuances in meanings of the words previously used only by professionals have become general knowledge, such as epidemic vs. pandemic, contagious vs. infectious, and respirator vs. ventilators. A popular Internet portal Dictionary.com has devoted several of its editorials over the year to explaining these differences, noting that "we encounter these words being used more and more frequently—and often, inaccurately" [3].

The scale of the health crisis that almost all countries experienced during the first wave of the pandemic was the reason for many comparisons with the wartime, and thus war metaphors and expressions were reactualised in the language.

The couple raised more than $1 million in an effort to help feed **frontline** workers in the U.K. amid the global coronavirus pandemic. The research was done across over 175 hospitals in the UK, by **frontline** nurses. The claim is based on Biocept's recent entry into the **coronavirus battlefield**, where Biocept has begun providing much needed testing kits.

(examples from The Coronavirus Corpus)

The temptation to invoke war metaphors may have seemed understandable, especially at the start of the pandemic when they were necessary to build unity and mobilise swiftly, but there is a social aspect of it that linguists warn against. According to Inés Olza, a linguist at the University of Navarra in Spain, "a sustained use of that metaphor and abuse of it, and the lack of alternative frames, might generate anxiety and might distort things about the pandemic" [6]. For example, at the start of the pandemic many medical and essential workers, despite being called heroes, experienced a lack of essential protective equipment, and in fact were frustrated by the use of this metaphor, which now often changes to 'from heroes to zeros':

Back in Seattle, Dancy says he has no idea when he can get the vaccine because the rollout in Washington state, like many states across the country, has been slower than expected. He's hoping he can get it soon. "We're **on the front lines**," he says. "At one time we were considered **heroes**. I guess we're now **zeros**."

(from WBUR radio station website, US, 5 February 2021)

Repurposing of the existing vocabulary

Over the last year many words have developed new meanings within our changed reality. One example of such a word is shielding. Coming from shield – 'a large, flat object made of metal or leather that soldiers held in front of their bodies to protect themselves', it has already been adapted before for football vocabulary, where it means 'the practice of keeping your body between an opponent and the ball, with your back to the other player, to prevent them from getting the ball':

Shielding allows you to keep the ball but also move forward.

(Cambridge Dictionary of English)

Yet, during the pandemic it has acquired another meaning of 'a method of protecting yourself from a disease that involves staying at home and having as little contact as possible with people from outside your home, because you are at risk of becoming seriously ill if you get the disease':

In England the UK Government had arranged a scheme with the supermarkets where those **shielding** could have priority in booking online slots for delivery. Covid-19 and its **shielding requirements** meant that the many volunteers over 70 years of age could no longer support the running of food banks.

(The Coronavirus Corpus)

From curve – 'a line on a graph that shows a relationship between two sets of information, for example changes in price over time', referring specifically to diagrams with the number of coronavirus patients, came the expression flatten the curve – 'slowing the spread of an epidemic disease so that the capacity of the healthcare system doesn't become overwhelmed'. The curve represents the number of cases over time, and flattening that curve means preventing a huge surge of new cases in a very short period of time:

As our front-line workers would go into the hospital each day to face the virus head-on, the community stayed home to help **flatten the curve**.

(The Coronavirus Corpus)

And the last but not the least important to mention is lockdown, which has been named Word of the Year 2020 by Collins Dictionary of English. Meaning 'an occasion or time when access to a place is restricted because of some danger', it has been used since the 19th century to refer to a security measure resulting in people being prevented from leaving or entering a building in the event of an emergency. Collins lexicographers explained that they registered more than a quarter of a million usages of lockdown in 2020, compared with just 4,000 in the year before that [1]. And the overwhelming majority of those usages were referring to particular measures from the governments to prevent the spread of coronavirus, which can be considered as a separate shade of meaning. Not surprisingly, the Cambridge Dictionary of English has

already included this as one – 'a period of time in which people are not allowed to leave their homes or travel freely, because of a dangerous disease':

The prime minister placed the UK on **lockdown** with drastic new measures to fight the coronavirus outbreak.

(Cambridge Dictionary of English)

Other examples of repurposing of the existing vocabulary for 'the pandemic needs' may include self-isolate – 'to not leave your home and to stay away from other people when you have, or may have, an infectious disease, so that you do not infect anyone else' and bubble – 'a group of people who have a lot of contact with each other but limited contact with people outside the group, for example as a way to avoid spreading disease':

The actor **self-isolated** after returning from a holiday. The government said that people living alone could join up with one other household to create a support **bubble**.

(Cambridge Dictionary of English)

Coronavirus neologisms

If nothing else, the pandemic has clearly proven that under any circumstances people are capable of being creative with language. The amount of new words coined to express various aspects of the current situation in the world has been enormous. The Coronavirus Corpus, a resource designed to be the record of the social and cultural impact of the coronavirus in 2020 and beyond, currently includes 968 million words which people are using with regard to the pandemic in online newspapers and magazines in 20 different English-speaking countries [2]. And a large share of these words are new creations, including the key word itself – COVID-19 (or covid). As stated in the Oxford report, the word originated on 11th February 2020 in a report by the World Health Organization, as an abbreviation of coronavirus disease 2019. By March this year it was one of the most frequently used nouns in the English language, and it quickly overtook coronavirus in frequency [5].

It is a sure sign that a word has become embedded in the language when it develops its own abbreviations, compounds, and other formations. Such is the case of covid and coronavirus: we use the phrases pre/post-covid speaking about the life before and after the pandemic, or humourously talk about the year … BC, meaning 'before coronavirus'. Also these two words gave birth to a limitless number of creative blends, such as covidiot (from covid + idiot).

Blending is by far the most common method of coining new words in 'coronavirus speak'. And this is not surprising, as it perfectly reflects the general tendency for new word formations in English [4]. The earliest blends in English only go back to the 19th century, with wordplay coinages by Lewis Carroll in the nonsense poem Jabberwocky. For example, he introduced to the language slithy, formed from lithe and slimy, and

galumph (from gallop and triumph). Interestingly galumph has survived as a word in English, but it now seems to mean 'walk in a stomping, ungainly way'. The most widely used blends with the coronavirus root include coronacrisis (coronavirus + crisis), coronageddon (coronavirus + Armageddon), coronapocalypse (coronavirus + apocalypse), and many others.

I can't wait to go to Vegas when **Coronageddon** is over!

(Urban Dictionary)

We can now expect a wave of "**coronababies**" and a new generation of "**quaranteens**" in 2033.

(New York Times, 27th March 2020)

Couples whose marriages are fraying under the pressures of self-isolation could be heading for a "**covidivorce**."

(New York Times, 27th March 2020)

The word coronavirus was also informally shortened to rona, which was originally used mainly in Australia and the US but is now more widespread, and as such, has blends of its own: Happy ronaversary! was a popular slogan and hashtag across the social media and Youtube in March 2021, when different countries celebrated the sad anniversary of first lockdowns.

Unlike compounds, where words are merged together based on their morpheme structure, blending allows to stitch a part of one word onto the other word on the basis of sound only, and opens the way to creativity with the language. For instance, pandemic, which was chosen the 2020 Word of the Year by Merriam-Webster and Dictionary.com, has given rise to a blend infodemic – 'a situation in which a lot of false information is being spread in a way that is harmful'. Doomscrolling, a blend of doom and scrolling, is used to describe 'the act of spending an excessive amount of screen time devoted to the absorption of negative news'.

According to the WHO, the COVID-19-related **infodemic** is just as dangerous as the virus itself.

(Cambridge Dictionary of English)

It's easy to get caught up in a **doomscrolling** cycle of despair, even as we feel that we should do something.

(Dictionary.com)

Examples of coronavirus-related neologisms are found across all areas of vocabulary and include:

1.   word combinations

The cities that instigated early **social distancing** measures did better.

(Cambridge Dictionary of English)

Doing an **elbow bump** instead of a handshake may still not be enough to avoid spreading the virus.

(Cambridge Dictionary of English)

The first **digital nomad** village in Europe is about to open on the tiny volcanic island of Madeira.

(The Coronavirus Corpus)

2.   acronyms (WFH – work from home, also used as a verb, PPE – personal protective equipment)

3.   idiomatic expressions (no jab, no job – referring to the practice of only hiring vaccinated people for a job, to get Pfizered – to receive a dose of Pfizer vaccine), etc.

Conclusion

There is no denial that since early 2020 there have been major changes in the lifestyle of people across the globe, and these changes were to be reflected in our language. The English language has had to adapt rapidly to the challenges of the new reality caused by the coronavirus pandemic. It did so by creating new words and word combinations related to the health emergency, by repurposing the existing vocabulary and adding new meanings and aspects to the words already in use, and also introducing specialised, professional vocabulary into a more general linguistic domain. The time will tell which of these new vocabulary units or nuances of meaning will stay in stay in the language, however, the degree of language change that English has experienced over such a short period of time allowed the authors of the Oxford report to call 2020 "an unprecedented year" [5].

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