ACROSS – A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF SOCIETAL STUDIES
ISSN 2602-1463
Vol. 4 2021 ACROSS CULTURES - INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN A BORDERLESS WORLD

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# Between *Coronationalism* and *Infodemic*: Covid-19, New Words and New Connotations

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**Abstract**

Significant social change brings with it significant linguistic change. The recent global emergency caused by Covid-19, which has remorselessly spread all over the world in a few months, has changed significantly our lives and, consequently, our language. What is extraordinary is the rapidity with which this alteration in language has happened, so much so that the Oxford English Dictionary broke its quarterly publication cycle to update its coverage in April 2020. The aim of this paper is to give an overview on how language use has changed over a few weeks in response to an extraordinary event such as the Coronavirus pandemic. On the one hand, taking as a starting point the OED update I will highlight the way technical terms have entered everyday language. On the other hand, I will observe to what extent common words and expressions have come to assume new connotative meanings.

***Key words***: *Covid-19; Lexicography; Connotation; Linguistic change*

## 1. Introduction

Significant social change brings with it significant linguistic change. This is a systematic issue of lexicography, and we have witnessed this phenomenon during the recent global emergency caused by the Coronavirus disease 2019, which has remorselessly spread all over the world in a few months, changing drastically our lives and, consequently, our language. What is extraordinary is the rapidity with which this alteration in language has happened, so much so that the Oxford English Dictionary (hereinafter OED) broke its quarterly publication cycle to update its coverage in April 2020. As stated by Fiona McPherson, member of the OED Management: "This is a significant update for the OED, and something of a departure" (Press Association 2020).

The aim of this paper is to give an overview on how language use has changed over a few weeks in response to an extraordinary event such as the Coronavirus pandemic. On the one hand, taking as a starting point the OED update, I will highlight the way (new) technical terms have entered everyday language. On the other hand, I will observe to what extent common words and expressions have come to assume new connotative meanings.

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## 2. Naming the new virus: a tricky politics

The first term to be taken into consideration is obviously Covid-19, which is a shortening adopted for the first time on February 11, 2020, by the World Health Organization (Internet Archive 2020) to name the coronavirus disease 2019. As stated in a press conference by the WHO Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesu:

> First of all, we now have a name for the disease:
> COVID-19. I'll spell it: C-O-V-I-D hyphen one nine – COVID-19.
> Under agreed guidelines between WHO, the World Organisation for Animal Health and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, we had to find a name that did not refer to a geographical location, an animal, an individual or group of people, and which is also pronounceable and related to the disease.
> Having a name matters to prevent the use of other names that can be inaccurate or stigmatizing. It also gives us a standard format to use for any future coronavirus outbreaks (WHO 2020a).

Since then, the term Covid-19 has been widely used in the press and in everyday language all over the world as a "pronounceable", unambiguous and unbiased name for the disease. People, in fact, tend to think of a disease as "belonging to" and there are plenty of examples in history where diseases have been named after a particular group of people or place. The 1918 influenza pandemic, for instance, was widely called "the Spanish Flu", whereas the acronym MERS stands for Middle East Respiratory Syndrome. They are both examples of disease names to be avoided, according to the WHO best practices for the naming of new human infectious diseases published in 2015 (Mansoor 2020)[1].

It is worth noting that the term "Covid-19" is beginning to be used as a metonymy. Just as the expression "nine eleven" is used metonymically to refer to "the attack on the World Trade Center in New York on the 11th September 2001" (Hunston 2020), Covid-19 often stands for a complex series of circumstances, for example in sentences like "We've been failing the black community long before Covid-19" (Mulanthara 2020) or "Covid-19 is a global emergency" (Warner 2020).

Actually, Covid-19 is the only neologism to be introduced in the OED, but other new words have been invented, such as the coinage "covidiot" created from the words "Covid-19" plus "idiot" through the word formation process known as "blending" (Hunston 2020). The term was first uploaded on Urban Dictionary - a crowdsourced online slang dictionary - on 16 March 2020 (Tait 2020) and was

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[1] The guidelines are available here: https://www.who.int/topics/infectious_diseases/naming-new-diseases/en/ [05 May 2020].

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defined as '[s]omeone who ignores the warnings regarding public health or safety'. At the time I am writing, another twenty-eight entries have appeared, covering different kinds and different behaviours of "covidiots", which range from "A person who doesn't believe the Coronavirus is real, but hoards toilet paper anyway" to "A person who has no medical background and makes statements about the Coronavirus pandemic founded on dubious sources, i.e. social media, an acquaintance, etc." (UrbanDictionary 2020a). The latter definition opens to another blend word that has been gaining momentum during the public health emergency: "infodemic". The term, formed from "information" and "epidemic", was introduced in 2003 by political scientist and journalist David J. Rothkopf to describe the explosion of information – but above all of misinformation – associated with the SARS epidemic (OED 2020). As he explained in a Washington Post article:

> What exactly do I mean by the "infodemic"? A few facts, mixed with fear, speculation and rumour, amplified and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies, have affected national and international economies, politics and even security in ways that are utterly disproportionate with the root realities (Rothkopf 2003).

The expression has been used in recent years also with reference to media and people's response to terrorism, but was peremptorily relaunched by Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus – the above-mentioned WHO Director-General – on February 15, 2020 during the Munich Security Conference:

> But we're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus and is just as dangerous. That's why we're also working with search and media companies like Facebook, Google, Pinterest, Tencent, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube and others to counter the spread of rumours and misinformation. We call on all governments, companies and news organizations to work with us to sound the appropriate level of alarm, without fanning the flames of hysteria (WHO 2020b).

Since then, the occurrences of "infodemic" both in the media and in institutional discourse have been numerous, as shown by a simple Google search of the term. As far as institutional discourse is concerned, UN Secretary-General António Guterres, for instance, on March 28, 2020, tweeted:

> Our common enemy is #COVID19, but our enemy is also an "infodemic" of misinformation. To overcome the #coronavirus, we need to urgently promote facts & science, hope & solidarity over despair & division (UN 2020)

Not surprisingly, in media discourse the term "infodemic" is often associated with President Trump, as shown by headlines like "Coronavirus pandemic made worse by Trump's infodemic" (Grossman 2020) or "Trump's administration fuelling

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Vol. 4 2021 ACROSS CULTURES - INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN A BORDERLESS WORLD

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coronavirus 'infodemic'" (Avlon 2020). The American President, in fact, has repeatedly embraced a conspiracy theory about Covid-19 escaping from China's Wuhan Institute of Virology, which has been punctiliously rejected as fake news by Dr. Anthony Fauci, the leading infectious disease expert in the US (Haltiwanger 2020).

## 3. Behaviour-based safety (and security) discourse

Indeed, political discourse in time of emergency pertains to security discourse, which in turn often relates to propaganda: every government has the fundamental duty to ensure the security of its citizens, or rather to demonstrate it is doing everything in its power in this respect. It is worth noting that during the Covid-19 pandemic the notions of "safety" and "security" may overlap. The two words differ in connotation, as "safety" is about protection from accidental harm, whereas "security" entails intentional actions undertaken by human actors. Thus, the main difference between security and safety lies in the nature of the threat, intentional in the former case, non-intentional in the latter. Both concepts are about actual or potential harm to acquired values and it is known that one of these values is public health. The Covid-19 challenge entails both safety and security aspects: as a pandemic, it has accidental causes, but people's behaviour has not only safety, but also security concerns to be addressed. An example of this interplay between safety and security in times of Covid-19 is offered by the expression "flattening the curve", which refers to a public health strategy introduced during the pandemic. "The curve" mentioned in the phrase is the epidemic curve, which is a visual representation in the form of a graph of the onset and progression of an outbreak of infectious disease in a particular population over a period of time (Merriam-Webster 2020a). As "flatten" is an ergative verb[2], we could say both that "the curve flattens" and that "someone's action flattens the curve" (Hunston 2020). The second option places responsibility for slowing the spread of the epidemic on to human action, and this is what we encounter more frequently in media and public discourse. The phrase "flattening the curve", in fact, is mostly used in association with the expression "social distancing", which is clearly related to human conduct, as shown in the following examples taken from the media: "New projections suggest social-distancing measures in state may be flattening the curve" (Powell 2020); "Social distancing remains the key to flattening the curve" (Gatta 2020)

It is interesting to note that the term "social distancing" has been in use for decades but has come to assume a completely different connotation from its original meanings. It was used for the first time in 1957 in the book *Systematic Sociology: An Introduction to the Study of Society* by Karl Mannheim et al. as

[2] An ergative verb is both transitive and intransitive. The object when it is transitive is the same as the subject when it is intransitive.

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follows: “The inhibition of free self-expression can also serve as a means of social distancing” (OED 2020). The expression referred to an attitude rather than the action of maintaining a specified physical distance from other people in order to avoid catching or transmitting an infectious disease, which is the meaning “social distancing” was used with for the first time during the SARS outbreak in 2003 (Merriem-Webster 2020b) and is diffusely used today when referred to Covid-19. It is worth noting that between January and March 2020 “social distancing” occurred 36,044 times in the English-Corpora.org compared to the 1,854 occurrences of “social distance”. The increased presence of the –ing form noun (social distancing) is particularly interesting, as well as the nouns (e.g. “advice”, “recommendations”, “guidelines”) and verbs (e.g. “maintain”, “observe”, “keep”) identified as collocates of the expression, which in most cases indicate encouragement rather than coercion (Hunston 2020). Nevertheless, according to the news organization Reuters, the WHO has recommended a preference for the expression “physical distancing” rather than “social distancing”, as during the coronavirus pandemic we have remained socially connected even while being apart, and ironically thanks to the same technologies we used to blame before the health emergency for tearing apart our social fabric (Tangermann 2020). However, the on-going massive use of the term “social distancing” demonstrates that both media and institutional discourse have not endorsed the WHO’s recommendation.

Social distancing implies other recommended conducts, such as the use of “PPE”, an acronym which stands for “personal protective (or protection) equipment”, especially gloves and masks. Dating from 1977, the expression was formerly restricted to healthcare and emergency professionals (OED 2020). Another suggested conduct related to social distancing is the “elbow bump”, a gesture of greeting in which two people lightly tap their elbows together as an alternative to a handshake or an embrace. Its earlier manifestations date back to 1981 as a way of “conveying celebratory pleasure to a teammate other than a hand slap or a high five” (2020). Before the spreading of the Covid-19 outside China, this greeting was also called “the Wuhan shake” (BBC 2020), but neither the latter expression nor the gesture itself have taken hold, as the Director-General of the WHO on March 7, 2020, tweeted: “When greeting people, best to avoid elbow bumps because they put you within 1 meter of the other person. I like to put my hand on my heart when I greet people these days” (Marcin 2020). The “one-meter distance” (or “three-foot distance”) to cut-off droplets emitted when we breathe, cough, or sneeze, in fact, is another of WHO’s recommendations. Also “the Vulcan salute” - which comes from the popular sci-fi *Star Trek* franchise - has been suggested by a UK Government scientist as a new form of universal greeting, as it means “live long and prosper”, a message particularly apt in the difficult pandemic situation (Conner 2020). However, *Namaste* seems to be the “perfect” pandemic greeting: coming from Hindu culture, it has become a popular

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alternative to a handshake and a somewhat more profound one, as it is translated in English as "I bow to the divine in you" (Engels 2020).

Other OED new word entries related to people's behaviour during the current pandemic are "self-isolation" and "self-isolating". Both expressions were recorded from the mid-1800s and have been used until the Covid-19 outbreak to describe the attitude of "countries which chose to detach themselves politically and economically from the rest of the world" (OED 2020), whereas their new connotation is related to self-imposed isolation in case of symptoms or a positive test for Covid-19. Self-isolation is often used in association or interchangeably with the expression "quarantine", but the latter is about separating and restricting the movements of people who have been exposed to a contagious disease. However, both self-isolation and quarantine imply that a "shelter in place" is needed. This expression dates back to 1976 and was devised as an instruction for the public in the event of a nuclear or terrorist attack (OED 2020). It is generally used as a hyphened modifier, as in the following examples: "[…] the San Francisco Bay Area officially declares a shelter-in-place command to slow the spread of the coronavirus" (Specter 2020); "The basics of a "shelter-in-place" order during the coronavirus pandemic are fairly clear: Stay at home" (Levenson and Flower 2020).

The last quotation brings us to the most hashtagged expression of the Covid-19 pandemic: #stayathome. It is mainly used as a social media mantra, a cohesive message perpetuated as a dynamic and user-generated tagging that helps users both to label their own messages under a precise category and to find other messages with that specific content. It is also extensively used to promote both social and institutional awareness campaigns for coronavirus prevention. Before the Covid-19 emergency, the expression "stay at home" was mainly used hyphenated as an idiomatic adjective to describe a person who prefers to spend time at home - e.g. "a stay-at-home girl" - or a parent who cares for their children instead of having a traditional job outside the home - e.g. "a stay-at-home dad/mom" - (Merriam-Webster 2020c). The hyphenated modifier is currently used in the phrase "stay-at-home order", which refers to the restrictions of movements of a population imposed by a government authority to mitigate the pandemic. This connotative meaning is often found in association with what is maybe the most upsetting word of the Covid-19 pandemic: "lockdown". Deriving from the old Germanic word "lock" for a fastening system, in the 19th century the term was used to refer to "a strip or wood or peg that secured the poles or a raft together when timber was transported by river" (Poole 2020). It was only in the 1970s that "lockdown" began to mean a protracted state of confinement for prisoners, a protocol usually applied immediately after a riot (2020). More recently, large-scale lockdowns have been imposed for security reasons during extraordinary times of crisis. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, for instance, a three-day lockdown of American civilian airspace was initiated (Altheide 2009: 129), whereas in 2013, after the Boston Marathon bombings, the entire city was on a

ISSN 2602-1463
Vol. 4 2021 ACROSS CULTURES - INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN A BORDERLESS WORLD

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23-hour lockdown due to the manhunt for the suspected terrorists (Pilkington 2013). For the same reason, Belgium's authorities imposed a lockdown on Brussels in 2015 after the November 15 terrorist attack in Paris (Traynor 2015). The widespread use of the term "lockdown" in the media in the last twenty years suggests that it has been mainly connoted as "an emergency measure or condition in which people are temporarily prevented from entering or leaving a restricted area or building (such as a school) during a threat of danger" (Merriam-Webster 2020d). It is interesting to point out that on March 12, 2020 the lookups for "lockdown" in the Merriam-Webster dictionary spiked by 9,900% (2020d). Not surprisingly, it happened when, following Wuhan's lockdown, the emergency protocol became a model to emulate for Italy and other countries in order to control the spread of the coronavirus and the respective government authorities confined millions of people inside their homes.

As government lockdowns were put in place, they were followed by the creation of "locktails" (UrbanDictionary 2020b) – an ironic blend term of "lockdown" and "cocktails" - to help pass the difficult time of isolation. Apart from drinking and "doomscrolling" - a newly coined verb that describes the activity of "obsessively consuming depressive pandemic news" (Mahdawi 2020) – people in lockdown have become familiar with the acronym "WFH", which stands for "working from home", a term that was first attested as a noun in 1995 and as a verb in 2001 (OED 2020). It is interesting to point out that the recurrent expression for "working from home" in Italy is the overused "smart working", which actually is a pseudo-Anglicism. In English, in fact, "smart working" has a completely different meaning, as it entails the undertaking of complex organizational innovations other than simply setting up home workstations (Stanford 2012).

Indeed, the coronavirus lockdown will go down in history as "The Great Lockdown", an expression that places the right emphasis on how the world has dramatically changed in just a few months. It has been introduced by the International Monetary Fund (Gopinath 2020) and strongly evokes both the Great Recession - the severe decline in economic activity during the late 2000s - and the Great Depression - the greatest and longest worldwide economic downturn that took place in the 1930s – with which the current pandemic shares a huge economic recession.

But what is unprecedented in *The Great Lockdown* is something that is not as easy to measure as economic slowdowns, but no less harmful: the risk of a "social recession", an expression that, in fact, is included in the April update of the OED (2000) and defined as "a period of widespread deterioration in quality of life among members of a community, especially due to reduced interactions and weakened social bonds". Before the Covid-19 emergency, the expression was mostly used as synonymous with "broken society", that is, a perceived or apparent decline in moral values (2000), but in the wake of the pandemic the term has been often associated with mental health and connoted as "a collapse in social contact

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that is particularly hard on the populations most vulnerable to isolation and loneliness" (Klein 2020). Not surprisingly, a Google search for "social recession" reports most of the results as informative rather than argumentative articles, providing suggestions for avoiding or overcoming the breakdown in social relations, as shown in the following headlines: "Don't let the 'social recession' ruin your mental and physical health" (Mehdi 2020); "Generosity: the key to avoiding a social recession" (McDonald 2020): "What is social recession and how to deal with it?" (Sahni 2020).

While it is true that social recession may be a consequence of drastic containment measures imposed by the government, the language used by those in power is designed to promote acceptance of and compliance with these measures. Strategies for persuasion in public discourse include the use of metaphors, and many politicians have adopted wartime metaphors to describe the challenges posed by the Covid-19 emergency. During wartime, people are encouraged, even required, to accept massive state intervention and personal sacrifice without question or doubt for the sake of national security. Hence, the war metaphor is a tool of political rhetoric and emphasizes the urgency that underpins severe political decisions. This is why when Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced the lockdown on March 9, 2020, he quoted Winston Churchill to talk about "Italy's darkest hour" (Musu 2020), whereas British Prime Minister Boris Johnson told Britons that theirs was a fight where every citizen was "directly enlisted" (Serhan 2020). Furthermore, President Donald Trump labelled himself "a wartime president" fighting against an "invisible enemy" (2020), even if this enemy has a name to him: "the Chinese virus" (Viala-Gaudefroy and Lindaman 2020), a bigoted expression that may encourage xenophobia as it personifies the threat. The adjective "Chinese" is particularly awkward as it associates the contagion with an ethnicity and entails a process of "Othering", a form of social representation that consists of "creating the other […] and allows individuals to differentiate in-group from out-group and Self from Other in such a way as to reinforce and protect the Self" (Dervin 2012: 190-191). Hence, metaphorical wars on disease may easily turn into a war on those who are believed to embody the disease. It is by no means a coincidence that several accounts of anti-Asian racism have been reported and documented on social media since the outbreak of coronavirus (Haynes 2020).

## 4. Some closing remarks

Language matters and framing the response to Covid-19 in the language of war may be dangerous: war is divisive, whereas this crisis requires global cooperation, far beyond national boundaries. As we find ourselves at war we may be overwhelmingly drawn to an "inward-looking, my-country-first attitude" (Musu 2020). But new nationalism should be distinguished by patriotism, which is "love of one's homeland" (Albertson et al. 2019), a sense of belonging to a community

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that Italian people, for example, have shown to the world singing morale-boosting patriotic songs from their balconies in the very first days of the national lockdown, performing a nationwide flashmob event (Kearney 2020).

The power of music can help overcome the most challenging obstacles mankind has to face and build a sense of togetherness and determination. During the Covid-19 emergency many songwriters have reinterpreted and adapted their hits to coronavirus theme. An example is the 2001 single "Times like These" by Foo Fighters, who launched a "Stay Home Live Lounge" charity version of the song featuring some of the music industry's biggest stars and moving listeners to tears (Savage 2020), as right from the title the song touched their hearts with its resonance and meaning.

But pathos is not the only feeling of sympathy evoked by the so-called "quarantine songs": The Police's 1980 hit "Don't stand so close to me" - especially in its funny "at home" version performed by Sting, Jimmy Fallon and the Roots (Shaffer 2020) - has become a fitting anthem for the coronavirus pandemic, as the phraseology in the title ironizes social distancing effectively. After all, every joke is a tiny revolution.

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ACROSS – A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF SOCIETAL STUDIES
ISSN 2602-1463
Vol. 4 2021 ACROSS CULTURES - INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN A BORDERLESS WORLD

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