

*Kovalevska T. I.,*

*Candidate of Philological Sciences,  
Senior Lecturer at the Department of Foreign Philology  
Vinnytsia Institute of Trade and Economics  
of Kyiv National University of Trade and Economics*

*Matsera O. A.,*

*Assistant Professor at the Department of Foreign Philology  
Vinnytsia Institute of Trade and Economics  
of Kyiv National University of Trade and Economics*

## LINGUISTIC CREATIVITY IMPLICATIONS OF THE PANDEMIC: NEW CONCEPTS, TERMS AND METAPHORES INSPIRED BY THE VIRUS

**Summary.** The article is aimed at highlighting how current reality influences and structures the global discourse, namely – how Coronavirus has led to the emergence of neologisms and nonce words as a response to the crisis and the instrument of better coping with it. The article lists the most commonly used newly coined words, which gained popularity and wide usage in media and everyday discourse. It is stated in the article, that the mere precedent of Covid-19 inspiring the appearance of new linguistic coinages is not new: throughout history pandemics and other meaningful events affecting the social life of people witnessed new terms and concepts proliferating, English not being the only language experiencing this. The article also presents a short diachronic investigation into how previous diseases outbreaks led to the appearance of the words and that the Coronavirus-inspired nonce words appearance is not unprecedented neither by scope, nor by the mere fact of this. The article also focuses on how effective different metaphors are in encouraging compliance with public health advice, as well as issues of translation, interpretation and access to healthcare. The reason behind this new vocabulary becoming strongly enrooted in the language is that it helps people articulate their worries about the biggest health crisis and social changes like lockdown they have seen in generations. Among others, humour is central to virus-related coinages as it undoubtedly presents one of the best coping mechanism there is.

One of the biggest factors in the spread of coronavirus terminology is the fact that people are now more digitally connected than ever before.

Despite gaining universal popularity and usage, most of Covid-19 coinages are believed to fade away as the virus ceases being the reality shaping our daily life and routine. But it remains to be seen.

**Key words:** neologisms, linguistic creativity, nonce words, metaphor, coinage, linguistic usage, discourse, lexical innovation, collective cultural reference.

**The issue under discussion.** Throughout history, challenging circumstances have given rise to new ways of verbally expressing those challenges. English as any other is a living language, refusing to be static, which means creating new words and borrowings from other languages like Latin, Greek and French. While some may consequently change their meaning, or simply shift their vowel sound

and add/lose a consonant, one word can quickly become another in the modern age [1].

The majority of the changes occurring in the language usually start with young adults and teens. In the course of their interaction with their peers, the language begins to evolve inevitably generating or comprising phrases and constructions that differ from of the previous generations. Many of these new speech patterns tend to irritate older adults, especially when they include sloppy pronunciation and slurring of some sort. Nonetheless, the majority of those words in trend have a relatively short life span. Some, on the other hand seem to stick for a while.

While Brexit may be the closest parallel, the speed of the linguistic change we're witnessing with Covid-19 is unprecedented. This may be stemming from a number of factors: the staggering pace at which the virus has spread and its dominance in the media and global span of both physical and virtual coverage at a time when social media and distant contact gain new meaning and importance.

Many of the newly coined popular terms are related to the socially distanced nature of human interactions and communication these days, for example "virtual happy hour", "coveideo party" and "quarantine and chill". "Corona" is widely used as a prefix, be it Polish speakers converting "coronavirus" into a verb or English speakers speculating about "coronababies" (children born or conceived during the pandemic).

No less prolific have been the abbreviations: from the now common WFH (working from home) to the life-saving PPE (personal protective equipment).

Society is currently facing the challenge of figuring out how to talk about the impact the virus is having on our everyday lives as the world comes to grips with the "new normal" coronavirus has created affecting our lives, communities, ways of life.

Coronavirus as a concept triggered an explosion of neologisms both in English and in other languages. This new vocabulary is called to help people make sense of the changes that have so suddenly and unexpectedly become part of everyday lives and the pandemic discourse [2].

The Oxford English Dictionary has made an extraordinary update to include Covid-19 and words related to the pandemic in its definitive record of the English language with terms like "social

distancing” and “self-isolation” now in common use. The term “Covid-19” was only coined in February 2020, when the WHO announced the official name of the virus and the associated disease.

The aim of the current article is to present an overview of the existing publications on the newly coined words and concepts behind them induced by the Coronavirus and the global lockdown it has led to.

#### Analysis of recent research and publications on the topic.

Lexicologists like common language users are trying to keep up with the changes the pandemic has brought on. The dictionary’s executive editor Bernadette Paton said that it was “a rare experience for lexicographers to observe an exponential rise in usage of a single word in a very short period of time, and for that word to come overwhelmingly to dominate global discourse, even to the exclusion of most other topics” [6].

Covid-19 has managed to do that, and has thus been added as a new entry in the OED, defined as “an acute respiratory illness in humans caused by a coronavirus, which is capable of producing severe symptoms and death, esp. in the elderly and others with underlying health conditions” [6].

“As something of a departure, this update comes outside of our usual quarterly publication cycle,” said Paton. “But these are extraordinary times, and OED lexicographers, who like many others are all working from home ... are tracking the development of the language of the pandemic and offering a linguistic and historical context to their usage [6]”.

The OED’s recent research of more than 8bn words of online news stories found that coronavirus and Covid-19 (a shortening of coronavirus disease 2019) are now dominating global discourse. While back in December 2019, words such as “Brexit”, “impeachment” and “climate” dominated news, by January 2020 “coronavirus” has witnessed a significant rise in use alongside current affairs terms such as “bushfire”, “koala”, “Iraqi”, “locust” and “assassination”. By March 2020 every single word in the OED’s top 20 list of keywords was related to coronavirus.

**Basic material presentation.** “In January 2020 the words were mainly related to naming the virus and describing its properties: coronavirus, SARS, virus, human-to-human, respiratory, flu-like,” said the OED in an analysis. “By March 2020 the keywords started reflecting the social implications of the virus, and issues related to the medical response: social distancing, self-isolation and self-quarantine, lockdown, non-essential (as in non-essential travel), and postpone are all especially frequent, as are PPE and ventilator [6].”

Social distancing, first used in 1957, “was originally an attitude rather than a physical term, referring to an aloofness or a deliberate attempt to distance oneself from others socially. Now we all understand it as keeping a physical distance between ourselves and others to avoid infection,” wrote Paton [4].

But this is not an unprecedented turn of events. Previous pandemics have also provoked new vocabulary appearance. For example, not long after the bubonic plague peaked in Europe between 1347 and 1351 “pestilence” and “a fatal epidemic or disease” appeared in usage in 1382. The adjective “self-quarantined” was used to describe the actions of the villagers of Eyam in the 17th century, who isolated themselves to prevent the second wave of “Black Death” from spreading to surrounding villages.

And while coronavirus/COVID-19 neologisms are being coined quicker than ever, already existing terms such as “self-isolating”,

“pandemic”, “quarantine”, “lockdown” have increased in use in the global narrative of current events [6].

The ones that gained most popularity and spread include:

- covidiot – someone ignoring public health advice;
- covideo party – online parties via Zoom or Skype;
- covexit – the strategy for exiting lockdown.

Coronavirus has also gained new descriptors including “the rona” and “Miley Cyrus” (Cockney rhyming slang) [5].

Terms dealing with the material changes in everyday lives have also gained immense popularity as they help verbalize and, thus, process the new reality and deal with changing work circumstances:

- Blursday – an unspecified day because of lockdown’s disorientating effect on time;
- zoombombing – hijacking a Zoom videocall;
- WFH – working from home;
- quaranteams – online teams created during lockdown.

Metaphors people are using to talk about our response to Coronavirus have also been quite ample: from war metaphors (for example, Boris Johnson’s briefing where he stated that: “This enemy can be deadly, but it is also beatable”) to sports, storms, monsters, natural disasters, etc. [6].

The effectiveness of different metaphors in encouraging compliance with public health advice, as well as issues of translation, interpretation and access to healthcare has to be further investigated and discussed in linguistic research.

Adding new semantic features to already existing words can in some cases be subtly harmful. War metaphors invoking “battles” and “front-lines” are being widely applied to the pandemic narrative, yet thinking only in terms of a wartime emergency can potentially detract from longer-term required structural changes. This has given rise to the project #ReframeCovid, in which linguists collect crowdsourced examples of alternatives to war language [7].

Inés Olza, a linguist at the University of Navarra in Spain, says she started the project spontaneously on Twitter [4]. She acknowledges and understands the temptation to invoke war metaphors, especially at the start of the pandemic when they were necessary to build unity and mobilize quickly. But she believes that “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” [7].

Terms such as “natural disaster” and “perfect storm” bear the risk of creating the impression that the pandemic was inevitable and unavoidable, ignoring the political, economic and environmental contexts, making some figurants of the narrative more exposed or vulnerable. For example, some healthcare workers have expressed their frustration at being called “heroes” as they would rather be seen as complex, frightened individuals doing their job, who need protective equipment and policy not relying on or expecting their own sacrifices.

While the scope of lexical innovation in relation to coronavirus is unprecedented, we only need to look to other periods of history to see how such linguistic creativity manifests itself in times of serious social crisis [3, p. 290].

World War II gave us “radar” (RADIO Detection And Ranging). Vietnam has triggered the coinage of “fragging” (the deliberate killing of an unpopular member of one’s own fighting unit, from the shortening of fragmentation grenade).

More recently, the UK's departure from the EU (colloquially known as "Brexit") triggered a variety of terms including "brexiteers", "remoaners", and "regrexit" [4].

The name of the disease entering common use is typically the lasting effect on language for major health pandemics, as happened with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), Spanish Flu (1918–1920), SARS (2002–2004), Swine Flu (2009) and others. But coronavirus seems to be breaking the pattern and appears to be influencing public discourse beyond simply adding a new disease to the dictionary [4].

There first important question worth asking given the scope of lexical innovation: is why are new coronavirus-inspired terms coined in the first place? And the second one: why have these terms gained popularity so quickly? After all, new words are introduced all the time, but few of them enter the wider public use in the way we've witnessed the coronavirus terminology has.

In his widely cited article on linguistic creativity, Ronald Carter, former Professor of modern English language at the University of Nottingham, makes the point that "verbal play is often undertaken for humorous purposes, serving in part to bring people closer together", as well as challenging the "normal" view of things. He goes on to argue that inventive language serves not just an ornamental function, but a practical one as well.

In a year coronavirus has fundamentally changed our ways of living. It has destroyed businesses and transformed our working and living patterns. This new vocabulary has turned out to be a utilitarian shorthand for talking about coronavirus-related issues: from the impact the virus has had on the working lives, to the influence of the lockdown measures or even the typical humor patterns and topics. The proliferation of metaphors, nonce words and lexical innovations registered in the past year all point to the fact that linguistic creativity is a key part of language responsible for reshaping of our ways of interactions with the world.

There have been quite a few objections to the use of social distancing as a term, which was originally borrowed from sociology and used to previously described separation based on class, racial and gender identities, fearing it may be misinterpreted.

The World Health Organization, among other public health agencies, has adopted "physical distancing" as its preferred nomenclature because, as epidemiologist Maria Van Kerkhove told reporters, "We want people to still remain connected [1]."

So far, however, the suggested change of terms has not gained popularity with the general public, which for the most part prefer "socially distanced".

This new vocabulary is called to help people articulate their worries about the biggest health crisis seen in generations. It unites people around a set of collective cultural reference points making new vocabulary coinages a kind of lexical "social glue". In the absence of the regular social contact, shared vernacular is an important part of helping people feel connected to one another [4].

One of the biggest factors facilitating in the spread of coronavirus terminology is the fact that people are now more digitally connected than ever before, not during the Swine Flu outbreak in 2009 or the SARS outbreak in 2002. Instant access social media and instant messages are currently an integral part of our lives. We share content with friends and family through a wide scope of social media tools. There are now far more opportunities for individuals to coin a new term and share it

beyond their immediate social circle due to the scale of our online presence and connections.

The role of novel language as a coping mechanism is mirrored in the wealth of linguistic creativity that hasn't yet entered the dictionary. These innovative usages allow people to name what is going on in the world. If you can name it, you can talk about it; and if you can talk about it, then it can help people cope and get a handle on really difficult situations [7].

Writer Karen Russell has found the newly coined terms such as "flatten the curve" are actually reassuring – a reminder of the importance of both individual and collective action, which "alchemizes fear into action".

Except serious linguistic research behind the issue, a kind of slightly anxious humour is central to many of the "coronacoinages". The German "coronaspeck" for example refers to stress eating amid stay-at-home orders. The Spanish "covidiota" and "coronaburro" (a play upon words on 'burro' – the word for donkey) ridicule the people disregarding public health advice. "Doomscrolling" highlights the hypnotic state of endlessly reading grim internet news. "Blursday" as has been argued above, captures the losing of sense of time when so many days blend into each other (Ro, 2020).

At this point it is difficult to predict much like the disease itself whether nonce words associated with the coronavirus and COVID-19 will remain widely used once the pandemic is over [1].

Linguists believe that many of the terms currently in popular vernacular won't stand. The ones with a stronger chance of sticking around after the pandemic is over are those that highlight the lasting behavioral changes, such as "zoombombing", which was inspired by "photobombing" and describes the practice of invading someone else's video call. Zoombombing most likely is going to become a generic term even if the company Zoom loses its market dominance.

Inventiveness with vocabulary can also witness that the current problems, like many of the coronacoinages, won't last forever [4].

Though unsettling these are boom times for linguists and simply language lovers, who have filled the internet and social media with COVID-19 glossaries, etymological treatises, collections of neologisms and histories of old words that have grown newly topical.

Since 2003, Merriam-Webster has proclaimed a "Word of the Year," an honor based partly on the number of times a word or expression has been looked up online and how that frequency compares to the previous year. Past honorees include blog (2004), bailout (2008) and austerity (2010) [1].

2020 winner would predictably be COVID-19-related [1].

**Conclusions.** We all have a slight variation on a set of words and constructions, depending on our age, education, job and region of the country. These constructions naturally become idiomatic. Some individuals within society use language as a way of marking group identity, particularly in the spoken language. As coronavirus rages on, understanding the language surrounding it will be ever more important.

In times of significant social or civic change, linguistic creativity not only reflects the major troubles, events and characteristics of the time, but also shows how people gather to discuss new challenges and contexts and how they need to articulate their fears and concerns verbally in order to be able to process them which inevitably entails new linguistic coinages defining the particular narrative.

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**Ковалевська Т. І., Мацера О. А. Лінгвістична креативність як імплікація пандемією: новотвори, терміни і метафори, інспіровані вірусом**

**Анотація.** Стаття має на меті висвітлити те, як сьогоденна реальність впливає та структурує глобальний дискурс, а саме те, як коронавірус спричинив появу неологізмів і понять як відповідь на кризу та інструмент кращого її прийняття та подолання. У статті висвітлено найбільш уживані неологізми, які набули популярності та широко-

го використання у засобах масової інформації та повсякденному дискурсі. У статті зазначено, що прецедент того, як Covid-19 спричинив появу нових мовних карбувань, не є новим: історії пандемій та інших значущих подій, які впливали на соціальне життя людей, стали свідками поширення нових термінів та понять. Англійська мова – не єдина, яка зазнала новотворів. Стаття також презентує коротке діахронічне дослідження того, як попередні спалахи хвороб спричиняли появу неологізмів, і того, що поява неологізмів, інспірованих коронавірусом, не є безпрецедентною ні за обсягом, ні за своєю суттю.

У статті зосереджено увагу на тому, наскільки ефективні різні метафори в заохоченні дотримання рекомендацій щодо охорони здоров'я, а також питання перекладу та доступу до медичної допомоги.

Причина, через яку ці нові лексичні утворення закріплюються в мові, бачиться в тому, що вони допомагають людям сформулювати свої тривоги та страхи стосовно найбільшої глобальної кризи, пов'язаної зі здоров'ям, та соціальними змінами, такими як карантин, досі не баченими. Серед іншого, гумор є однією з причин лексичних новотворів, інспірованих вірусом, оскільки, безсумнівно, є одним із найкращих механізмів подолання тривоги та стресу.

Одним із найвагоміших факторів розповсюдження термінології коронавірусу є той факт, що люди зараз більше пов'язані в цифровому плані. Незважаючи на набуття загальної популярності та узуальності, передбачається, що більшість лексичних новотворів, пов'язаних із Covid-19, зникнуть із широкого вжитку, шойно вірус припинить бути реальністю, яка формує наше повсякденне життя. Але це ще належить з'ясувати.

**Ключові слова:** неологізми, лінгвістична креативність, лексичні новотвори, узуальність, дискурс, лексичні інновації, колективні культурні референції.