

Social Crisis and Lexical Innovation: The Context of the Covid-19 Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Language is dynamic and fluid – not rigid and constant. It keeps evolving and changing with time. And extraordinary times result in extraordinary innovations and inventions. In the context of the current COVID-19 spread, its users also invent and reinvent ways to use the language effectively to suit the needs of the hour. Throughout history, difficult times or changing scenarios have made people find new ways of expressing themselves. It is also true that such linguistic creativity manifests itself in times of serious social crises such as this. It would be an understatement if it is said that lexical innovation in relation to corona virus is unprecedented. An attempt has been made in this paper to examine how language changes or behaves during social crises like the covid19 pandemic.

Keywords: Social crises and language development; Covid pandemic; lexical innovation, linguistic creativity.

Introduction

Language evolves with the dynamics of the society and how the society is impacted by the events and the changes that happen at a point in time. These changes may occur due to wars, or social or political unrest, or epidemics or pandemics. History is replete with innumerable examples when linguistic creativity was at its best even in the worst of times. People have shown great lexical innovations even at the face of testing times. The WWI and WWII, the breakdown of the then USSR, England's exit from the European Union, and now the Covid-19, to name a few, are some of the glaring examples of how new words and terms have made their way into dictionaries. The impact this pandemic has on the entire humanity is unprecedented and has changed the global discourse but with some light at the end of the tunnel in the form

of neologisms.

Historical Perspective

Over the centuries, man has felt the need for words to express himself, which is why the English dictionary, for example, has been growing fatter by the day. The events that happen around us necessitate new expressions or neologisms. The word 'frustrate', for example, was first used by George Eliot (1871), because she was frustrated by rigid gender biases and lifestyle. Similarly, the WWII gave us new words like 'radar' [**ra**(dio) **d**(etection) **a**(nd) **r**(anging)]. From Vietnam we got 'fragging' (the deliberate killing of an unpopular member of one's own fighting unit). And in the late 20th century, words such as 'glasnost' (the practice of open consultative government and wider dissemination of information in the

former USSR) and ‘perestroika’ (the practice of restructuring the economic and political system in the then USSR) came to be used to denote reforms during Gorbachev’s term (1980s).

Recently, words such as ‘bregret’ (regret following the vote for leaving the EU), ‘bremain’ (the campaign for the UK to stay in the EU), ‘Brexit’ (UK’s departure from the EU), ‘brexiteer’ (a person who is in favour of the UK withdrawing from the EU), ‘regrexit’ (a feeling of regret about Brexit taking place), and ‘remoaners’ (those who reject the outcome of the 2016 referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU) became a part of the common parlance.

With regard to health epidemics or pandemics, words such as ‘HIV’ (Human Immunodeficiency Virus 1983) ‘SARS’ (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome 2002-03), ‘Spanish Flu’ (caused by H1N1 virus 1918), and ‘Swine Flu’ (influenza caused by pigs 2009) made their way into the English dictionary, but the influx of new words and revived words into the English lexicon has been one of the largest during the pandemic that has gripped the world for quite some time now.

Covid19-Inspired Terms

The birth of new words or phrases is a natural phenomenon; they are born and inducted into the lexicon but few of them enter the wider public consciousness in the manner and the rate at which those related to the corona virus do, leaving the lexicographers excited and surprised at the same time. The exponential growth in the formation of words related to Covid-19, e.g. ‘super spreader’, ‘virtual

happy hour’, ‘the new normal’, ‘coveideo party’, ‘covidivorce’, and ‘WFH’ in such a short span of time has made linguists work overtime. The words which have come to be used so overwhelmingly to dominate the global discourse even to the exclusion of most other contemporary and equally significant topics has baffled those interested in language studies.

Covid-19 and its Manifestations

‘Covid-19’, which is a shortening of ‘co(rona) vi(rus) d(isease) 2019’ has led to various manifestations. Each of these words is being used so overwhelmingly that it has got in to the psyche of even the layman. People may not know how to spell or pronounce a particular word or its meaning but have been using it in their daily life. Here are some of the most common words with their meanings:

- ‘comorbidity’ (the presence of diseases with a condition at the same time)
- ‘corona/frontline warriors’ (healthcare and other professionals)
- ‘quarantine and chill’ (to make oneself relaxed at home observing isolation norms)
- ‘screening’ (the investigation of something as part of a methodical survey)
- ‘shelter-in-place’ (typically, issued by local government, residents remain at home)
- ‘social/physical distancing’ (the act of staying away from one another in an effort to stop transmission)

- ‘super spreader’ (a highly contagious individual who can spread the disease to many)
- ‘the new normal’ (the current or prevailing situation, expected to remain the norm post-covid)
- ‘virtual happy hour’ (the time spent at home or on the internet)

Similarly, there is another set of words doing the rounds. These words, most of which are related to medicine, already existed even before the Covid-19 but then they are being reused, redefined and repurposed more than ever before in the present context. In other words, they have come to be used on a large scale, thereby popularizing the words. Let us examine these words and understand how linguistic innovation shapes our consciousness:

- ‘asymptomatic’ (showing no symptoms of a disease)
- ‘case fatality rate’ (the ratio of deaths to the total number of individuals diagnosed positive)
- ‘clinical trial’ (experiments on humans to see the efficacy of a vaccine)
- ‘community spread’ (the spread of a contagious disease in an area)
- ‘contact tracing’ (identifying people, perhaps in contact with an infectious person)
- ‘containment area’ (an area with limited access in an effort to contain an outbreak)
- ‘epidemic’ (a widespread occurrence of an

infectious disease in a community)

- ‘flattening the curve’ (an attempt to create a more gradual uptick of cases)
- ‘incubation period’ (time between exposure to infection and the first symptoms)
- ‘index case/patient/patient zero’ (the first documented patient within a population)
- ‘intensivist’ (a board-certified physician who provides special care for the critically ill)
- ‘lockdown’ (an emergency measure restricting people to control transmission)
- ‘mortality rate’ (the number of deaths proportionate to the size of that population)
- ‘pandemic’ (a worldwide spread of an infectious disease)
- ‘quarantine’ (restriction on the movement of people exposed to a contagious disease)
- ‘symptomatic’ (showing symptoms of covid-19, such as fever, dry cough, and breathlessness)
- ‘vaccine’ (a biological preparation that provides immunity to a particular disease)
- ‘ventilator’ (a machine designed to help a patient breathe well)

There are also words which are either shortened forms or abbreviations of words or phrases. Some of these words are given below as examples:

- ‘Covid-19’ (a respiratory illness caused by coronavirus, 2019)
- ‘nCoV’ (novel corona virus)
- ‘PPE’ (**P**ersonal **P**rotective **E**quipment used by healthcare personnel)
- ‘PUI’ (person under investigation)
- ‘quaz’ (short form of *quarantine*)
- ‘sanny’ (short form of *sanitizer*)
- ‘TMC’ (**T**emporary **M**edical **C**entre)
- ‘WFH’ (work from home)
- ‘covidient’ (a person who follows all the directives regarding public safety)
- ‘covidiot’/’moronavirus’ (a slang expression to refer to one who ignores safety guidelines for coronavirus)
- ‘covidivorce’ (divorces filed as a result of a couple’s experience during the covid-19 pandemic)
- ‘infodemic’ (a wide and rapid spread of misinformation)
- ‘photobombing’ (action of spoiling a photo by unexpectedly appearing on camera)
- ‘quaranteams’ (the people you choose to live with during a coronavirus quarantine)
- ‘quaranteens’ (when the coronababies get older to become teens)
- ‘zoombombing’ (when uninvited guests enter a Zoom meeting and disrupt it with images)

Besides the Covid-inspired medical terms and abbreviations, we also see another class of words or phrases that have come into existence during the pandemic. They are formed by ‘blending’ or combining words or parts thereof. Here is a list of some of such terms that have enriched our vocabulary:

- ‘Blursday’ (the day you are presently living but don’t know what day it actually is)
- ‘coronababies’ (babies conceived during the covid pandemic)
- ‘coronacation’ (coronavirus-compelled vacation)
- ‘coronials’ (hypothetical new generation of children conceived during covid-19)
- ‘covexit’ (a gradual disengagement from the effects of the covid-19 pandemic)
- ‘coveideo party’ (online/virtual party via an online platform)

As the large scale spread of the covid virus has affected the lives of billions of people across the globe, it has also brought about a whole range of new words covering super specialist terms from the branch of medicine (e.g., ‘intensivist’), new abbreviations or acronyms (‘sanny’, ‘WFH’), portmanteau words or blends (e.g., ‘covidient’, ‘infodemic’) and many other words to express the social needs of self-isolation and social distancing (e.g., ‘home quarantine’, ‘TMC’, ‘social distancing’). There is no denying the fact that grave social or behavioural changes make a humongous impact on language, e.g. the flooding of a

language with a large number of words in a short span of time. Of course, one of the reasons for the unprecedented pace of the linguistic change is the lightning speed at which the virus is spreading, the other reason being the spotlight the pandemic has got in the digital space.

It is important to note what Carter (2020) says about language as a unifying tool, “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 also feels that inventive language is not just ornamental, but practical. It means that there is a wealth of linguistic creativity. Similarly, what Lawson (2020) says is also equally relevant, “These innovative usages allow us to name whatever it is that’s going on in the world. And once you can name the practices, the events, the social conditions around a particular event, it just gives people a shared vocabulary that they can all use as a bit of a short hand. I think ultimately 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.”

In a span of five to six months (since late December), the corona virus has drastically changed our way of life and living. It has closed businesses, be it hospitality, tourism, or services, shut shops of all denominations, brought transportation of all forms to a grinding halt, closed educational institutions from the kindergarten to universities, shut down offices, both government and private, and transformed our working patterns and style. It has forced people to look at life from a different perspective and adapt to a new

life style: stay at home, virtual work, contactless payments, online classes, restricted or limited movements, adherence to govt-announced curfews or self-imposed curfews, eat out or go to the cinema or public places, hit the gym and the swimming pools, and so many other activities.

It is sad that the pandemic has affected over 8 million people with almost half a million casualties in over 213 nations across the globe and has brought the whole humanity to its knees. However, it has also resulted in some good phenomena: boundaries between and among nations are fading; peoples of countries are coming closer to one another to support, show solidarity and help as never before; scientists and researchers the world over are working overtime hand in hand to devise a vaccine against it; leaders of all political hues are burying their differences to face the challenges collectively. The unprecedented catastrophe of this magnitude has also resulted in linguistic creativity and lexical innovations, leading to the arrival of a range of new words: metaphors, neologisms, abbreviations, portmanteau words, revived words, and so on, reshaping our ways of engaging with the world by articulating our worries about the biggest health crisis we have seen in generations. It has, in reality, bound peoples around the globe (physically away) and made them stay connected as if with a kind of lexical ‘social glue’, thanks to the social media.

In contrast, instant access to the media via several devices, primarily smart phones, has become an indispensable part of our lives. So we share information, content, and messages with friends, family, and peers

through a host of social media outlets such as WhatsApp, Face Book, Twitter, Instagram, and Pintrest. The scale of our online connections shows that there is more penetration and visibility in the digital space. It provides far more opportunities for individuals to coin or discover new terms and expressions, and share them with others beyond their immediate local communities.

Conclusion

In times of disruption in all spheres of life at this scale, linguistic creativity not only reflects the predominant preoccupations of the time, but also shows how people in their respective circles and communities come together to discuss the new challenges and contexts using the newly coined words. Some of these terms will continue to be used post-covid; they are those that describe lasting behavioural changes (e.g., ‘zoombombing’, ‘photobombing’). The unprecedented pandemic will certainly rob us of so many of our fellow human beings from around the globe but will leave some remnants or trails behind in the shape of neologisms which will remain a part of the discourse long after the

covid-19 pandemic is gone.

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