ENGLISH IN THE PANDEMIC: CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract: The article sheds light on some of the new developments in English under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic: namely, various types of neologisms, which have appeared over the past year and a half. The paper offers an overview of these new formations, supplemented by discourse analysis. The study is based on the material gleaned from online editions of The Economist newspaper, with the examples selected using the method of continuous sampling. Research results indicate that the majority of neologisms are portmanteau words; however, abbreviations, compounds and new coinages referring to people's work arrangement are also encountered. In addition, some data on the increase in dictionary searches for words connected with the pandemic are adduced. COVID-19 has boosted the capacity of the English language for expanding its vocabulary, and the changes brought about by this process should be thoroughly studied and understood.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, the English language, neologisms, portmanteau words, abbreviations, compounds.

It is a well-known fact that any living language is like a living organism, immediately reacting to significant changes in the outside world – whether it is discovering new continents, bringing about industrial revolutions or technological breakthroughs, or waging world wars. English is no exception in this respect. The COVID pandemic has undoubtedly boosted the capacity of the language to form new words, as well as people's urge to look up not only novel formations, but also some unfamiliar ones in various sources. In this case it is only natural to turn to dictionaries, and most present-day dictionaries are digital. Quite often they are much better than traditional printed dictionaries, because they give insight into what is going on in other people's minds, what
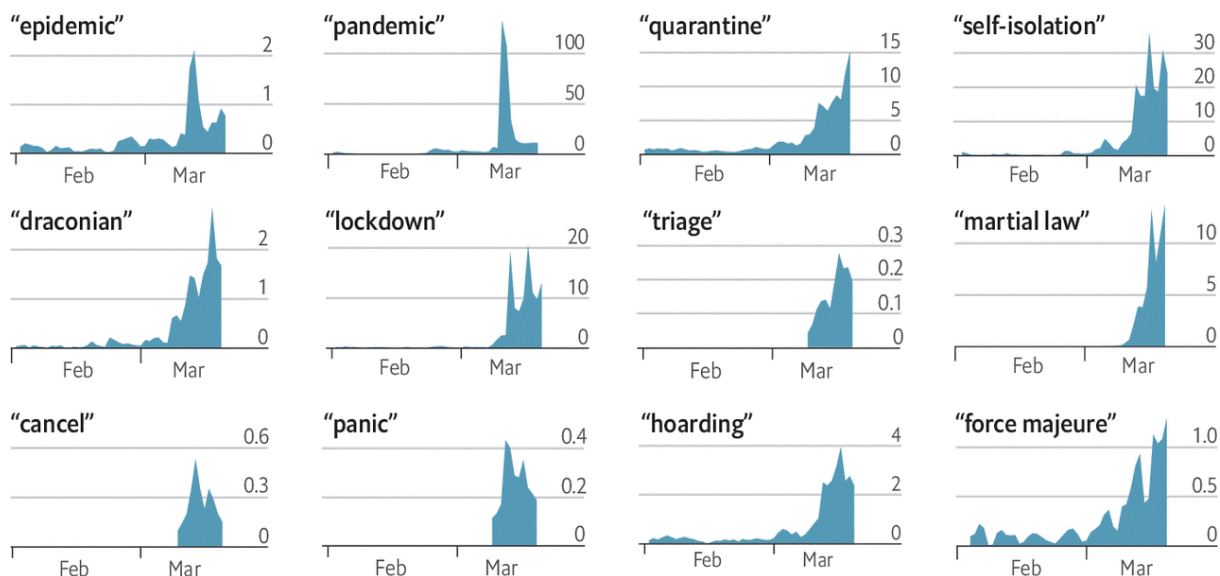
their main woes and worries are. To illustrate this point, it is necessary to consult an authoritative American dictionary, *Merriam-Webster,* which has for a number of years registered increase in the search for words during major events, among them – the time of the pandemic (Graph 1) [The Economist, March 25, 2020]:

The search for meaning

Frequency of search terms on Merriam-Webster
Increase from a year earlier, 2020, '000 %

Searches for "coronavirus" are up 1.1m% compared with the same day last year

"pandemic"
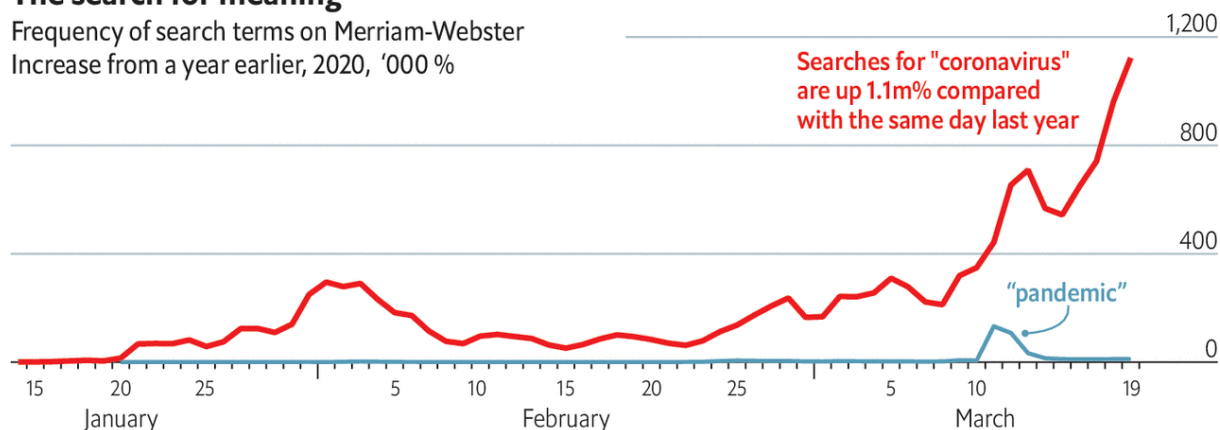
Increase from a year earlier, '000 %

Source: Merriam-Webster

The Economist

Graph 1. Frequency of Term Searches in Merriam-Webster Dictionary

As can be seen from the chart, the most evident rise is for the word "coronavirus" – up to 1.1 million per cent. Other related words show how the world crisis developed: people started searching for "epidemic" (an outbreak of disease that spreads quickly and affects many individuals at the same time) [Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020a] and for "pandemic" (an outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographic area, such as multiple countries or continents, and typically affects a significant proportion of the population) [Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020b] in February 2020. Terms linked to preventing the disease saw a rise as well – "quarantine" and "self-isolation", for example.

Governments took action, and people became interested in what was going to be done: "draconian" (adjective describing laws, government, actions, etc. that are extremely severe, or go further than what is right or necessary) [Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2021a], "lockdown", and "triage" (the process of quickly examining patients who are taken to a hospital in order to decide which ones are the most seriously ill and must be treated first) [Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2021b] began surging in February-March 2020. The same can be said about "martial law" (the law administered by military forces that is invoked by a government in an emergency when the civilian law enforcement agencies are unable to maintain public order and safety) [Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020c].

Another word searched for was "hoarding" (the compulsion to continually accumulate a variety of items that are often considered useless or worthless by others accompanied by an inability to discard the items without great distress) [Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020d]. This seems to reflect the concerns whether stockpiling toilet paper and hand sanitizers during the early days of the pandemic could develop hoarding disorder, a rather serious mental problem when people excessively save items that others may view as worthless. Moreover, people suffering from this disorder cannot part with their possessions and clutter all living space, sometimes in such a way that they cannot move about their flat or home.

Thousands of people lost their jobs during the pandemic, and this fact explains a spike in the searches for "force majeure" (French for "greater force"), referring to a clause in contracts which removes liability for natural and unavoidable catastrophes that interrupt the expected course of events and prevent people from fulfilling their obligations [Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020e].

As has already been mentioned above, possibly the most obvious backlash has been the coinage of numerous neologisms related to the pandemic. These may be classified in the following way:

1. Shortenings, or abbreviations;
2. Blending / Portmanteau words / Coronacoinages;
3. Compounds;
4. Neologisms related to people's work arrangement.

Shortenings and abbreviations, such as "pando" (pandemic), "iso" (isolation), "sanny" (hand sanitizer) are supposedly an influence of Australian English, where such words are widespread [The Economist, June 27, 2020].

Next on the list are portmanteau words, or words that result from blending two or more lexical items, so that the portmanteau word expresses some combination of the meaning of their parts [Encyclopaedia Britannica]. The following items can be given as examples:

Coronaverse: coronavirus+universe (which incorporates people from all over the world) [The Economist, June 27, 2020];

Quarantimes: quarantine+times – the era in which many people now live [The Economist, June 27, 2020];

Coronapocalypse: coronavirus+apocalypse – the total breakdown of society, feared at the beginning of the pandemic, which, thankfully, proved to be too pessimistic [The Economist, June 27, 2020];

Covidiot: COVID-19+idiot – a person who refuses to follow health advice aimed at halting the spread of COVID-19, for example by not following the rules of social distancing, taking part in large gatherings, etc., as well as by buying large amounts of perceived staples, especially toilet paper [The Economist, June 27, 2020];

Quaransheen: quarantine+sheen (a bright, smooth surface) – unwashed sweat on the faces of participants in online meetings [The Economist, June 27, 2020];

(Emotional) coronacoaster: coronavirus+roller coaster (often referring to relationship in married couples during the lockdown). It should be noted that this portmanteau word is based on the transferred meaning of the compound "roller coaster" used to describe a situation in which a person's feelings change from one extreme to another, or a situation that alternates between making one feel excited, exhilarated, or happy and making one feel sad, disappointed or desperate, the main nominative meaning of the word being "an exciting entertainment in an amusement park, like a fast train that goes up and down very steep slopes and around very sudden bends" [Collins Dictionary, 2021]. It is a rather disturbing fact that during the pandemic there was a spike in the number of divorces in most European countries, as well as the USA and Canada [The Economist, June 27, 2020].

Coronasplaining: coronavirus+explaining/splaining (referring to half-informed blogs on the Internet trying to explain various issues connected with the disease). Interestingly, "splaining" is a slang word, meaning "explaining something in a slightly condescending manner, while 1) assuming that other people do not have any knowledge of the subject, 2) believing you know more about it than you actually do, and 3) thinking that people need to hear your wisdom) [Urban Dictionary, 2020].

Smizing: smile+eye+suffixes *-ize* and *-ing* (referring to smiling with one's eyes, with one's mouth hidden by a mask) [The Economist, June 27, 2020].

One more case of blending is **Zumping:** Zoom+dumping (getting rid of), with the meaning "firing an employee by video" [The Economist, November 30, 2020]. As has already been pointed out above, a great number of people lost their jobs during the pandemic, and their employers found themselves in a predicament as to how they should make their employees redundant in person. They resorted to the same device that was used for numerous online meetings – Zoom.

There have also been examples of blending connected with numerous conspiracy theories around COVID-19, and these should be singled out into a separate subgroup:

Infodemic: information+pandemic. There was a virtual outbreak of misinformation linked to the disease. For example, the rumours were spread that the infection can be cured by drinking methanol, which caused hundreds of lethal cases in Iran [The Economist, June 3, 2020]. One more myth blamed 5G transmitters for spreading the virus, and in Britain numerous cases of attacking phone towers were reported [The Economist, June 3, 2020].

It goes without saying that the Internet plays a crucial role in the rapid diffusion of misinformation. In March 2020 Gallup International conducted a survey in 28 countries on four continents, which showed that at least 16 per cent and at the most 58 per cent of respondents believed that COVID-19 was deliberately spread [The Economist, June 3, 2020].

Plandemic: plan+pandemic (referring to a theory that the disease was allegedly planned by the world elites) [The Economist, September 17, 2020].

Sheeple: sheep+people (the word conspiracy theorists use to refer to the rest of the world population, implying that such people passively believe everything they are told, without critically analyzing the information they receive) [The Economist, September 17, 2020].

Compounds come next on the list of neologisms, and here two of such lexical units may be mentioned. However, they are not neologisms in the proper sense of the word, but were rather "resuscitated", so to speak, during the pandemic:

Shelter-in-place: finding a safe location indoors and staying there until given "all clear" or told to evacuate. One may be asked to "shelter-in-place" because of an active shooter, tornado, chemical, radiological or other hazards [Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020f].

Doomscrolling: this compound refers to obsession with reading negative news online. Interestingly, the word was coined before the pandemic, in 2018, but in the times of COVID-19 there is a vast amount of grim news in the media, which people tend to read as much as they can in order to gather more information about the disease. The downside of this tendency is that they are likely to feel more stressed than safe [The Economist, February 15, 2021].

Finally, a few words should be said about neologisms related to people's work arrangement during the pandemic:

Remote work / 'Udalyonka': working online was rare in Russia before the pandemic. Possibly, only a few tech whizzes used to resort to remote work. Now increasing numbers of employees work online if this does not run counter to their professional duties. Thus, a new word was coined to describe this widespread, unusual, but necessary practice [The Economist, November 30, 2020].

Toxic productivity: an unhealthy compulsion to work. It has been observed that people tend to work more online, as compared with "off-line" times. Employees have stopped commuting to work and spend more time at home. On the one hand, it may seem to be an advantage, but on the other hand, the distinct line between the workplace and home has become rather vague. As a result, people may spend every waking hour working: answering phone calls, sending e-mails, taking part in Zoom meetings, etc. Interestingly, the adjective "toxic" was singled out by the Oxford English Dictionary as the word of the year in 2018 [The Economist, November 30, 2020].

Zoom fatigue: today, numerous employees complain about Zoom fatigue. This criticism is mostly connected with the video format: some people may feel self-conscious about how they look; others lack eye contact or are not comfortable with demonstrating the interior of their dwelling – be it a luxurious country cottage or a modest flat. Yet a greater problem lies in exchanging remarks and turn-taking. In regular conversation interlocutors quickly gauge the right time for making a comment. However, in Zoom meetings this may be hindered by the limitations of the technology: overlapping and interruptions may turn out to be tiresome and draining [The Economist, May 16, 2020].

Zoom gloom and **Zoom boom:** at present employees spend hours at Zoom meetings, staring at their own faces and comparing themselves with their colleagues, which may lead to Zoom gloom, because poor lighting and laptop cameras are often not flattering. Besides, there is a notion of the so-called "lockdown face", having the signs of stress and lack of exercise.

It is not surprising, therefore, that increasing numbers of people turn to plastic surgeons for all kinds of beauty treatment, such as eyelid surgery, facelifts, liposuction, etc. Specialists in the field expected this field of medicine to collapse during the pandemic. Instead, it enjoys a Zoom boom [The Economist, April 11, 2021].

Summing up what has been expounded above, it would not be totally out of place to present a word cloud containing the neologisms which have either recently appeared in English in COVID times, or have undergone a revival:

In conclusion it seems apt to quote Professor David Crystal, who described changes in a language and challenges linked to them in the following way: "We may find these developments uncomfortable – threatening, even – but they are not going to go away. And that leaves us with only one alternative: we have to learn to manage them. But management presupposes understanding. The first step, therefore, is to explore, as closely as possible, what is happening to language…" [Crystal, 2009, p.7].

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