

## VOCABULARY FLEXIBILITY AND DEVELOPMENT PROMOTED BY COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Випуск 1 (43)

УДК 811.111'81'373

DOI:10.24144/2663-6840/2020.1(43).152–158

Крапівник Г. Vocabulary flexibility and development promoted by covid-19 pandemic; кількість бібліографічних джерел – 35; мова англійська.

**Abstract.** The ongoing coronavirus outbreak and pandemic have dramatically changed the worldwide life landscape in many respects, and, in particular, the language situation, which has revealed that at their present stage of development, language systems and their vocabularies are much more dynamic than they used to be. It is especially evident in English since it is used around the globe for international communication. The virtual global hypertext, as the totality of the existing texts, is currently overloaded with the virus-related existing and new vocabulary. The thing is that even the existing lexis is being frequently used in a misleading way to confuse or scare the audience. Therefore, it is relevant and worth studying those rapid lexical and semantic changes that have been occurring over the past several months in relation to the description of the novel coronavirus phenomenon in question. The study aimed at analysing the rapid processes developing in the English vocabulary due to the coronavirus pandemic as an extralinguistic factor. The empirical material included English-language media texts of the early 2020. It appears that the new virus naming was an evolutionary process that included a number of versions that finally resulted in the generally accepted formal name of Corona Virus Disease 2019, or its generally accepted shortened and thus economical form Covid-19/COVID-19. In total, 21 options of nomination in question were found. The virus spread effect naming has also developed diachronically, from a local outbreak to pandemic and infodemic. During the short period of functioning in the language, the coronavirus and its consequential disease names have already built their word families, including numerous short-lived occasionalisms. Moreover, there have emerged various collocations that include the coronavirus name as their structural element, as well as other lexical units related to the new life situation globally. It is to be noted that the present research cannot be considered holistic since the novel coronavirus pandemic is still ongoing and, accordingly, vocabulary changes continue, which will require further analytical consideration and conclusions.

**Keywords:** coronavirus, naming, vocabulary flexibility, media, word-building process.

**Problem statement.** The situation with the current coronavirus outbreak and pandemic has drastically changed human life globally. Vocabulary development has not been an exception in this respect. It has turned out that today lexis can transform far more actively and flexibly than ever before, in particular, owing to the common accessibility of various media and the spread of information via them. The English language may serve here a good example since it is used worldwide for international communication. Today's postmodernist society, overloaded with media texts, is struggling to cope with the data available in the public domain. It was rightly indicated in New York Times (NYT) on April 3, 2020 that "*Making sense of the coronavirus pandemic requires getting up to speed on semantics as much as epidemiology*" [Pérez-Peña 2020]. It is essential to know that media language is being extensively used misleadingly so as to confuse or scare the audience. Therefore, it is topical to study rapid vocabulary changes that have been occurring over the past several months in relation to naming and describing the infection in question.

The research **aims** at analysing the rapid processes developing in the English vocabulary due to the coronavirus pandemic as an extralinguistic factor. For this purpose, it is necessary to study the media texts of the specified period, single out the lexis that denotes the phenomenon, identify and scrutinize the ongoing language processes related to the development of the novel coronavirus.

The lexeme that emerged just in December 2019, due to the appearance of an unknown kind of pneumo-

nia in the Chinese city of Wuhan, gave the name not only to the terrifying virus spreading throughout the world but also to various global transformations, including the language people use to speak about this top priority topic.

**Analysis of the previous research.** Neology has been in the focus of linguistic, sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, media linguistic and interdisciplinary research due to the significant developments in the field. A study into the innovations in the English language due to linguistic and sociolinguistic parameters was carried out by Yu.A. Zatsniy and A.V. Yankov in [Zatsniy, Yankov 2008, p. 5–68]. The authors a bilingual dictionary of English neologisms. It is also to be noted that lately there have already been cases showing that neological changes may be very fast. For instance, it concerned the process of Brexit. It generated global mass media coverage and created a huge and long-lasting hype, which, naturally, brought about new lexical items. However, even there, the rate of change was incomparable to the situation currently observed around the planet. With Brexit, the formation and development of the correspondent word and word family, the expansion of its combinability and distribution took several months initially and was, on the whole, in the scope of popular attention for about four years. Some research papers on the Brexit phenomenon included, in particular, «Metaphors of Brexit: No Cherries on the Cake?» by J. Charteris-Black [Charteris-Black 2019]. The study thoroughly discussed the issues concerning metaphorical naming of Brexit and processes related thereto. A number of dedicated glossaries were set up to clarify

the meaning of Brexit and related matters, e.g. on BBC in [Brexit: Jargon-busting guide 2019]. R. Cristine discussed the ongoing Brexit-induced changes in English in [Christine 2019]. L. Fontaine provided a diachronic study of the Brexit semantics [Fontaine 2017]. Another research into the neologisms that originated from Brexit was offered by G. Lalić-krstin and N. Silaški [Lalić-Krstin, Silaški, 2018]. The Brexit phenomenon, which travelled to the Russian language and assimilated there, was analyzed by T. Prystaiko. The researcher showed the Russian neologisms that rapidly emerged in the receiving language [Prystaiko 2019].

An infodemiological study into the problem was made in February 2020 under the development of projects «COVID-19 infodemic: Don't feed the trolls. Infodemiological framework for historical taxonomy and diachronic discourse of virus genera» [Zhiwen Hu et al. 2020].

Interestingly enough, not all the new coinages appear to be the results of this year pandemic. In fact, as early as on May 09, 2013, NYT published an article by D. Quammen, which was entitled «The Next Pandemic: Not if, but When» [Quammen 2013]. In that non-medical text, the author uses such word combination as *novel coronavirus*, which had been used by specialists and, in 2020, has become a household term. The article mentions that every pandemic starts *small* and «when the *Next Big One* arrives», it can initially go unnoticed. In this context, it is notable that the writer uses capital letters to common words to modify and emphasize the new meaning.

**Methods and Materials.** The empirical materials used in this research included television (mainly on BBC and CNN) as well as press coverage (oral and written texts) of the coronavirus related processes from January to early April 2020. The study involved the application of such methods as data collection, lexicological, media discourse, semantic and partly linguo-stylistic analysis.

**Results and Discussions.** Another important sign of the swift language changes during the coronavirus pandemic is the entry of new lexemes or new meanings in lexicographical sources and glossaries (faster than what once happened to *Brexit*). For example, Merriam Webster Dictionary published an unscheduled issue of entries related to the Covid-19 coronavirus [A Guide to Coronavirus-Related Words. 2020] with an explanatory note on its relevance [Coronavirus and the New Words 2020]. Educational resources seek to catch up with the situation and provide updates, too (e.g. English club [English Club 2020]). Media provide information coverage using such coronavirus-related headings as Daily coronavirus newsletter, updates etc. Neological units evolve swiftly in the media and are recorded in some dictionaries, e.g. in Urban dictionary, which is live and offers several dozens of lexical units related to the current virus outbreak. For example this dictionary offers the word *covidiot*, (a hybrid of *Covid-19* + *idiot*, recorded in the Urban Dictionary on 14.03.20 after having been coined in social media less than a month before, e.g. as «Covidiot-45», posted on Twitter in late February [Popik 2020]. Within a few days, the

new word received feedback from academic public, too [Petric 2020]. The interlinguistic spread is so quick that within several days this word and its semantics became the topic of Ukrainian radio and TV media news articles in the Ukrainian language: on the radio [Radio Maximum 2020], and on the national Ukrainian television channel [1+1 2020]. Some other newly coined items in the Urban Dictionary include *corona abhorism*, *coronababy boom*, *coronabesity*, *coronabate*, *coronabration*, *coronabroke*, *maskhole* etc. These virus-related lexical innovations feature an extraordinary pace, and only the usage will prove whether they are going to become a part of the core English vocabulary or turn out to be short-lived occasionalisms.

The name of the virus has gone through the evolutionary process to be given its generally accepted name of Covid-19 (or CoVID-19/COVID-19). The earliest versions included *Wohan virus*, *coronavirus*, and the Chinese virus. These were followed by the names suggested by researchers who were working on the infection identification and thus gradually specified its name. Respectively, the names that have been found in the English-speaking media resources include at least 21 units, namely, *Wuhan virus*, *Wuhan illness*, *Wuhan coronavirus*, *Wuhan seafood market pneumonia virus*, *Wuhan pneumonia*, *Coronavirus disease*, *2019-nCoV acute respiratory disease*, *China virus*, *Chinese virus*, *Chinese coronavirus*, *Coronavirus disease*, *Covid-19 (COVID-19)*, *Covid-19 virus*, *Corona Virus Disease 2019*, (disease causing virus) *SARS-CoV-2*, *Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2*, *2019-nCoV*, *2019 Novel coronavirus*, *Novel coronavirus pneumonia*, *Kung Flu* [NYT 2020], *coronavirus 2.0*. In the present-day circumstances of high information transparency, the name of the scientist who actually gave the name to the virus in question is known – it is Zheng-Li Shi of the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The lexemes *coronavirus* and *Covid* have already become themselves the center of newly-coined word families, which as of the time of writing this research included, but were not limited to *Covid* (as a proper name given to a newborn tiger in a Mexican zoo), *coronaviral*, *coronababy*, *covidiot*, *covidiocy*, *coronic* (a person positive for the virus), *virus* (initially clipped version of the *coronavirus*), *coronaphobia*, *coronapocalypse*, *corona burger*. The Urban dictionary, as mentioned before, also included such lexical items as *coronababy boom*, *coronabration*, *coronabroke*, *coronacation*, *covidivorce* etc. (all being included in February – early April 2020 [Urban Dictionary 2020]). The above lexical units clearly show the prevalence of compounding and blending as the most productive word-building processes. Apparently, it is the media infodemic that encourages such coinages. It is worth mentioning that such quality paper as New York Times says that “*The crisis has spawned a new lexicon, too*” [NYT 2020]. The paper continues “... we may see first *coronababies born*. In a little more than a decade, they'll be known as the *quaranteens*. Sadly, couples who can't cope with the pressure of isolation could end up in *covidivorce*” [NYT 2020]. Another new word created by a Financial Times reader using the telescoping process was includ-

ed into an article on vocabulary changes published by this periodical on 20.03.2020: “*Bob Greer, a Swamp Notes reader, wrote to us in late February suggesting the use of “coronageddon”* [Luce 2020]. This item was complemented by other nonce-words in English: “*Covid-10 — for the 10 pounds some of us are gaining. Another is “coronacession”. Let us hope it doesn’t turn into depressorona”* [ibid.]. The abovementioned article also included other items not yet entered into lexicographic sources, namely, “*WFH*” (*working from home*), “*WFO*” (*working from office*), “*contactless delivery*”, “*micro-socialising*”, “*cocooning*”, “*Wuhan*”, “*contact tracing*”, “*N95*”, “*quarantini*”, “*iatrogenic*”, “*caremongering*”, “*young vector*” and “*virtual happy hour*” (ibid.). Further, the author mentions the recent cases of denominalisation, e.g. “*Facebooking*”, “*WhatsApping*”, and “*Zooming*” [ibid.].

The use of the virus geographical origin in its naming has been perceived by many as the expression of racism that might cause xenophobia. The texts confirming this issue include: “*Senator Charles E. Grassley, Republican of Iowa said on Twitter: “I don’t understand why China gets upset because we refer to the virus that originated there the “Chinese virus” Spain never got upset when we referred to the Spanish flu in 1918/1919”* [NYT 2020]. Moreover, “*... President Xi Jinping of China in early January repeatedly referred to the coronavirus as the ‘Wuhan illness’”* [ibid.]. The same date the situation was discussed on television and elsewhere, e.g. “*Trump defends using “Chinese Virus” Label, ignoring growing criticism”/“Experts warned that the term could result in xenophobia”* [ibid.]. Notably, the Novel Coronavirus has been actively compared to the Spanish flu 1918-1919, or 1918 influenza, calamity and thus it requires an adequate coronavirus response.

Further, it is worth dwelling on the impact of the disease on various aspects of life, where dedicated discourses are in operation, and they had to respond to the challenge. Combinability of the nominative units, denoting the new disease, is of certain linguistic interest, too. In particular, the phenomenon itself has been called an *outbreak*, *coronavirus outbreak*, *community outbreak*, *(community) spread*, *epidemic*, *pandemic* and *infodemic* (as it clearly involves not only medical but also generally social, economic political and other contexts covered by media). The diachronic tracking shows the apparent rise of intensity, a sort of *intertextual stylistic climax* in the disease naming.

The infodemic has brought about varied fake news, easily spreading online and urgently requiring refutation (to this end, there are dedicated sections in periodicals and television programs, e. g. *Facts vs Fiction*, *facts and fears*, *hoax*, *myths and misinformation* etc.). As early as on March 23-24, 2020, there appeared news (in part, misinformation) about the death from a hantavirus, which was nicknamed after the notorious COVID-19 coronavirus: “*One person has reportedly died of a rodent-carried hantavirus infection in China, sparking wild — and completely unfounded — fears of a “coronavirus 2.0” pandemic on social media*” [Elliott 2020]. Nevertheless, people anxious about the novel coronavirus were quick to hit the panic button when they saw the

report of a hantavirus-related death in China.

Another active word-building process exploited in the media coverage is conversion (mainly verbs and nouns). These words denote the rise in the number of confirmed cases of the virus, e. g. *spike*, *jump*, *leap*, *drop*, *accelerate*, *soar*, *surge*, etc. The efforts taken to get the outbreak under control are aiming to *flatten the curve*, which is *exponential curve*, trying to *change its trajectory* [BBC 2020]. The cost of the disease and crisis is often called the toll – death or human toll (in different media).

The governmental measures taken with regard to the virus in different countries involve *lockdown*, *quarantine*, *restrictions* (including *nationwide movement restrictions*, *stringent containment restrictions*), *self-isolate/isolation*, *quarantine*, *self-quarantine*, *social distance/distancing*, *containment*, *coronavirus emergency*, *stay-at-home order/mandate*, *travel bans*, *band of (public) gatherings*, *curfew*, *no kisses*, *no handshakes*, *super spreader*, *contact tracing*, *community spread/spreading*, *patient zero*, *index case*, *distance learning* etc. Media text headings with these lexemes can be rather dramatic and appealing: “*... the country still looked almost certain to see an extension of stringent containment measures*” [New York Post 2020].

As a result, the pandemic socioeconomic effects are currently discussed using such lexical units as *disruptions*, *losses*, *coronavirus victims* etc. The overall economic situation worldwide has been experiencing unprecedented shocks, which have been colourfully described in English-speaking media, e.g. *(global) coronavirus crisis*, *(people, industries etc.) affected*, *lay-off fear*, *coronavirus depression*, *global supply chain disruption*, *medical supplies (med supplies) shortage (severe, widespread shortage of/dire need for medical supplies)*, *financial meltdown*, *global downturn*, *most critical looming challenge*, *ravage*, *unprecedented threat*, *hoarding*, *stock markets tumble/plummet/fall/ (experience) free fall*, *crash*, *recession*, *rally (on)*, *stimulus plan*, *mitigation program*, *Washington remained deadlocked/shore up economy/*, *coronavirus batters the economy*, *stimulus plan*, *emergency oil meeting*, *gig economy falters as virus spreads*, *COVID economy...*

Religious organizations are also involved in the virtual virus fight: “*Pope Francis prays for a coronavirus miracle at “plague” crucifix church*” [CNN 2020]. This non-evidence-based belief was expressed by President Trump on February 27<sup>th</sup>, when he said that “*It’s going to disappear. One day it’s like a miracle, it will disappear*” [Vazquez 2020]. Consequent changes in Trump’s behavior were appreciated by journalists: “*This version of D. Trump will save lives*” [CNN 2020]. Other emotional comparisons had been mentioned in headlines before the lockdowns were imposed by governments, as country leaders were reluctant to introduce severe restrictions, e.g. Boris Johnson’s initial attitude to the problem. Ironically, just a week or so later the Prime Minister himself tested positive to the virus. African leaders also called for an action and support, which was worded on CNN (on air on April 04, 2020) as “*The virus has pushed the continent to the brink*”.

During the period under analysis the situation was



frequently compared to the war and it was openly called so. For instance, media resources used such collocations as a *war zone*, *coronavirus ceasefire* [ReliefWeb 2020], *coronavirus front line*, *(virus) attack*, *escalation* and others. The fact that journalists resort to such words as an attack confirms the essential need of national political forces to find external enemies as objects to release the negative charge of emotions and energy. Media worldwide echoed leading politicians repeatedly calling the new health problem an *invisible enemy*. Medical staff are identified with an army fighting with that enemy: “*CNN goes inside Seattle hospital battling Covid-19*” [CNN 2020]. Some of the locations (especially newly created for the severe cases) were called *field hospitals*. The pandemic deadly consequences were widely named the *Coronavirus death (human) toll*. The USA passed the *Defense production act* (to fight coronavirus), which initially had been designed for war-related purposes. The UK had to resort to the steps, atypical of normal peaceful life style and pace, too: “*Health Secretary Matt Hancock told MPs the emergency legislation will allow “extraordinary measures” never seen in peace time in the UK*” [Kraemer 2020].

The lack of medical products was another topic raised in the media. It involved the metaphorical use of the economic, war and sport lexis “... *state-by-state bidding war for desperately needed supplies*” [BBC 2020], (heading) “*A mad scramble for masks, gowns and ventilators is pitting states against each other and driving up prices. ... The market for medical supplies has descended into chaos... They are begging the federal government to use a wartime law to bring order and ensure the United States has the gear it needs to battle the coronavirus*” [The Washington Post 2020].

It is notable that the key word *coronavirus* has gained a wide range of collocations that include it as an element. Some of them existed before, but have been activated recently, while the majority are new, nominative and featuring the N+N structure (though there are predicative combinations, too). The total number of such word combinations found as of the time of writing this paper was already over 50, including, but not limited to *coronavirus epidemic*, *coronavirus outbreak*, *coronavirus crisis*, *coronavirus pandemic*, *coronavirus disaster*, *coronavirus demand*, *coronavirus watch*

*newsletter*, *coronavirus hotspot*, *Coronavirus response*, *coronavirus scare*, *coronavirus vote (in the House)*, *coronavirus victim*, *coronavirus facts and fiction*, *coronavirus infodemic*, *coronavirus spread*, *coronavirus disease*, *coronavirus infection*, *coronavirus email*, *coronavirus depression*, *coronavirus case*, *coronavirus test*, *novel coronavirus*, *Chinese coronavirus*, *Wuhan coronavirus*, *coronavirus anthem*, *coronavirus song*, *coronavirus community outbreak*, *coronavirus emergency*, *coronavirus miracle*, *coronavirus nightmare*, *coronavirus death toll*, *coronavirus survivor*, *coronavirus protection*, *coronavirus slowdown*, *coronavirus efforts*, *coronavirus information*, *coronavirus vaccine*, *coronavirus drug*, *coronavirus myths to ignore*, *fake coronavirus stories*, *coronavirus lockdown*, *shutdown*, *economic impact of coronavirus*, *coronavirus fund*, *coronavirus deals*, *coronavirus deaths*, *coronavirus diagnostics*, *coronavirus problem*, *coronavirus misinformation*, *coronavirus reality*, *coronavirus epicenter*, *coronavirus information page*, *coronavirus measures*, *coronavirus concerns*, *Covid-19 crisis*, *Covid-19 drug*, *coronavirus boredom*, *coronavirus ‘despair’*, (Heidelberg’s) *corona taxis*. The above collocations can be illustrated by such contexts as: “*German state financial minister kills himself over coronavirus ‘despair’*” [Salo 2020] / “*Death rate soars in New Orleans coronavirus disaster*” [USA Today 2020] and others.

**Conclusion.** The study shows that the 2019–2020 coronavirus pandemic has significantly influenced the language situation, particularly, in the English language, thus featuring a new rate of flexibility and dynamics of the language vocabulary. The name of the virus and the virus-induced disease (Corona Virus Disease 2019, or Covid-19) have become household terms within a few months of their active use. The media texts analysis demonstrated that their vocabulary was used to impact the audience with either unbiased or misleading information. The virus spread scale also developed diachronically, from a local outbreak to pandemic and infodemic. The active usage of the above lexical units led to forming their respective word families and collocations. It should be noted that this research cannot be considered holistic since the novel coronavirus pandemic is still ongoing and thus vocabulary changes continue, which will require further consideration and analysis.

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### ВИДОЗМІНИ Й РОЗВИТОК СЛОВНИКОВОГО ЗАПАСУ, ЩО СПРИЧИНИЛА ПАНДЕМІЯ COVID-19

**Анотація.** Спалах коронавірусу та його пандемія докорінно змінили практично усі аспекти життєдіяльності по всьому світі, й, зокрема, мовну ситуацію, що демонструє, як на своєму сучасному етапі розвитку мовні системи, у тому числі їхні словники, набули більшої динамічності, ніж це було колись. Це особливо актуально для англійської мови, оскільки її використовують у світі як засіб міжнародного спілкування. Віртуальний глобальний гіпертекст, який є сукупністю всіх текстів, що існують, сьогодні перевантажений активною наявною та новою лексикою, пов'язаною з вірусом. Річ у тім, що навіть словник, який існує в мові, часто застосовують для того, щоб, користуючись лексичними засобами, ввести свою аудиторію в оману. Тому важливо й актуально провести дослідження швидких лексичних і семантичних змін, що відбуваються останнім часом у тому, що стосується опису явища нового коронавірусу. Емпіричним матеріалом роботи стали англійські медійні тексти, датовані початком 2020 року. Виявилось, що найменування нового вірусу було еволюційним процесом, який містив низку попередніх версій, що в підсумку привели до появи офіційного загальноновизнаного найменування Corona Virus Disease 2019 (коронавірусна хвороба 2019), або його скороченої, але загальноприйнятої та економної назви Covid-19/COVID-19 (Ковід-19). Загалом, у дослідженні було виявлено 21 варіант найменування феномену, що розглядається. Вплив поширення вірусу та його найменування також пройшли в діахронії шлях розвитку від локального спалаху до епідемії, пандемії і навіть інфодемії. Протягом короткого періоду функціонування в мові слова *коронавірус* і хвороба, яку він викликає, вже утворили свої словотвірні гнізда, зокрема численні okazionalizmi, що, найімовірніше, мають коротке життя в мові. Більше того, з'явилися різні словосполучення, що містять найменування коронавірусу як структурний елемент, а також інші лексичні одиниці, пов'язані з новою глобальною життєвою ситуацією в світі. Варто зауважити, що проведені дослідження не можна вважати комплексним і всеосяжним, оскільки пандемія нового коронавірусу все ще триває, а тому словник змінюється. Цей матеріал потребує дальшого аналітичного розгляду й узагальнення.

**Ключові слова:** коронавірус, найменування, видозміни словникового запасу, медіа, процес словотворення.

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