English-based coroneologisms

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A short survey of our Covid-19-related vocabulary

In a 2016 article published in this journal (Roig–Marín, 2016), I argued that the coinage of cyberblends reflects our blended digital/physical relationships in today's world. The current pandemic has put a halt to our everyday lives and all forms of physical contact, and so technologies and digital experiences now play a more conspicuous role than ever. We have gone online and got used to vocabulary whose usage prior to COVID-19 was very limited (e.g. *quarantine* and *pandemic*) or known to very few (*coronavirus, super-spreader*, or the abbreviations *PPE* 'personal protective equipment' or *WFH* 'working from home'), while coming to terms with the implications of others such as *self-isolation*, *lockdown*, or *social distancing* (which should be better called *physical distancing* as social closeness, albeit non-physically, is very much needed to get through these difficult times). Short pieces on *coroneologisms* have attested to the rise of many new lexical formations, mostly blends.[1] According to Thorne (2020; also cited in *CBC*, 2020), more than 1,000 new words – both non-specialised and technical terminology – have been created during the current pandemic. Journalists and Twitter users are particularly prone to coin words displaying a high level of linguistic ingenuity; yet, the circulation of that lexis may be very limited. The present note overviews some of the most widely spread vocabulary related to our new COVID-19 reality, coming from the laity rather than from medical or scientific professionals. Alongside terms like *social distancing* and *lockdown*, less technical and more playful vocabulary has transcended linguistic boundaries. Particular attention will be paid to examples from European languages whose wordstocks share a common Latinate substratum, likewise central to scientific communication.

Unsurprisingly, the clipped word *corona*, from the compound *coronavirus*, and to a lesser extent, the acronym *covid* (written both in capital letters and in lower case) feature prominently not only in English but also in many other languages. *Covid* has been borrowed as an Anglicism and users of languages with grammatical gender like French, Catalan, Spanish, and Italian have tended to prefer the masculine gender because of its associations with (*corona)virus*, masculine in those languages. Nevertheless, French and Spanish prescriptivists, among others, have pointed out that because it stands for *coronavirus disease*[2], it should be feminine following the gender of the head of the phrase (i.e. *disease*).[3] *Covid*-derived Anglicisms including *covidiot* ('a person who ignores public health advice, thereby putting others at risk') and *covidivorces* ('divorces during quarantine') are widely attested cross-linguistically. Some records of their usage include the French headline 'Les «covidiots», une triste épidémie de bêtise et de bassesses' (*Ouest*, 2020) or the headline 'Historias del 'covidivorcio'' from a Spanish newspaper (*El país*, 2020), the latter showing the second element in its Spanish rendering, *divorcio* (creating what is known as a 'loanblend' [Haugen, 1950]), a



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strategy which seems to be very productive in Spanish coroneologisms (see also, e.g., *covidiotas* [*covid* + Sp. *idiotas* 'idiots'] and *Zoompleaños* [*Zoom* + Sp. *cumpleaños* 'birthday']).[4] In the case of other forms containing *corona* such as *corona-coma* and *anticoronavirus*, the question of whether the new forms in languages other than English have been calqued on English or are endogenous (i.e. language-internal) developments can be more complex because their components (e.g. *coma, anti-*, and *corona*) were already attested in all those languages. Unlike *covid,* a newly integrated Anglicism, *corona* is found in Latin and Romance languages with the primary meaning of 'crown', until its clipping (< *coronavirus*) became popular across nations and *corona* was subsequently associated with the disease. Therefore, distinct languages could have created the same words independently.[5] In addition, if the other element of the compound is a well established borrowing itself from English as German *Babys* (dated to the second half of the 19th century) or *boom* (here implicitly associated with *baby boom*) in *Corona-Babys* and *coronaboom*, respectively, its adaptation from English models (*coronababies* and *coronaboom*) can be questioned.[6] The dates of attestations of these neologisms in the different languages, however, seem to support the first possibility, that is, that they are calques on English models since they are attested later in other languages than in English. The unmediated English origin of direct, unadapted, borrowings like *coronials*, playing with *corona* + *millennials*, poses little doubt. Similarly, there are some words that look like English but do not exist in that language, known as 'false Anglicisms' or 'Pseudo-English' (see, e.g., Furiassi, 2003; Furiassi & Gottlieb, 2015), such as *quarenteners*, broadly meaning 'someone quarantining' in languages like Portuguese or Spanish.

All these neologisms can be broadly categorised according to their components: under the aforementioned *covid* are also *covidials* 'babies born in an expected baby boom in late 2020' and *covideoparty* 'a video party during lockdown' and under *corona, coronials* (same meaning as *covidials*), *coronacation*, used ironically to refer to the forced 'holidays' during quarantine, *corona trolls*, and *morona* or *moronavirus* (*moron* + *corona/coronavirus*), synonyms for *covidiots*; to that list of recurrent stems we can also add *quarantine* (e.g. *quaranteens* 'teenagers who have experienced the coronavirus pandemic'), *quarintini* 'a cocktail during lockdown (based on the word *martini*)', *quarantipple* 'a drink taken while in quarantine' and *Zoom* (*zoombombing*, 'hijacking a Zoom meeting'; *zumping* 'breaking up on Zoom'), as well as other individual creations related to drinks like *locktail* (*lockdown* + *cocktail*). Not all of the listed forms have been borrowed into other languages (at least yet), but their presence seems to be expanding. That is the case for all the recent names for breaking up on different platforms (see, apart from *zumping*, *FaceTumping* [*FaceTime* + *dumping*] and *Skumping* [*Skype* + *dumping*])[7], which have been the subject of articles in several languages, including French (see 'confinement et rupture amoureuse: la tendance est au "Zumping"' [*Doctissimo*, 2020]).

Besides the patent productivity of blending, compounding (e.g. in *coronababies*), a crucial device throughout the history of English – especially in Old English – still proves to be popular in the coinage of new concepts. All of these new lexical items play with existing words, their sounds, and resonance, and they highlight the profound interrelation between language and society. The power of words in encapsulating the ethos of the current situation, without conveying its tragedy but a more cheerful spirit, is here demonstrated. These terms may fall out of use in the future even if some are already in online dictionaries (see *Macmillan Dictionary*, s.v. *drivecation* 'time spent in your caravan or camper van parked at home during lockdown'), but at the moment they serve their purpose, contributing to putting names to new realities and psychologically processing and enduring these unprecedented times globally.

Notes

1 See *Dictionary.com* (2020), *Economic Times* (2020a, 2020b), Lawson (2020) and Mahdawi (2020) articles, among others.

2 This acronym has been source of misunderstanding among some non-English speakers, the most notorious incident being the misinterpretation of *COVID-19* as referring to *Coronavirus December 19* in a public statement made by Isabel Díaz Ayuso, President of the Community of Madrid, Spain.

3 On gender variation in Anglicisms, see Rodríguez González's (2019) thorough overview and the references therein.

4 These kinds of blends, involving overlap of material from both English and Spanish, are also attested in Spanish marketing campaigns (Roig–Marín, 2017). On the history of blending as a word-formation mechanism in Spanish, see Rodríguez González (1989).

5 Apart from borrowings, each language has developed its own vocabulary (see, e.g., Ortega [2020] on Catalan, Pons Rodríguez [2020] on Spanish, and *Il Piacenza* [2020] on Italian).

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6 In the case of Spanish *bebé* (in *coronabebés*), it comes from French *bébé*, so it does not derive from English. The French word *baby* (1704 in the sense of 'small child') is often considered a borrowing from English, but according to the OED (2011, s.v. *baby*, n. and adj.), it might also be a parallel native development through the reduplication of the syllable /be/, associated with early child vocalisation (cf. *bébé* [c. 1766 as a 'term of endearment' and 1858 in the sense of 'small child']).

7 See, e.g., *The Guardian (2020)* on this rising phenomenon.

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