

**LEXICON DYNAMICS IN THE PANDEMIC ERA /  
DYNAMIQUE DU LEXIQUE À L'ÈRE DE LA PANDÉMIE<sup>1</sup>  
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**Abstract:** *Language is a living organism in continual change. Lexical innovations are part of the development of any society and their role is to either depict a reality in its very essence or to create a powerful stylistic effect on the readers. Irrespective of their stability or transiency in the language, these terms give zest and grandeur to any historical age.*

**Key words:** *pandemic, metaphor, innovation*

**Résumé:** *La langue est un organisme vivant en perpétuel changement. Les innovations lexicales font partie du développement de toute société et leur rôle est soit de dépeindre une réalité dans son essence même, soit de créer un puissant effet stylistique sur les lecteurs. Qu'ils soient stables ou transitoire dans la langue, ces termes apportent du piquant et de la grandeur à toute époque historique.*

**Mots clés:** *pandémie, métaphore, innovation, dynamique du langage*

### **Introduction**

At the very core of each society lies the idea that education is the engine which helps people to shape their personality or character and to acquire knowledge and information with a view to developing various skills and competences. Due to numerous changes occurring worldwide, the educational paradigm has undergone a series of challenges lately, while the actors of education have inevitably become subject to these changes.

These adjustments and innovation stages comprise the era of technology, artificial intelligence, blended learning which students had to adapt to along the way. Learning is no longer a two-dimension process but a dynamic space through which the learner moves. It is an interaction with a huge number of psychological and sociological parameters which gained recognition in applied linguistics through the work of Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008), Ellis and Larsen-Freeman (2009), Van Geert (2008) and many others.

Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008:135) stated that "learning is not the taking in of linguistic forms by learners but the constant adaptation of their linguistic resources in the service of meaning-making in response to the affordances that emerge in the communicative situation, which is in turn affected by the learners' adaptability". Therefore, adaptability to communication environments seems to contribute to shaping learners' attitudes towards learning. Despite the profound changes occurring in society, the structure of school subjects (natural sciences, modern languages, arts and humanities etc.) cannot be mechanically changed because they are deeply rooted into history and they themselves should have the capacity to develop mind and an intrinsic critical and analytical way of thinking.

The educational format undergoes form changes because the content of the educational principles remain partly unaltered. Even if connectivity through technology has changed forever the way in which we communicate with one another, heralding an age in which space and time no longer count on a large scale, it does not necessarily enrich understanding. Educating under the delusion that progress and evolution are

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equal to access to state-of-the-art devices is only detrimental to the purpose of education itself.

Only by making meaning and making sense of the world around can we turn history, language or literature into fertile sources of absorption and valid interpretation of similarities and contrasts. As social circumstances have proved so far, it is not only technology and its advances which are the main factors that revolutionized our lives.

### **Educational paradigm in the current pandemic**

The educational paradigm itself has changed from a purely cognitive direction through which learners grasp information and materialize it in various context to a more extended dimension comprising the acquisition and development of multiple types of intelligence with the most relevant emphasis on emotional intelligence, social skills, working adjustment abilities etc. What seemed to be a more opaque learning system has now become a broader horizon of interaction, cooperation and openness to novelty.

On the other hand, certain social events may also contribute to altering our way of learning and interacting with the others. A normal educational framework including face-to-face interaction may suddenly be replaced by a new format mostly based on online activities. School becomes a remote place and its actors interfere only in online environments. Covid-19 pandemic that the modern world is facing nowadays stands for another important dimension of change. Proliferation of this so-called non-conventional war has affected all levels of life: medical, social, educational, economic, legal with long-term consequences. School has not been exempted from the widely spread virus despite the specialists' bold attempts to handle the situation so as the situation may not get out of control.

The transition to online instruction has not been easy either due to the quick rhythm in which people had to act and to adapt to the new situation. Schools through their instructors had to redesign the educational system so as to meet students' needs. However, the newly implemented changes have not had the expected yield among all learners. Poor-internet connection, lack of face-to-face interaction, difficulty in grasping information and serious psychological impact have all contributed to a less responsive attitude and an alarming increase in drop out. Belonging to various backgrounds, social distancing, lack of access to performant devices as well as lack of interest in education have brought about disparities in learning.

Students as beneficiaries of education have encountered numerous challenges starting from information acquisition and ending with evaluation parameters. Teachers, on the other hand, have tried hard to serve their students fairly even if this involved a continuous adaptation to online applications, virtual interference and the burden to reinvent themselves in order to be up to students's expectations.

### **Evolution of vocabulary and the use of specialized terms**

As regards the dynamics of language, a clear understanding of terminology is essential both for specialists and laymen. A series of words and structures have been found relevant to be introduced into everyday vocabulary. For example, *epidemic* / *pandemic* pair is open to intense debate considering specialists' disagreement related to its right use. They acknowledge that *pandemic* from Greek *pan* (all) and *demos* (people) should be properly used to define "a disease that affects people over a very large area of the whole world" (Idoconline.com).

*Epidemic* derived from Greek *epi* (upon, above) and *demos* (people) is used to describe "a disease always present in a particular place or among a particular group of people" (Idoconline.com). The current COVID-19 virus has become pandemic due to

its large and quick spread all over the world. However, occasional misuse of terms has thrown people into total confusion considering that *pandemic* is more impactful and unpredictable in the long run.

Remarkably, vocabulary has enriched its inventory with terms which otherwise weren't made use of so frequently, except for some specialized fields. Almost subconsciously people have inserted pandemic-related terms into their common lexicon in an attempt to better understand the epidemiological phenomenon and its occurrence. A flurry of new words and phrases comprising scientific jargon or newly coined terms are now commonplace. Here is a list of frequently used terms and their connotations as reflected in relevant examples from the language of the written press.

One of the most repetitive words is *quarantine* or *isolation*. According to Cambridge Dictionary, *quarantine* is defined as "a period of time during which an animal or person that might have a disease is kept away from other people or animals so that the disease cannot spread". The word etymology is worth mentioning. The Universal Dictionary of the Romanian Language registers the word as borrowed from the Russian *karantin* or the French *quarantaine*. It was largely used in law and administrative texts of the 19th century. However, the Italian word *quaranta* has a specific etymological characteristic. Initially, the word referred to an isolation period of forty days, although in recent times, the number does no longer have the same significance and applies to a smaller number of days (fourteen).

At the same time, *quarantine* (forty) also made biblical reference to the number of days Jesus spent alone in the desert or the number of years during which Moses and the Hebrews wandered through Sinai Desert. As mentioned before, today's quarantine has been reduced to fourteen days as the following examples show: *Travellers returning to the UK from Spain now have to quarantine for 14 days* (bbc.com, July 28, 2020), *Coronavirus: what are the UK travel quarantine rules?* (bbc.com, July 28, 2020).

As regards its morphological class, the word is mostly used as a noun, although current tendency is to make it a verb or an adjective. For example, there is no Romanian verb *a carantina* in the dictionary but it has become fashionable and usable especially among medical stuff. The action should be replaced by verbal phrases such as: *a plasa in carantina* or *a pune in carantina*: *La trei cazuri la mia de locuitori se carantinez zona/localitatea*. (romania.europalibera.org, July 20, 2020)

Formed from the constituent parts of a phrasal verb *lockdown* has been turned into a noun and has been in use from the 19th century. It is used on a large scale during COVID-19 period and refers to "a situation in which people are not allowed to enter or leave an area freely because of an emergency" (dictionarycambridge.org). Its equivalent *confinement* does not differ substantially, but adds some further information of "keeping somebody usually by force".

Either form bears a strong psychological significance and is perceived as a feeling of loneliness which finally affects a person's mental health: *Lockdown loneliness is going to have a worse long-term impact on teenagers' mental health* (euronews.com, June 6, 2020); *The economists analyzing the impact of lockdown on Europe's markets* (ec.europa.eu, May 19, 2020); *Barcelona rules out lockdown as COVID-19 cases spike* (aa.com.tr, July 15, 2020).

*Social distancing* also called *physical distancing* is another widely used term which refers to "the practice of keeping away from other people as much as possible, in order to stop a disease from spreading". Although recently introduced, the term dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. and makes reference to the practice in the Book of Leviticus 13:46 - "As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp".

Unlike *lockdown* whose connotation is much more restrictive and affecting, *social /physical distancing*, although difficult to impose according to strict parameters

or viewed as impractical, seems more flexible and determined by subjective factors: *The untold story of the birth of social distancing* (nytimes.com, April 22, 2020); *Social distancing and masks reduce risk of getting COVID-19, review finds* (edition.cnn.com, June 1<sup>st</sup> 2020); *Staff working for the range store chain said they are terrified of catching coronavirus because customers are not adhering to social distancing* (bbc.com, April 29, 2020).

*Herd immunity* also has historical roots occurring as a medical phenomenon in the 1930s when a large number of children became immune to measles. The significance of the phrase is related to somebody's inability to get a disease. Although highly contested among specialists, due to its unlikelihood to work properly over a high range of population, the term has become part of everyday's vocabulary since the spread of COVID-19. Irrespective of the question it raises about public or ethical values, the term is deeply rooted into the idea of protecting society itself: *The Health Secretary, Matt Hancock has insisted that herd immunity...was never "a part of the plan" in the battle against COVID-19* (theguardian.com, April 29, 2020); *We are wasting time talking about herd immunity* (edition.cnn.com, July 13, 2020)

Another series of terms include medical terminology, which is closely related to the virus itself: *infectious disease, spread, latent period, outbreak, disinfection, hygiene* etc. Most of them are already part of the medical terminology being used to explain various medical conditions, others such as *comorbid, case fatality rate, patient zero, (a)symptomatic, contact tracing* etc., have been simply introduced into the medical jargon to exemplify a momentary situation. Their frequency into the language shows that specific categories use them either to differentiate from the others or to simplify their communication.

Economic or mathematical terms add up to the global picture and have the role to explain the consequences of the virus on our social and economic life. Such terms as: *escalation, recession, scenario, trend, curve, peak* etc., have sprung up and they all depict the whole phenomenon we are currently dealing with: *Models of coronavirus underestimate the pandemic's peak and overestimate its duration* (medicalxpress.com, April 7, 2020); *Coronavirus plunges eurozone economy into historic recession* (ft.com, July 31, 2020). These terms are generally transient in language because they only belong to a newly created social circumstance. They do not represent a permanent entry into the dictionary and their easiness of penetrating the language is the same with the ephemeral nature of their usage in a given situation.

Any pandemic is more or less perceived as a psychological phenomenon, therefore the psychological-related terms could not miss from the language of COVID-19. They include words such as: *virus fear, vulnerable, death toll, social disruption, unrest* etc: *Moments of social disruption are a vulnerable reminder that so much of what...isn't necessarily normal at all* (theconversation.com, April 26, 2020); *COVID-19 lockdowns could lead to social unrest, according to new research* (phys.org, July 6, 2020).

Apart from the medical consequences, the virus has had a strong emotional impact on all social categories. Most of the terms have negative connotations because it has been scientifically proved that language intensity and negativity are stronger on the news reader than the positive ones and people respond more quickly to words related to fear or danger. In cognitive psychology, the phenomenon is called *negativity bias* (Jing-Schmidt, 2007). Language intensity is based on the use of intensifiers whose role is to change the stylistic strength: *extremely, seriously, terribly, dreadfully, highly* etc. *People at high risk (clinically extremely vulnerable)* – nhs.uk, July 2020), *COVID-19 significantly impacts health services for non-communicable diseases* (who.int, July 2020); *This is a dreadfully serious disease, Dr. Principe says* (wmbfnews.com, July 20, 2020).

### Use of metaphors

The language of pandemic also abounds in metaphors which are essential for the development of cognition and culture. Since the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic, metaphors have been widely used as a tool for spreading information about the virus and its consequences. Their main role is to express complex and abstract experiences in more familiar, simpler and accessible terms. The virus has been referred to as: *the invisible enemy, a tsunami on health services, a ravaging fire, a powerful storm* etc. On the other hand, doctors were described as *front-line workers, the guardian angels of ICU, angels in white gowns* etc. Other metaphors include: *powder keg, the domino effect, spike protein as weapon, flattening the curve, to be at war with the virus* etc.

Use of metaphors is not random. Sometimes they become controversial and highlight more powerful effects in order to impress the reader. Despite being criticized as inappropriate for the ampleness of the phenomenon, they serve their rhetorical purpose since in larger contexts they become vivid and rich sources of imagination.

Even if their existence is short-lived, they are worth mentioning and exploring in language. Most of the times, metaphors go beyond linguistic and cultural boundaries and have a strong communicative function in natural language. *COVID-19 – turning Asia into "powder keg" of unrest* (fdiintelligence.com, May 27th, 2020); *This isn't a COVID-19 wave – it's a tsunami* (theverge.com, July 2nd, 2020); *We are at war with coronavirus. Everyone will have to muck in* (the guardian.com, March 2020), *The novel coronavirus is a public health crisis of cataclysmic proportions* (hms.harvard.edu, March 31st, 2020)

Pandemic lexicon has also been enriched with terms whose semantic meaning has been extended beyond the context. *A conspiracy theory* has transcended the simple belief that a situation is the result of a secret plan made by powerful people. COVID-19 phenomenon stresses the idea that the virus itself does not exist at all, instead it is only part of a global conspiracy. *Unregulated social media platforms...may present a health risk to the UK because they are spreading conspiracy theories about coronavirus* (bbc.com, June 18th, 2020)

The literal meaning of *cocoon* as "a silk cover that young moths and other insects make to protect themselves while they are growing" (ldoceonline.com) has acquired a metaphorical meaning of protecting somebody from an unpleasant situation. *...friends and neighbours can support a person cocooning once everyone has adhered to the above guidelines* (thejournal.ie, March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020)

Someone disregarding public health advice has been qualified as *covidiot* (a blend of *covid* and *idiot*) a lexical innovation which probably stands little chance of becoming a dictionary entry. *Comorbidity* is strictly related to the medical field and refers to the presence of one or more diseases at the same time in an individual. Despite its specialized use, scientists sometimes extend its meaning to the economic field in the sense of a serious situation which may affect large social categories. *COVID-19 cases have clustered around poorer...so much that some referred to inequality as a comorbidity* (theglobalamericans.org, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

The more conventional term *work* does no longer pertain to the normal labor register since it has been replaced by other modern words such as: *telework* (to work at home, while communicating with your office by phone or email or using the Internet – dictionary.cambridge.org), *distance work* or *remote work*. People's openness to this type of work remains an issue of personal choice. *Trade unionists feared that telework was just another ploy by employers to cut wage bills and erode workers' rights* (theguardian.com, April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

### **Conclusions**

Language as a living organism is continually changing and developing. Each society marked by historical events such as political elections, natural disasters, wars, pandemics etc., will spread new lexical structures whose main role is to emphasize the significance of the respective event or to produce a powerful psychological effect. Whether terms are newly coined by linguists or ordinary people or borrowed without appropriate equivalents, they all contribute to enriching and modernizing the vocabulary of any language. However, any term which belongs to a temporary reality loses its stylistic strength at the same time with the transience of the event.

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