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From *Covid-free* to *Coronapocalypse*

Trendy Neologisms and Nonce Words of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Abstract

This study explores a dataset of Covid-related terms drawn from the Coronavirus Corpus (2020) in order to examine the impact of the crisis on language development in terms of novel words employed in popularisation discourse, namely online newspapers and magazines. The primary goals of the study are (1) to establish the stability, recognition and reusability of Covid-19 novel words (i.e. whether they are proper neologisms or nonce words), and (2) to investigate their main functions and effects. Results from a discourse-based analysis show that, on the one hand, new compounds (e.g. Covid-free*) and regularly derived words (e.g.* post-Covid*) are used to disseminate information about the Covid-19 crisis to laymen and non-specialists. On the other hand, novel blends and similar creative words (e.g.* coronapocalypse *from 'coronavirus' and 'apocalypse') often have the function of breaking the tensions created by a difficult, even catastrophic scenario, but may also be used in the context of hate speech, to criticise or attack others, such as people ignoring stay-at-home orders and public health measures.*

Keywords: *neologisms, nonce words, Covid-19 discourse, hate speech, corpus analysis*

1. Introduction

Language changes in many different ways, adapting to new realities and circumstances. The new reality of the Covid-19 pandemic is no exception. Covid-19 discourse is generally characterized by a state of anxiety, scaremongering, and fear, which can be expressed by the use of metaphors (Mattiello 2022; Semino 2021). Besides conventionalized war and military metaphors, the pandemic was compared in the mass media to a natural disaster, such as a flood, earthquake, or tsunami, for its power to cause great harm, damage, suffering, and ultimately death. As Semino (2021, 50) observed, "[t]he virus has been described, for example, as an 'enemy' to be 'beaten,' a 'tsunami' on health services and even as 'glitter' that 'gets everywhere.'" All of these are instances of semantic innovation, as they extend the meaning of existing words, such as *enemy* or *tsunami*, to refer to unusual concepts, such as an epidemic.

However, this global outbreak also affected the English language to a great extent in terms of new lexemes, both neologisms and nonce words. According to Thorne (2020), more than 1,000 new words were created during the pandemic, most of which are new blends, such as *coronapocalypse* (from 'coronavirus' and 'apocalypse'), but also novel regular compounds (*Covid-free*), derived words (*post-Covid*), and combining-form combinations (*Covidonomics*). Neologisms such as *Covid-free* are commonly coined to fill a terminological or conceptual gap, whereas nonce words such as *coronapocalypse* may have a more temporary function, ranging from playfulness and jocularity to the intention to catch the readers' attention.

This study explores language change in the Covid-19 era, with a focus on the trendy neologisms and nonce words of the pandemic. By exploring a dataset of 92 Covid-related lexical words/phrases drawn from the *Coronavirus Corpus* (2020),[1] this paper examines the impact of the crisis on language development in terms of novel words employed in online newspapers and magazines and potentially entering the English vocabulary. The primary aims of the study are, first, to discriminate between neologisms and nonce words in terms of frequency in a topic-specific corpus, and second, to investigate the main functions and effects associated with these new words in the language of the news.

The following research questions will be addressed in the study:

- How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected English vocabulary in terms of new lexemes?
- Which new words have a chance of becoming a permanent part of the English lexicon? Which of them are destined to remain nonce words?
- What do their frequencies in a topic-specific corpus reveal about the impact of the pandemic on communication?
- What are the main functions that new words serve and the effects that they produce?

The language used by reporters to describe the difficult and even catastrophic scenario of the Covid-19 pandemic will be investigated both quantitatively and qualitatively in order to shed some light on the way vocabulary develops to meet the needs of a speech community wishing to be informed about the health emergency and its consequences.

[1] The *Coronavirus Corpus* (2020) was about 1,551 million words in size in November 2022, when the research was carried out, and includes Covid-related articles drawn from online newspapers and magazines in 20 different English-speaking countries. The corpus is related to many other corpora of English created by Mark Davies. These corpora were formerly known as the 'Brigham Young University (BYU) Corpora' and are currently accessible at https://www.english-corpora.org/.

The study is organized into four main sections. After this introductory section, Section 2 offers an overview of language change and its theoretical background, with special focus on the morphological and semantic processes used to coin or obtain new Covid-related words. In this section, a terminological distinction between neologism and nonce word will be also made. Section 3 briefly illustrates the methodology used for data selection and analysis. Section 4 presents the quantitative results of a corpus-based analysis dividing new words into high-, medium- and low-frequency. From the qualitative viewpoint, it deals with the functions served by Covid terms and the effects that they may produce on newspaper readers. The last Section draws some conclusions on the impact of new words on the English lexicon and communication at large.

2. Theoretical background on language change

The various processes and mechanisms of language change, including lexicalization, grammaticalization, and lexical or semantic change, have been investigated and conceptualized in a variety of ways (Bybee 2015; Traugott and Trousdale 2010; Brinton and Traugott 2005; Labov 1994; Hopper and Traugott 1993 inter alia).

In a chapter devoted to lexical change, Bybee (2015, 188-208) claims that new words come either from internal resources, such as compounding and derivation, or from external resources, such as borrowing words from other languages (see "lexicalization" in Brinton and Traugott 2005). Another manifestation of lexical change is in lexical semantic change, that is, how words are perceived as being new when their meaning changes (e.g., through metaphorization). Illness, including deadly diseases such as cancer, is the kind of sensitive experience that tends to be talked about and conceptualized through metaphor (Semino et al. 2018; Demjén and Semino 2017).

Crucially, metaphors are not neutral ways of communicating, as each source domain chosen to represent reality highlights some aspects of the target and backgrounds others, facilitating different evaluations and inferences (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Hence, as recently observed by Semino (2021):

> It is […] not surprising that a new virus, causing illness and death throughout the world, and requiring urgent and radical responses from governments and citizens, would often be talked about through metaphors. (Semino 2021, 51)

However, the new Covid-19 virus has also led to lexical expansion by means of new words or novel meanings, which are the object of analysis of neology.

In recent times, Arndt-Lappe et al. (2018, 2-10) have argued that lexical expansion is at the crossroads of three main aspects: (1) lexical innovation and institutionalization, (2) productivity and its interplay with speaker creativity, and (3) the role of ludicity in lexical innovation. Neology studies new words and their recognition by a speech community: when a new word is recognized by a speech community and enters the lexicon it becomes institutionalized. The origin of the new word can be by productive rules, such as regular word-formation rules, or by creative mechanisms, such as blending (Mattiello 2013). The words obtained by blending have often a ludic character and may result from analogy, i.e. resemblance to existing words, series, or word families (Mattiello 2017).

Moreover, as far as new words are concerned, a terminological distinction seems to be in order. According to Algeo (1991, 2-3), a new word is "a form or the use of a form not recorded in general dictionaries"; hence, it is a more general concept than a nonce word "coined for a particular use and unlikely to become a permanent part of the vocabulary" (Bauer 1983, 45). Chanpira (1966) also introduces the term "occasionalism" for a word created by a literary writer for a specific occasion, with a particular poetic aim in view, and which has little chance of being re-used or of turning into a neologism.

The recent model for neology discussed in Mattiello (2022, 38) includes both neologisms and nonce words within lexical innovation. The former are new words which are recorded in dictionaries, attested and recognized as new by a speech community. An instance of neologism is *Covid-19*, purposely coined to refer to 'an acute disease in humans caused by a coronavirus' (OED) (also found in its abbreviated form as compound modifier, e.g., in *Covid case*, *Covid crisis*).[2] By contrast, nonce words are destined to disappear over time and their use is only temporary, like *Wu flu* (from *Wu*[han] [in]*flu*[enza]), whose use is not recorded in dictionaries, but only in the news. In their turn, neologisms and nonce words have to be kept distinct from neosemanticisms, which are already existing words in the lexicon, but used in a different sense. An instance of neosemanticism is *lockdown*, which before the pandemic (1973) was used for 'the confinement of prisoners to their cells' (OED), but since 2020 has extended its meaning to 'the imposition of an isolation state as a public health measure against coronavirus.' While neosemanticisms are out of the interests of this study, the focus will be on the neologisms and nonce words produced by the Covid-19 pandemic.

[2] All definitions of new Covid-related words provided in the paper are taken from the OED (https://www.oed.com/, last visited October 2022), unless otherwise specified.

2.1 The morphological and semantic processes of language change

The main processes involved in language change are either morphological or semantic. From the morphological viewpoint, regular word-formation phenomena used to coin new words mainly include compounding (23.6% of cases),[3] as in the formation of *Covid-free*, i.e., free of Covid-19:

(1) The Italian island of Capri plans to gradually re-open to tourists as it has nearly finished its vaccination drive against the coronavirus and will soon be '**Covid-free**'. (*The Independent*, 12/05/21)

Derivation occurs in 14% of cases, a frequent prefix being *anti-*, as in *anti-lockdown*, *anti-vaccine* (also *anti-vax*), and *anti-mask*:

(2) **Anti-lockdown**, **anti-vaccine** and **anti-mask** protesters crowd London's Trafalgar Square. (*The Independent*, 29/08/20)

Whereas conversion is less frequently used for new words (2.1%), an instance being the shift from the noun *self-quarantine* 'self-isolation' to the verb *to self-quarantine* 'to isolate oneself in order to avoid transmitting an infectious disease':

(3) Schoolchildren told **to self-quarantine** for 14 days as precaution. (*The Guardian*, 25/02/20)

Extra-grammatical formations are very common, especially blends (24.7%), such as *covidiot* (← *covid* + *idiot*) 'someone who ignores the warnings regarding public health or safety' (*Urban Dictionary*, henceforth, UD) used in:

(4) Trump dubbed '***Covidiot*** in chief' after telling Americans not to be afraid of coronavirus. (*The Independent*, 06/10/20)

and clippings (10.7%), such as *Rona* (← (Co)*rona*(virus)), illustrated in:

[3] The dataset to which the percentages refer consists of 92 Covid terms collected by the author from various sources, including the OED, the UD, and various collections and glossaries listed in Section 3. The contextualized examples reported in Section 2.1 are drawn from two online newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. See Section 3 for the complete list of the dataset sources and the methods.

(5) Under the tagline "Spread love, not ***Rona***," restaurants that are part of the local Gates Hospitality Group are offering a 10 per cent discount for residents who have the first dose. (*The Independent*, 27/01/21)

The formation of verb or noun phrases only amounts to 3.2%, two instances being *test negative* and its opposite *test positive*, respectively meaning that 'you do not have/have the infection.' Although these verb phrases were also used in the past with reference to other infections, recently they have been used for 'testing negative/positive to Coronavirus.' The latter is exemplified in:

(6) Tom Fletcher and Strictly partner ***test positive*** for Covid. (*The Guardian*, 26/09/21)

Semantic phenomena related to linguistic change mainly include metaphors. The pandemic, for instance, is often referred to as a *tsunami* for its destructive and devastating effects:

(7) Fears of Covid '**tsunami**' in Fiji after outbreak found to be Indian variant. (*The Guardian*, 28/04/21)

Another common semantic process is that of specialization: e.g., *face covering* once (first in 1732) indicated 'any of various types of mask worn to protect or conceal the face,' but since 2020 it has acquired the more specific sense of 'mask designed to prevent transmission of Covid-19':

(8) England's medical chief gives three situations in which it would be important to wear **face covering**. (*The Guardian*, 05/07/21)

Two further processes affect the semantics of words, namely, amelioration and pejoration. Amelioration is illustrated by *elbow bump*, whose original sense in 1902 was 'a blow with or to the elbow,' but is now (from 2020) commonly used to refer to 'a gesture of greeting used in order to reduce the risk of spreading or catching Covid-19':

(9) **Elbow-bumps** and **footshakes**: the new coronavirus etiquette. (*The Guardian*, 03/03/20)

The opposite process is pejoration, occurring in the "loose compound" (see Scalise 1992, 181) *social isolation*,[4] originally (in 1833) indicating 'the state of having little or no contact with other people' but since 2020 also used for 'a condition in which an individual lacks social connections or has no access to family, friends, or other social support':

(10) Long-term **social isolation** is as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. (*The Guardian*, 20/02/21)

3. Data and methods

The data analysed in this paper were taken from various web sources. The primary sources of the dataset were the online edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) and in particular its latest additions since April 2020, "New words list April 2020." The Webinar on "The language of Covid-19: Special OED update" (McPherson, Stewart and Wild 2020) reported to the global research community about the recent words and meanings added to the dictionary.

Their recognition by native speakers of English was checked in the *Urban Dictionary* (UD), a crowdsourced online dictionary for slang words and phrases, operating under the motto "Define your World." It records novel additions to everyday vocabulary, as new words are introduced, defined, and illustrated by the Internet community. Hence, novel words related to the pandemic are also recorded in the UD.

Other collections of Covid-19 terms were found at the webpages *EnglishCLUB* and *Cheapism*, as well as in the glossary compiled by Thorne (2020). Moreover, *The Independent* also offered a glossary of Covid terms in the article "'Riding the 'ronacoaster': An A-Z of new terms we've learnt during the pandemic," published by Harry Cockburn in December 2020 (Cockburn 2020).

92 Covid-related words were selected from the above-mentioned sources for the analysis. For the contextualized examples shown in Section 2.1, the words were searched for in two British quality newspapers,[5] *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, from February 2020 until September

[4] From the semantic viewpoint, compounds can be classified as 'strict' and 'loose' (Scalise 1992, 181): strict compounds (e.g. It. *quintessenza* 'quintessence' ← *quinta* 'fifth' and *essenza* 'essence') display a weak boundary between their constituents and result in a new complex meaning, whereas loose compounds (e.g. *amministratore delegato* 'CEO') display a strong boundary between their constituents and each of them is phonologically and semantically considered an individual element.

[5] The choice of two quality newspapers, rather than tabloids, is motivated by the recognition and institutionalization of the new terms. Their frequency in two widely spread newspapers like *The Guardian* and *The Independent* is indeed symptomatic of the acceptance by a vast audience.

2021. The webpages of these newspapers allow readers to search for specific words and to expand related contexts in articles where Covid-19 vocabulary is used.

For the corpus-based analysis of the dataset (see Section 4), I used the *Coronavirus Corpus* (CVC-20), including articles that have at least two occurrences of the words "coronavirus," "COVID," or "COVID-19."

This topic-specific corpus was designed to record the social, cultural, and economic impact of Covid-19 in 2020 and beyond. The corpus was first released in May 2020 and collects information and news about Covid-19 from online newspapers and magazines in 20 different English-speaking countries. In November 2022, when the corpus-based analysis was conducted, CVC-20 was about 1,551 million words in size, but it continues to grow by 3-4 million words each day.

The tools available on the CVC-20 platform enabled me to check the frequency of the words and phrases collected in my database since January 2020. They also showed collocates, patterns of occurrence, and contexts where the new words were used. These contexts were fundamental to establish the main functions of Covid-related vocabulary and the effects that it produces.

In the present study, a corpus-based analysis of the most frequent words and multi-word sequences was conducted to study how language changes, extends, and develops to adapt to the linguistic needs of both a specific language community and the global speech community. The analysis was meant to investigate whether the new words are recognized neologisms or nonce terms destined to vanish in the future. It was also meant to examine the purposes of such new words, ranging from the naming function to the goal to attract readers and make them laugh. Five different functions were specifically elaborated in this study in order to cover and illustrate the various goals of neologism creation.

4. Corpus-based analysis

The analysis carried out in this Section is both quantitative, aiming at establishing the frequency of a set of Covid-related words in the *Coronavirus Corpus*, and qualitative, aiming at identifying the functions and effects of these new words.

4.1 Quantitative analysis: classification of new Covid words

From the quantitative viewpoint, new Covid words can be classified as 'high-frequency' (51 words/phrases), occurring more than 1,000 times in the corpus, medium-frequency (18 instances), occurring between 1,000 and 100 times, and low-frequency (23 instances), with fewer than 100 occurrences.

High-frequency words (the number of tokens is indicated in brackets) include words/phrases used to:

- refer to the virus: e.g., *Covid-19* (4,392,939 tokens), *Coronavirus* (2,304,882), *Covid* (1,094,555), *SARS-CoV-2* (104,451), *Corona* (50,220), *C-19* (1,568), *Rona* (1,132);
- explain public health measures for reducing contagion: e.g., *lockdown* (648,761), *social distancing* (275,110), *PPE* / *Personal Protective Equipment* (65,609 / 42,556), *stay at home* (42,208), *self-isolate* (38,233), *self-isolation* (31,200), *face covering* (17,533), *self-quarantine* (17,405), *flatten the curve* (8,736), *social isolation* (8,584), *shelter-in-place* (noun) / *shelter in place* (verb phrase) (8,370 / 5,090), *Covid-free* (3,229), *support bubble* (1,698), *Covid-secure* (1,678);
- explain how contagion happens and how it can be tracked: e.g., *test positive* (39,855), *test negative* (9,124), *contact-tracing* (6,521), *incubation period* (6,331), *superspreader* (4,012), *index case* (3,398), *patient zero* (1,481);
- describe attitudes towards the pandemic and health measures: e.g., *anti-vaccine* (8,543), *panic buying* (6,165), *anti-lockdown* (3,818), *anti-vax* (3,633), *anti-mask* (2,863);
- outline post-pandemic and post-vaccine future: e.g., *second wave* (72,463), *herd immunity* (32,788), *Long Covid* (29,865), *Recovery Plan* (8,270), *Recovery Fund* (4,201), *green pass* (1,952);
- portray the role and actions of health workers in coping with the pandemic: e.g., *telehealth* (19,039), *telemedicine* (12,867), *front-liners* (1,753).

These have a high possibility to become true neologisms, to be introduced in dictionaries (most of them already are part of the OED) and become part of English lexicon.
Medium-frequency words/phrases in my dataset are used to:

- explain public health measures for reducing contagion: e.g., *social bubble* (623 tokens), *elbow bump* (477), *smart working* (152);
- describe attitudes during or towards the pandemic and public health measures: e.g., *anti-vaxx* (856), *doomscrolling* (422), *Zoombombing* (300), *no vax* (212), *quarantine* (167);
- outline post-pandemic future: e.g., *cashback* (816), *maskne* (526), *unlockdown* (104);
- portray the role of health workers: e.g., *clap for carers* (570);
- explain how contagion happens: e.g., *index patient* (388).

These words are potential candidates for becoming recognized neologisms in English.
By contrast, low-frequency words/phrases are generally not recognized in lexicographic works (only *social recession*, 43 tokens, is included in the OED). Most of them are nonce words (e.g. *covexit* 8 occurrences, *Covidivorce* 6 occ.) or even hapax legomena, i.e. once-only attestations (e.g. *lockstalgia*, *upperwear*). Many low-frequency words consist of blends, which are used in journalism, but are not attested in dictionaries. This suggests that reporters often recur to the blending process to coin new words because of their humorous effects (e.g. *quaran-team* 37 occ., *quaranteen* 23 occ.), jocularity (e.g. *coronasomnia* 60 occ., after *insomnia*), and attractiveness (e.g. *coronials* 24 occ., *covexit* 8 occ.) (see "ludicity" in Arndt-Lappe et al. 2018), yet they often remain nonce terms used on specific occasions.

4.2 Qualitative analysis: Functions of new Covid words

From the qualitative viewpoint, the primary functions of Covid-related words used in newspapers include:

- Naming/Labelling: filling a terminological or conceptual gap;
- Informative/Popularizing: disseminating information about the Covid-19 crisis to laymen and non-specialists;
- Attractiveness: catching readers' attention and arousing their interest or curiosity;
- Playfulness/Jocularity: breaking or defusing the tensions created by a catastrophic scenario;
- Criticism/Attack: criticizing or attacking others.

4.2.1 Naming/Labelling function

When a new phenomenon arises, we need new vocabulary to name it. For instance, new labels displaying different spellings (*Covid-19*, *COVID-19*, *COVID19*, *CoViD-19* ← *COronaVIrus Disease 2019*) have been coined to refer to 'an acute disease in humans caused by a coronavirus, which is characterized mainly by fever and cough':

(11) The **COVID-19** disease has spread from its initial epicentre in Wuhan, China, where the outbreak was first reported in January, to other parts of the world, including Europe, the United States and other parts of Asia. (CVC-20, 27/02/20)

Other official labels are used for the new virus, especially found in medical terminology (e.g. *SARS-CoV-2* ← *Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome CoronaVirus 2* "the final official name for the coronavirus that causes COVID-19"):

(12) [A] large percentage of asymptomatic individuals are testing positive for the novel coronavirus (**SARS-CoV-2**). (CVC-20, 22/04/20)

4.2.2 Informative/Popularizing function

In the news, other unofficial names are used to disseminate information about the Covid-19 crisis to non-specialists. For instance, *Covid* and *Rona* are informal or slang words for Covid-19:

(13) Daniel "The Rock" Dawson made history in 2013 to become the first Australian ever to hold world titles in Muay Thai boxing, kick-boxing and boxing. He's fit, he's vaxxed and he's just had **COVID** twice in six weeks. With WA hitting a new peak of infections multiple times in the past week, it may seem like nearly everyone you know has the **Rona**. (CVC-20, 05/10/22)

Popular new words have been used to describe attitudes and measures assumed during the pandemic, or to inform and encourage people to adopt them. A new Covid procedure is 'touching elbows or tapping feet rather than shaking hands' referred to as *Wuhan shake* (UD), coined by analogy with the model word *handshake* (see also *footshake* in example (9), Mattiello 2017):

(14) The greeting is described in the video as the **Wuhan Shake**, named after the city where COVID-19 was first identified. (CVC-20, 02/03/20)

4.2.3 Attractiveness

New Covid vocabulary may be used to catch the readers' attention. Some neologisms coined by politicians, for instance, are attractive to the audience, such as *Kung Flu* (a pun on *Kung Fu*) and *China Virus* 'Coronavirus.'

(15) Since COVID-19 began at the end of 2019, hate crimes against Asian-Americans have been on the rise, due in part to racist rhetoric by former president Donald Trump, who often referred to coronavirus as "**Kung Flu**" or the "**China Virus**." (CVC-20, 25/01/22)

These terms are clearly humorous and attractive, especially because they play on words, but may also sarcastically allude to the Asian origin of the virus, and thus have an additional critical function (see § 4.2.5).

Similar eye-catching new words inundate the news, especially blends such as *Flurona* used 'when a person has the Flu virus and the Corona virus at the same time' (UD):

(16) As the name suggests, **Flurona** occurs when a person is infected with both the flu and the coronavirus, or when they experience both infections back-to-back. (CVC-20, 24/01/22)

4.2.4 Playfulness/Jocularity

About one fourth of the new words are used with a jocular intention. They mainly include blends, such as *Coronababies* (← *Coronavirus* + *babies*) 'the babies born twelve to sixteen months after the start of the pandemic,' *quaranteen(s)* (← *quarantine* + *teenager*(s)) 'teenagers during the Covid-19 quarantine,' and *covidivorce* (← *covid* + *divorce*, with overlapping) 'a divorce resulting from the covid house arrest,' illustrated in:

(17) Where once there were "blackout babies," we can now expect a wave of "**coronababies**" and a new generation of "**quaranteens**" in 2033. Couples whose marriages are fraying under the pressures of self-isolation could be heading for a "**covidivorce**." (CVC-20, 28/03/20)

Some playful words have been used to defuse the tensions created by a tragic scenario. For instance, the exaggerated blend *Coronapocalypse* (← *Coronavirus* + *apocalypse*) 'end of the world via coronavirus' and the jocular *quarantini* (← *quarantine* + *Martini*) 'the drink that people consume during a quarantine lockdown' have contributed to attenuate the suffering from the epidemic:

(18) [Emily Anderson is] planning to host weekly video chat happy hours to help moms "celebrate surviving another week of the **Coronapocalypse**" with a "**quarantini**." (CVC-20, 20/03/20)

4.2.5 Criticism/Attack

The critical function is served, for instance, by new words referring to media disinformation and fake news (Sini and Cetro 2020). Journalists have been accused of *infodemic* (← *information* + *epidemic*) 'proliferation of diverse, often unsubstantiated information relating to the pandemic,

which disseminates rapidly through news, online, and social media,' sometimes reported in quotation marks, i.e., *"infodemic"*:

(19) Since the beginning of the COVID crisis, the UN health agency has voiced concerns over the flood of misinformation on COVID and vaccines. It has been working with Twitter and other social media platforms to battle this so-called "**infodemic**." (CVC-20, 26/04/22)

Criticism also addresses people who ignore the virus (e.g. *Covidiot* 'someone who ignores the warnings regarding public health or safety') or oppose vaccination (e.g. *anti-vaxx* 'an adjective which denotes someone who opposes vaccination'). These two new words are illustrated in (20) and (21) respectively:

(20) As he doesn't follow the directives and orders and behaves like an idiot, the **COVIDIOT** not only spreads the disease to others but also induces panic and hysteria, which eventually leads to more cases. (CVC-20, 13/04/20)

(21) Unvaccinated people are not the problem, the **antivaxx** idiots are. (CVC-20, 12/01/22)

Some neologisms attack others' behaviours by using jocularity, irony, or sarcasm. Hence, we have a combination of functions such as criticism and jocularity, as in *maskhole* (← *mask* + *asshole*) 'a person who refuses to wear a facemask':

(22) He gets pissed-off when asked to wear a mask. The **Maskhole** declares it's his constitutional right to ignore social-distancing guidelines, disinfectant wipes & hand-sanitizers. (CVC-20, 18/09/20)

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

This study has investigated the new words coined during the Covid-19 pandemic and their functions. Some of the new words were considered 'new' because their meaning was refreshed in the specific context of Covid-19. In general, the analysis has shown the usefulness of a topic-specific corpus such as CVC-20 for the investigation of the institutionalization of new vocabulary, covering a wide spectrum of word-formation processes, from compounds such as *Covid-free* to blends such as *covidivorce*.

The corpus-based quantitative analysis has helped distinguish between new words having a chance of becoming a permanent part of the English lexicon (high- and medium-frequency

vocabulary), such as *Coronavirus* and *SARS-CoV-2*, and words destined to remain nonce formations (low-frequency vocabulary), such as *coronapocalypse*, or hapaxes, such as *upperwear*. The study has finally shown the functions that new Covid vocabulary serve, ranging from the naming function to the critical function. New words generally serve to fill a lexical or conceptual gap, as often occurs in the medical and technological fields. However, in the Covid-19 pandemic many new words have been also used to criticize or condemn others' behaviours, as well as to relieve the strain of the hard condition worldwide, as happened in the past with other health pandemics, such as Spanish Flu (1918-1920), SARS (2002-2004), and Swine Flu (2009).

Results from a discourse-based analysis show that, on the one hand, new compounds and regularly derived words are used to disseminate information about the Covid-19 crisis to laymen and non-specialists. On the other hand, novel blends and similar creative words often have the function of breaking the tensions created by a difficult, even catastrophic scenario, but may also be used in the context of hate speech, to criticize or attack others, such as people ignoring stay-at-home orders and public health measures.

Overall, we can claim that Covid-related neologisms and nonce words also help a cohesive function, in that they can increase people's bondedness:

> Buzzwords related to the current pandemic have also increased. We grimace or laugh at **covidiot**, **covideo party** and **covexit**. Then there is **Blursday**, **zoom-bombing** and **quaran-teams**. According to a British language consultant, the pandemic has fostered more than 1,000 new words. Why has this happened? According to a socio-linguistic analysis, new words can bond us like "a lexical social glue." Language can unite us in a common struggle of expressing our anxiety and facing the chaos. Common linguistic expressions decrease isolation and increase our engagement with others. (CVC-2020, 07/08/21)

This extract from the *Coronavirus Corpus* makes us reflect on the worth of Covid "buzzwords," such as *covidiot* or *Blursday* 'the name of the day of the week when you do not know what day of the week it is, because the pandemic has distorted or abandoned all sense of time' (UD). According to Ruth Derksen (2021), new vocabulary has acted as a "lexical social glue" for many people, both locally and globally, connecting citizens who are struggling the same battle against the virus. We can conclude by saying that language is what unites people and peoples, especially in such a situation of social distancing and lack of physical contact.

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