Social change and linguistic change: the language of Covid-19

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It is a rare experience for lexicographers to observe an exponential rise in usage of a single word in a very short period of time, and for that word to come overwhelmingly to dominate global discourse, even to the exclusion of most other topics. *Covid-19*, a shortening of *coronavirus disease 2019*, and its various manifestations has done just that. As the spread of the disease has altered the lives of billions of people, it has correspondingly ushered in a new vocabulary to the general populace encompassing specialist terms from the fields of epidemiology and medicine, new acronyms, and words to express the societal imperatives of imposed isolation and distancing. It is a consistent theme of lexicography that great social change brings great linguistic change, and that has never been truer than in this current global crisis.

The OED is updating its coverage to take account of these developments, and as something of a departure, this update comes outside of our usual quarterly publication cycle. But these are extraordinary times, and OED lexicographers, who like many others are all *working from home* (WFH, first attested as a noun in 1995 and as a verb in 2001), are tracking the development of the language of the pandemic and offering a linguistic and historical context to their usage.

Some of the terms with which we have become so familiar over the past few weeks through the news, social media, and government briefings and edicts have been around for years (many date from the nineteenth century), but they have achieved new and much wider usage to describe the situation in which we currently find ourselves. *Self-isolation* (recorded from 1834) and *self-isolating* (1841), now used to describe self-imposed isolation to prevent catching or transmitting an infectious disease, were in the 1800s more often applied to countries which chose to detach themselves politically and economically from the rest of the world.

As well as these nineteenth century terms put to modern use, more recent epidemics and especially the current crisis have seen the appearance of genuinely new words, phrases, combinations, and abbreviations which were not necessarily coined for the coronavirus epidemic, but have seen far wider usage since it began. *Infodemic* (a portmanteau word from information and epidemic) is the outpouring of often unsubstantiated media and online information relating to a crisis. The term was coined in 2003 for the SARS epidemic, but has also been used to describe the current proliferation of news around coronavirus. The phrase *shelter-in-place*, a protocol instructing people to find a place of safety in the location they are occupying until the all clear is sounded, was devised as an instruction for the public in 1976 in the event of a nuclear or terrorist attack, but has now been adapted as advice to people to stay indoors to protect themselves and others from coronavirus. *Social distancing*, first used in 1957, was originally an attitude rather than a physical term, referring to an aloofness or deliberate attempt to distance oneself from others socially—now we all understand it as keeping a physical distance between ourselves and others to avoid infection. And an *elbow bump*, along with a hand slap and high five, was in its earliest manifestation (1981) a way of conveying celebratory pleasure to a teammate, rather than a means of avoiding hand-touching when greeting a friend, colleague, or stranger.

New and previously unfamiliar abbreviations have also taken their place in our everyday vocabulary, and these too appear in the latest OED release. While *WFH* (working from home) dates from 1995 as mentioned previously, the abbreviation was known to very few before it became a way of life for so many of us. *PPE* is now almost universally recognized as personal protective (or protection) equipment—an abbreviation dating from 1977 but formerly probably restricted to healthcare and emergency professionals. The full phrase – *personal protective equipment* – dates from as far back as 1934.

As a historical dictionary, the OED is already full of words that show us how our

forebears grappled linguistically with the epidemics they witnessed and experienced. The earliest of these appeared in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the great plague of 1347-50 and its follow-ups, which killed an estimated 40-60 per cent of the population of Europe, must surely have been an ever-present memory and fear. *Pestilence*, 'a fatal epidemic or disease', was borrowed from French and Latin, and first appears in Wycliffe's bible of 1382, not long after this first great devastation. The related term *pest* (from French *peste*) appeared shortly afterwards. Our weakened uses of pest—an insect that infects crops, an annoying person—stem from this original plague usage. *Pox* (from the plural of pock, denoting a pustule or the mark it leaves) appeared in 1476 as a term applied to a number of virulently contagious diseases, most especially the dreaded smallpox (first recorded in the 1560s).

It was the great plagues of the seventeenth century, however, that opened the floodgates for the entry into English of words to describe the experience of epidemic disease. *Epidemic* and *pandemic* both appeared in the seventeenth century; *the Black Plague* (so called from the black pustules that appeared on the skin of the victims) was first used in the early 1600s (although its more familiar synonym *Black Death*, surprisingly, did not appear until 1755). It was the seventeenth-century plague that saw a whole village in Derbyshire choose to *self-isolate* or *self-quarantine*; the adjective self-quarantined was first applied, in a historical description from 1878, to the story of the heroic population of Eyam, which isolated itself in 1665-6 to avoid infecting the surrounding villages, and lost around a third of its population as a consequence.

As the world expanded, so too did the spread of diseases and their vocabulary. *Yellow fever* appeared in 1738, and the so-called *Spanish influenza* in 1890 (reduced to *Spanish flu* during the great epidemic of 1918). *Poliomyelitis* appeared in 1878 (shortened to *polio* in 1911), although the epidemic that attacked children especially and struck fear into the heart of parents was at its worst just after WWII. Recent decades have also seen their share of linguistic coinages for epidemics and pandemics.

AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) appeared in 1982, and *SARS* (severe acute respiratory syndrome) in 2003. The *coronaviruses* themselves (so-called because they resemble the solar corona) were first described as long ago as 1968 in a paper in *Nature*, but before 2020 few people had heard of the term beyond the scientists studying them.

As we continue to monitor our in-house corpora and other language data to spot new words and senses associated with the pandemic and assess the frequency of their usage, the OED will keep updating its coverage to help tell the story of these times that will inevitably become embedded in our language.