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Linguistics Reflections

Cambridge Reflections: Covid-19

Language & Linguistics

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## Covocabulary

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All over the linguistics world, linguists are staying safe, like everyone else, but in their newly imposed spare time are having a field day, because Covid-19 has given them a new lexical world to explore. There are already some initial collections of English Covid neologisms online, and the numbers are rising. I have over a hundred, and that's just from my part of the world. I wouldn't be surprised to find Covid regional dialects develop in the UK, USA, Australia, and so on. And what's going on in other languages, I wonder?

What's happened is that the basic vocabulary of the virus – social distancing, lockdown, Corona, and so on (some of which will undoubtedly be 'Words of the Year' in due course) – has been used ludically to generate a wide range of playful, yet often pointed, expressions. We've seen new abbreviations, such as BC (Before Covid) and WFH (working from home). The influence of Brexit lives on, with people talking about covexit and locksit. There are some new rhymes, such as corona moaner, and even a new piece of rhyming slang. Singer Miley Cyrus has the (good? bad?) fortune of having a surname that rhymes with virus – so 'You had the Miley?' has given new life to a phenomenon (Cockney rhyming slang) that many people thought had died out.

But the majority of the neologisms are blends – the combination of parts of two old words to make a new one. Many begin with Cov (covidiot, covideo, covidivorce) or corona (coronanoia, coronaspiracy, coronacation, and, for your self-made haircut, coronacut). But the cleverest, I think, are those using other elements, such as quarantini (for the drink that keeps you going, also known as a locktail), quaranteeny (a very mild dose keeping you at home), upperwear (the part of your clothing seen on screen), and elbump. I'm expecting zoom to take off – I've already seen zoombombing (on analogy with photobombing) and zombie (what happens to you if you zoom too much), and there'll be many more.

I'm sure the humour is good for us. Laughing in the face of the enemy. But I sympathise with our poor lexicographers, as there's no way of knowing whether these novelties are going to remain part of the language, or whether they will silently disappear once the crisis is over. However, we're told today by the WHO that the virus may be with us for good, so maybe the associated vocabulary, playful as well as serious, will stay too. Either way, the dictionary people are going to have a job keeping up with this unexpected lexical explosion.