

## Lexical pandemiconium

'Unpredictable changes have always taken place', I wrote towards the end of my Afterword to *The Stories of English*. I penned that in November 2019. And three months later? Everyone knows.

The linguistic consequences of the pandemic were actually a mixture of the predictable and the unpredictable. It was obvious that there would be new specialised vocabulary relating to the character of the disease and its management. In fact, hardly any technical neologisms were created, other than those relating to the name of the virus; rather, words that had been living in quiet obscurity suddenly found themselves the centre of attention. *Lockdown*, for instance, had been in the language for over a century - its first recorded instance in the *OED* is 1832 - but in 2020 it became so frequently used that it was a leading candidate for 'Word of the Year' in many dictionaries. *Self-isolation* was another with a long history: 1834. *Social distance* is likewise 1830s, though the infectious disease sense is only from 2004, used in relation to flu. But all rose at unprecedented rates in the lexical frequency charts, along with *quarantine*, *zoom*, and - in the latter part of 2020 - *vaccine*.

Far more noticeable, at least to a linguist, was the rise of non-technical neologisms, testifying once again to the linguistic creativity innate in all of us. I collected these for a while, and stopped when my list reached a hundred. It was nice to see *-exit*, introduced in my Afterword, still alive and well, with *covexit* (the elimination of the virus in an area) and *locksit*. I was surprised to see a new example of (originally Cockney) rhyming slang. Singer Miley Cyrus has the (debatable) fortune of having a surname that rhymes with *virus* - 'You had the Miley?'

The majority of the neologisms are blends - the combination of parts of two old words to make a new one. There are a few compound words. Most can be grouped into five sets.

- A *corona*-based set, such as *coronalert*, *coronadance*, *coronababy*, *coronanoia*, *coronaphobia*, *coronageddon*, *coronaspiracy*, *coronavacation*, *coronaliterature* (includes *coronapoetry*, *coronanovels*, etc)

- A *Covid*-based site, such as *covidiot*, *covidreaming*, *covidivorce*, and cases where the *d* is dropped, such as *covindicated* (after a test), *covigilant*, *covipets* (*covidogs*, *covicats*, etc), and cases where *Covid* is moving in the direction of *co-*, as in *coviewing* (an online show).

- An *iso-* set, such as *isocooking*, *isobaking*, *isodesking*, *isolocks* (for hair), *isoliterature*, and some puns on *ice-* as in *iso-skating*, *iso-creams*, and *iso-breaker* (a social remark at the beginning of an online conversation).

- A *quarantine* set, such as *quarantedium*, *quaranteaching*, *quaranteetotal*, *quarantini*, *quaranteenager*, *quarantrendy*, *quarantunes*, *quarantimes*.

- A *Zoom*-based set, such as *zombie*, *zombombing*, *zoomer*, *zoomed out* (exhausted), *zoom coma*, *zoomdate* (for a relationship begun), and *zumped* (for one ended),

Sometimes there are choices: *coronalert / covalert, coronads / covads, coronacation / covacation, covid cuts (for hair) / coronacuts*, and *coronadance / covidance* for the sudden avoidance movements made when people pass each other by, as well as *coronadodging / covidodging*.

A few nice rhymes have emerged, such as *corona moaner* and *corona groaner*. And then there's a wide range of forms that don't readily fall into groups, such as *elbump, locktail* (a lockdown cocktail), and *ronavation* (home improvements), and really ingenious coinages such as *corooning* (singing to others online or in the street) and being *sent to Covidentry*.

This by no means completes my list, and there are other lists online now that are much longer - Tony Thorne's slang archive is the best place to explore further (<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/study/foundations/tony-thorne/slang-and-new-language>). The subject cries out for in-depth study. Who invented these neologisms? It's usually not possible to say; most are likely to have been invented by more than one person at more or less the same time. To my mind, they capture some of the traditional spirit that we call laughing the face if adversity. I've no idea how far the same spirit of lexical creativity exists in other languages; I've only come across sporadic examples. But in English it's carrying on a tradition of lexical inventiveness that can be traced back many centuries. It remains an open question, of course, just how many will have a permanent home in the language.