

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18454/RULB.2020.22.2.17>**ЯЗЫК ПАНДЕМИИ: ЛИНГВОКУЛЬТУРОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ АСПЕКТЫ**

Научная статья

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Аннотация

В статье предлагается сравнительный анализ лексики пандемии COVID-19 в русском и английском языках. Совокупность выделенных слов делится на три группы: непосредственные номинации болезни и связанные с ней термины, реакции и поведение человека, новая организации труда. Каждая из групп в обоих языках содержит идентичные лексемы, а также культурно специфические слова, отличающиеся с точки зрения мотивации и словообразования. В статье делается вывод, что различия лексики COVID-19 в русском и английском языках объясняются: 1) лингвистическими причинами (типологические различия в словообразовании), 2) политическими и идеологическими факторами, 3) различиями в протекании пандемии в сравниваемых странах.

Ключевые слова: КОВИД-19, коронавирус, неологизмы, словообразование, культурные различия, оценочная коннотация.

LANGUAGE OF PANDEMIC: LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL ASPECTS

Research article

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Abstract

The article offers a comparative analysis of COVID-19 words in Russian and English. The body of the selected words is divided into three groups: the immediate nominations of the disease and disease-related terms, words denoting human reactions and behaviours, nominations of new work life. Each of the groups in both languages features identical items as well as culturally specific words different in terms of motivation and word formation. The article concludes that the differences of COVID-19 words in Russian and English are explained by the following factors: 1) linguistic reasons (typological differences in word-formation), 2) political and ideological factors, 3) differences in the disease spread scenarios in the compared countries.

Keywords: COVID-19, coronavirus, neologism, word formation, cultural differences, evaluative connotation.

Introduction

Like any global disaster, COVID-19 has impacted each aspect of our life: economy, health, education, human relationships and language. These days the coronavirus pandemic is often compared to 2008 financial crisis that caused a huge influx of new words in the national vocabularies. In this respect, COVID-19 seems to become a good match. New words “watchdogs” have already recorded the number of coinages big enough to start a dictionary [4]. Why is it important to study these new words? Firstly, language does not only reflect the reality – it constructs it. Any new phenomenon is termed, discussed and communicated via language. Secondly, language is of dual nature: on the one hand, it is a universal human ability to produce sounds, build words and sentences; on the other hand, any language is peculiar in the way its speakers produce sounds, build words and sentences. The latter stems from historical, cultural and climate-driven differences in the world categorization. That’s why it is so interesting, when we all confront with the same challenge, to investigate the linguistic and cultural differences in the way we respond to it.

In this article I share preliminary observations about linguistic and cultural differences of English and Russian COVID-19 word-production and rhetoric.

The body of the selected words is divided into three groups: the immediate nominations of the disease and disease-related terms, nominations of human reactions and behaviours, words denoting new work arrangement. Some of the words have long been part of the common vocabulary, remaining in the shadow until claimed by the pandemic discourse. The other items are true coinages, with the prospect of either remaining topical words that disappear with time, or getting institutionalized. It is assumed that “while topicality is characterized by a short-lived frequency related to a specific current event, institutionalization is brought forth by an increasing frequency within a longer period of time” [3, P.16].

First of all, both languages have seen the same basic terms naming the disease jump to the forefront: terms of the Latin origin coronavirus (Eng.) – *коронавирус* (Ru.), acronym COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) – КОВИД-19 (Ru.).

The cultural differences stand out when it comes to adjusting these terms to informal every day communication. The English / American speaker can shorten the name of the disease to *corona*, or even *the Rona / Rony* (mostly in Australian English). In Russian, we may occasionally use a similar clipping with the diminutive suffix –“ка”: *коронарка*. The *корона* (*corona*) is hardly possible as a permanent use for its ambiguity: the Russian word *корона* means *crowns*. Ironically, this ambiguity can work in the opposite direction: all the words with the base morpheme *корона* become evocative of the pandemic name (for example, *коронный номер* – “the best piece in a performance”). This effect should not be underestimated, as the sad experience of the Mexican brewer of Corona beer shows. On the whole, the contractions of the disease name,

especially when used with diminutive suffixes, implying a sort of defiant familiarity, points to the natural desire of people on either side of the Atlantic to diminish the danger, to ease its menacing sound.

Another way to refer to the pandemic in English is to use a euphemistic acronym *c-word* (where *c* stands for *coronavirus*). This word-formation pattern — hiding an unpleasant word behind its initial letter — is widespread in English while in Russian a similar technique is applied to referring to an obscene word and is restricted to vulgarisms.

Another interesting though grim English coinage for coronavirus is a compound *boomer-remover*. The sarcastic paraphrase was brought about by the sad statistics: the pandemic death toll is the biggest among senior citizens — the boomers generation. In Russian, though technically possible in terms of word-formation, this nonce-word would be irrelevant: as soon as the pandemic crossed Russia's borders it quickly became “younger”, hitting those from 18 to 45.

By frequency and immediate impact on every individual's well-being, *stay-at-home* concept is definitely the champion in the pandemic language. It is represented by a number of terms which, having the same denotation, are distinguished by connotations. Imposing a stay-at-home regime, authorities in English-speaking countries apply such terms as *self-isolation*, *quarantine*, *self-quarantine*, *shelter-in-place* (variant *shelter-at-home*), *cocooning*. In Russian, this concept is less broadly verbalized: two terms *самоизоляция* (self-isolation) and *карантин* (quarantine) serve all sorts of contexts. In order to add more urgency, the speaker needs to tap into the terms' syntagmatic relations (for example, intensifying adjectives, emotional words, etc.).

What is peculiar to English is some sort of confusion about the distinct meanings of the above terms. Strictly speaking, *quarantine* is a more technical term designating a restraint upon the activities or communication of persons or the transport of goods designed to prevent the spread of disease or pests.” [5]. The meaning of the word may be traced back to the Latin word *quadraginta* — “forty”. In Russian the term was borrowed from Italian via French (Fr. *quarantaine*, Ital. *quarante giorni* — “forty days”) with the same meaning [2]. *Self-quarantine* obliges the person “to refrain from any contact with other individuals for a period of time (such as two weeks) during the outbreak of a contagious disease usually by remaining in one's home and limiting contact with family members.” [5]. The noun *self-quarantine* was already in occasional use in the XXth century while the verb *self-quarantine* is fairly recent, showing evidence of use only within the past 20 years or so [5].

Isolation of the infected patient has been known since the biblical times [9, P.951]. The term *self-isolation* was first used in 1834 in *The Metropolitan Magazine* to make reference to being unaware of the events of the world around us [5]. In Russia, *self-isolation* was first introduced in 1940 by S. L. Rubinstein in his book “Основы общей психологии” (The foundations of general psychology) to describe a mode of an individual's behaviour who keeps away from social life [1]. Under the current circumstances, the social emergency language has borrowed the term, which besides the necessity of separating from others, came to imply an individual's voluntary decision driven by awareness of risk and social responsibility. Thus, the new term is a result of developing the opposite (positive) evaluative meaning attached to the same denotation (enathiosemy).

In English official and media rhetoric *quarantine*, *self-quarantine* and *self-isolation* are often used interchangeably to mean absolutely identical sets of rules. This contributes to semantic noise and terminological misuse. Moreover, a similar blurring of meaning pertains to other stay-at-home terms: *stay-at-home* and *shelter-in-place* (*shelter-at-home*). Of the two, *shelter-in-place* is a stricter protocol instructing people to find a place of safety in the location they are occupying until the all clear is sounded; it was devised as an instruction for the public in 1976 in the event of a nuclear or terrorist attack [7]. As the term has a pronounced negative, alarming connotation, it was initially avoided by the authorities who chose a more cautious wording (like New York Governor Andrew Cuomo did trying to calm down the residents [6]). However, with the pandemic situation getting out of control and the number of deaths increasing exponentially, the officials tightened the rhetoric. And yet, the regulations that fit *stay-at-home*, *shelter-in-place* and *self-isolation* regimes are identical, which makes these terms practically indistinct semantically. The Russian respective rhetoric is more unequivocal and rigid. The RF government made a special point of spelling out the few key terms (as was mentioned earlier two basic forms of regime) to the residents. This, coupled with highly centralized power, strict policing and traditional submission of population to the authorities, helped to discipline a huge country.

Apart from the above mentioned nominations, COVID-19 discourse brought to light a number of metaphor-based terms with relevant sense, such as *cocooning*. Built on the similarity to a covering of silk threads insects make to protect themselves before they become adults, the noun is normally used to designate a habit of spending more time at home and less time going out and socializing. Like in the case of *self-isolation*, the word *cocooning* has undergone amelioration of meaning and now is used for a responsible behaviour of self-quarantine strongly recommended, especially to vulnerable groups (elderly people, pregnant women, etc.).

The next set of new words is related to behavior of individuals adapting to the pandemic reality. Whatever the cultural, ideological and economic differences, people tend to demonstrate similar behavioural patterns when put in an extreme situation, and even more so in a globalised world. The most typical modes of behavior get worded in a compact form. That is how the portmanteau nonce word *covidiot* (COVID + idiot) was created to mean an unreasonable behaviour of an individual who is either a scare-monger hoarding food and toilet paper or a light-minded egoist ignoring safety measures.

In Russian, the acronym *covidiot* (*ковидиот*), though quickly and eagerly adopted, is still an exotic borrowing and a rare choice even in media. Instead, the common word with the respective meaning is used — *паникёр* (alarmist, panic-monger). The Russian coinage for those who dismiss the coronavirus pandemic as an artificially inflated threat is a compound *коронадиссидент* (corona dissident). In fact the word-formation model “corona + noun / adjective / verb” turned out the most productive in Russian: *коронаскептики* (coronaskeptics), *коронапроявления* (corona symptoms), *коронакотик* (corona cat). Among other loan words that found their way into Russian from English are *карантин—шейминг* (*quarantine-shaming*, also *spread-shaming* — criticizing someone for spreading a virus or bacteria), *карантини* (*quarantini*, a humorous word with an Italian ending, coined back in 2005 in TV show *Scrubs*, — a strong alcoholic beverage that is made when people are quarantined, or otherwise locked up or trapped in a location for an extended period of time) [10].

In her book *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, the celebrated nonfiction writer Rebecca Solnit writes that a truly dire situation “drags us into emergencies that require we act, and act altruistically, bravely, and with initiative in order to survive or save our neighbors, no matter how we vote or what we do for a living.” [8, P. 306]. The pandemic of 2019 proved, once again, this is true. Lots of people in different countries volunteered to do shopping and pet-walking for those who found themselves locked down in homes. A new term coined for this, first presumably in Canada, *caremongering*, is a result of minimal but meaningful deformation of the word with the negative connotation *scaremongering*. In Russia, no new word has been invented for this end: people who are eager to help others are called, as before, *волонтеры* (volunteers).

COVID-19 demonstrated all the features of a global disaster of the new millennium. Besides fast spread across the world and sophisticated methods of prevention and treatment, it is characterized by the controversial role of media. On the one hand, they help quickly inform and organize huge masses of people; on the other hand, unsubstantiated information abundant in the internet leads to confusion in heads and unreasonable behaviour. The phenomenon was termed *infodemic* (blending of *information + pandemic*). Coined in 2003 for the SARS epidemic, the word came into frequent use in all the languages in 2019-2020, due to its high relevance.

Another dramatic change caused by the pandemic is concerned with employment and work. Although the working-from-home format is no news to the modern generation, never ever before has it been a globally prevalent form of work arrangement. And while previously working-from-home was a matter of choice now it has become a matter of survival. Meeting the requirements of the new experience, foregrounded came such terms as *teleworking*, WFH (working-from-home) contrasted to *WFO* (working-from-office), *home office*, *distance learning*.

In Russian every day communication the terms *работать на дому / удалённо* (work from home / from a remote place) and *дистанционное обучение* (distance learning) have boiled down to one common noun «удалёнка». The word is an example of the typical Russian word formation: adjective *удалённый* (remote) + diminutive suffix — *ка*. Normally, the use of words built by this model is restricted to informal style. However, if such word designates a socially important concept of high recurrence, it gets quickly accepted as a common literary word.

Conclusion

To sum up, COVID-19 has caused similar changes in the English and Russian languages. Firstly, a group of already existing (disease-related) terms became temporarily topical, with some of them developing an opposite evaluative connotation. Secondly, completely new words were coined to give an up-to-date name to old concepts. Most of these neologisms, due to their specificity, will hardly be institutionalized and enter the general vocabulary. The others, however, are likely to remain in language since they designate concepts that are applicable in various situations of social communication.

As far as word formation diversity is concerned, the English language obviously has the edge over Russian. Due to the prevalence of one-morpheme words, on the one hand, and agglutinative and adjunctive mechanisms, on the other hand, English has more flexibility in creating and transforming words. In Russian, derivational possibilities are checked by complex inflectional morphology. It explains why since the pandemic outbreak English has recorded more new words than Russian.

But it is not only the structural properties of the languages that account for the statistical difference — to a great extent word production is directed by the cultural peculiarities, which include: 1) political and ideological factors; 2) an individual scenario of the disease spread and tackle.

The first attempts, like this article, at analyzing COVID-19 language will be certainly followed by further research, as the pandemic lockdown of 2019-20 revealed too many imperfections in all spheres of human life; dealing with them will lead to new changes, and therefore, to new words and new rhetoric.

Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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