

THE IDIOMATIC VOCABULARY OF THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract: *A pandemic was declared last year, and it has changed our lives forever. It has resulted in many unusual but necessary actions and measures and Coronavirus has led to an explosion of new words and phrases, both in English and in other languages. Language is meant for communication. Communication can have literal and figurative meanings. Idioms are a type of figurative language. They do not always and necessarily make sense literally. Learning idioms is fun, especially when you compare English idioms to the idioms in one's native language. English is a language particularly rich in idioms and they were extremely used in the present health circumstances as this new vocabulary helps us make sense of the changes that have suddenly become part of our everyday lives. Linguists are analysing these idioms and metaphors with a special attention paid to how effective they really are in encouraging compliance with public health advice, as well as issues of translation, and access to healthcare. The paper intends to present some of the most frequent expressions, idioms and perhaps metaphors that piled up in the very recent vocabulary.*

Keywords: *COVID-19, idioms; pandemic; vocabulary; language, dictionaries.*

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1. Introduction

As a widespread international phenomenon, the COVID-19 pandemic benefits from the vocabulary of globalization. The language we speak is always changing. There are several factors that drive change, among them the influence of other languages and major events that imprint our lives. Should new events happen, and circumstances change, we need new words to describe them. Currently humanity is facing one of the greatest challenges of this century: the COVID 19. People are going through a period of fearful insecurity and stress causing many problems and mental health, some of them probably hard to remediate. Nevertheless, people are adjusting to the new way of living: some countries of the world are still on lockdown, permitted to leave home only for such reasons as food and medicine shopping, others have managed better and are striving to come to normality. The fact is most people are faced with the sudden changes to lifestyles and that might be challenging. COVID-19 has had a major impact on people around the world, but how is the pandemic changing our language and the way we communicate?

Besides politics and sports, health, disease, and medical breakthroughs are topics of interest generally, but with so many people impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, there are even more media stories on these topics than usual. The new vocabulary talking about this issue helps people articulate their worries, share feelings about the biggest health crisis in generations. Despite the negative aspects which are numerous, it is interesting to observe that the pandemic brings people together around a set of collective cultural reference points working as a kind of social connector. Social distancing means the absence of the regular social contact; thus, shared talk is an important part of helping people feel connected to one another.

2. Figurative meaning – Idioms

“Creativity is not a capacity of special people but a special capacity of all people. It shows speakers as language makers and not simply as language users” (Carter, 2004) It is perfect beginning for the subchapter on figurative meaning, a choice of each end every individual.

Communication can have literal and figurative meanings. One can only rely on the literal meaning making direct reference to words or sentences to objects, others may also employ the figurative sense to give an imaginative description or a special effect. English is a language particularly rich in idioms; without them it would lose much of its variety and humour both in speech and writing. Louisa Buckingham (2006) remarks that “Idioms are widely recognized to be a stumbling block in the acquisition of a foreign language; it is often maintained that their ‘arbitrary’, language-specific nature makes them difficult for learners to understand and acquire, and resistant to translation.”

Idioms are a form of a language that is spoken in a particular area and that uses some of its own words, grammar, and pronunciations; a style or form of expression that is characteristic of a particular person, type of art, etc. (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/idiom>). Idioms which are pure samples of prefabricated speech may also be defined as “complex bits of frozen syntax, whose meanings are more than simply the sum of their individual parts” (Nattinger and De Carrico, 1992:32).

Briefly, an idiom is a combination of words that has some features:

- The meaning of the idiom is different from the meanings of the individual words themselves; it is thus a phrase which defies the regular grammatical rules and meanings. An idiom can have a literal meaning in one situation and a different
- The meaning of an idiom can be replaced by a single word. For example, “kick the bucket” is an idiomatic expression which means “die”.
- In idiomatic expressions the words are used metaphorically. Therefore, the surface structure helps only a little in understanding the meaning of the whole expression: “to bury the hatchet”, meaning to become friendly again after a disagreement, the meanings of the words ‘to bury’ and. ‘the hatchet’ are different from the meaning of the whole expression.

- The word order of the idiom cannot be changed, they “tend to be frozen in form and meaning and do not allow change in structure and meaning”. (Liu, Zhengyuan, 2012). For example, the idiom “let the cat out of the bag” cannot be reordered to “the cat got left out of the bag”.

Further in the article there are examples of idioms that very frequently used during this period of the health crisis.

2.1. Enriched vocabulary due to COVID 19 crisis

In the global pandemic context of the last two years, the need for communication and specialists in the art and science of communication has been more evident than ever. Expressions, phrases or terms specific to crisis communication, which before the pandemic were part of the specialized vocabulary used by students, teachers or specialists in media and communication in classes, case studies, or to communicate isolated situations, have reached very short time to be widely used, thus entering the basic vocabulary of all languages.

Coronavirus has plundered towns, cities, and communities; thus, people face the challenge of figuring out how to talk about the impact the virus is having on everyday lives. The new medical crisis has led to an explosion of new words and phrases, both in English and in other languages for in times of significant change, linguistic creativity not only reflects the major preoccupations of the time, but also shows how people gather to talk about new challenges and contexts. In his book on linguistic creativity Ronald Carter (2004) considers that “verbal play is often undertaken for humorous purposes, serving in part to bring people closer together”, as well as challenging the “normal” view of things. Carter goes on to argue that inventive language is not just ornamental, but practical. The unusual trend of the period refers to the fact that even though these new words or phrases are used by or written for the public they often contain terms that are usually only used by health professionals and other types of researchers.

Every three months the Oxford English Dictionary adds new words and phrases as “creativity shows speakers as language makers not simply language users” (Carter, 2004); still, due to the coronavirus crisis, more new words and meaning are being coined than ever before, and in an amazingly fast manner so they needed an early update. This new vocabulary helps us make sense of the changes that have suddenly become part of our everyday lives. Nevertheless, specialists claim that the only truly new word produced by the health crisis is the acronym COVID-19.

Most of the other coronavirus-related words or expressions -specialists claim- are older, more obscure words and phrases being drawn into common usage, such as *reproduction number* and *social distancing*.

All in all, established terms like *self-isolating*, *pandemic*, *quarantine*, *lockdown*, and *key workers* have increased in use, while coronavirus/COVID-19 neologisms such as *covidiot*, *covideo party*, *covexit*, are being registered by dictionaries faster and easier than ever.

We will further on focus on words, phrases, and idioms around the theme of dealing with difficult situations. Idioms are descriptive and poetic, but unfortunately the literal and dictionary meanings of the words have little to do with the idioms' meanings. Idioms come from life experience. They are rich with meaning. The following enumeration of the most frequent expressions, idioms and perhaps metaphors that piled up in the very recent vocabulary will come according to the grammatical category.

2.1.1. The noun grouping category

Community transmission is also a syntagm that has gained ground as of all the ways in which Covid-19 can spread itself, being among the most worrying for health professionals. Community transmission means nobody knows how somebody got the disease. As opposed to this transmission with no clear origin, *close contact* of someone with Covid-19 is a person you have spent more than 15 minutes of face-to-face contact within two meters of someone who has Covid-19, indoors or outdoors and thus, *contact tracing* is identification and monitoring of people who may have had contact with an infectious person.

Exponential growth is one of phrases that have been misused in relation to the pandemic of 2020. The word exponential means having an exponent or to the power of; thus, if two people have Covid-19 today and four have it tomorrow and eight the following day, we face an actual exponential growth, but it does work for low numbers only - 100 cases today and 200 tomorrow, it would need 10,000 cases to make the growth exponential.

2.1.2. Verb groups of coronavirus expressions

Flattening the curve is a verbal construction that reflects the change of the steep upward curve on a graph of new disease cases to a flatter, shallower upward curve over a longer time through measures such as social distancing. The US Control of Disease Centre (CDC) defines the curve as a “visual display of the onset of illness among cases associated with an outbreak” and starting with 2020 we all have become obsessed about the daily figures and the trends that followed as we all felt somehow responsible for flattening the curve. Nevertheless, writer Karen Russell has found the term ‘flatten the curve’ to be reassuring – a reminder of the importance of both individual and collective action.

To test negative/ to test positive means that if someone takes a test for an infection and s/he tests negative, that means they do not have the infection, whereas if they test positive, that means they have the infection.

Cocooning is a term first coined in the 1980s for those with apocalyptic inclinations who were stocking their basements with VCRs, tins of beans and bottled water while awaiting the nuclear holocaust. It was brought back to attention in 2020 when people were told to “cocoon” so as to avoid other people, to remain indoors, have their shopping delivered and not venture out.

2.1.3. Adjective groups

Non-essential is an adjective that is worth mentioning as it has been rising in frequency and that has enriched its original meaning from “something that is not necessary” to expressions like non-essential travel, employees, or businesses where the latter aims at the meaning related to recreational and leisure time like theaters, museums, restaurants.

Asymptomatic is also interesting as it is so very frequently used these days by non-specialists about showing no symptoms of a particular disease.

2.1.4. Acronyms of coronavirus expressions

Previously, other health crises also generated new acronyms and terminology: AIDS and HIV entered the language almost 40 years ago. There are new acronyms of the current crisis, that came along to populate our vocabulary.

COVID-19 is an acronym, a word combination already added by the dictionaries as “an acute respiratory illness in humans caused by coronavirus” where the latter term referring to the large category of coronaviruses that include the flu virus, MERS and SARS, for example. Thus, *COVID-19* is the strain of coronaviruses we are facing today, consequently, it is a more specific term, the shortened word for the syntagm coronavirus disease 2019. One of the most used, searched for word of the recent period. *Novel coronavirus* is sometimes the name under which the newly identified coronavirus strain is often called.

But should it be written as *COVID-19* or as *Covid-19*? The Oxford English Dictionary published it under the headword *Covid-19*.

WFH another acronym describing the new working reality stands for working from home.

R-rate: R stands for reproduction. This is the rate at which the virus reproduces itself.

PPE-personal protective equipment like masks and gloves that are required.

PCR test detects viral particles in blood or other body fluids. (PCR = polymerase chain reaction) – the PCR test is one of the tools that doctors use to diagnose certain coronavirus diseases

2.2. Words and expressions that shifted their meaning

The social relations, the way people connect with one another produced numerous new words and phrases registered by dictionaries or caused changes in meaning. Some of these words can be confusing, even they have been encountered before. Here is a list of *COVID-19* useful words and phrases.

Elbow bump is such an idiom referring to greeting one another when shaking hands is not a desirable option. The expression changed its meaning, as not long ago it was the equivalent of high five, a sort of celebration.

Related to the same social interaction, new habits occurred and claimed for new words to render them, or new meanings of old words. Such an example is *self-isolation*. Previously, the named structure referred to political or economic aspects of countries that kept themselves separate. Historically, some countries have had an isolationist foreign policy, with no foreign trade and difficulty for other countries to enter them. Presently, *self-isolation* means something different – i.e., if someone has or thinks s/he has the coronavirus, they self-isolate and keep themselves apart from their family. They must stay physically apart and clean and disinfect the common areas.

Self-quarantine is another idiom made up of two words one of which is the Cambridge Dictionary's Word of Year 2020 -*quarantine* as a period in which people are kept apart, are not allowed to leave their homes or travel freely so that they do not spread or catch a disease. Presently, people are self-quarantining not to infect their families, so they must stay isolated, a tough thing to do.

Social distancing is a phrase very often heard written or seen. In the past it meant not wanting to get engaged socially with other people. Now it is less about feelings and attitudes or personal choices, and more about physical distance, i.e., to stay six feet apart.

Lockdown refers to an official order given in dangerous situations, controlling the free movement of people and vehicles. Originally, prisoners in jail might have been placed on lockdown if they showed violence. It is very strict, and it suggests danger. Currently, people refer to lockdown when staying home and they really wished to go out. In America it is called a *stay at home* order and is sounds less restrictive, or shelter in place. The last term used to be linked to gun violence or a tornado and it means stay and do not move whereas now it means do not go out meaning a prolonged period of social isolation.

Air bridge is an agreement in which two countries agree that people can fly directly between them, without some of the rules and controls that affect travellers from other countries.

New normal is a nowadays phrase describing the new existence we have lived in for the last twenty months: online education, working from home, Zoom calls, social distance, shuttered pubs and restaurants all became part of the "new normal".

Circuit breaker - the phrase is linked to a headline in a New York Times newspaper, "Markets Spiral as a Globe Shudders Over Virus." referring to the way the economy has suffered due to the pandemic.

Contact tracing - method of monitoring the spread of the virus.

Frontline workers designated the front-line medical staff, doctors and all the medical staff who sacrifice themselves every day.

Unprecedented - a word often heard in our political speeches - is an unprecedented situation.

Virtual happy hour - with the implementation of quarantine, people have thought of ways to get together, to interact, so they thought of the idea of "virtual happy hour" where people meet on an online platform and discuss.

2.3 New inventions

The COVID-19 pandemic has produced new terms that are combinations of other words, being used for the fun of colourful communication. Nevertheless, Fiona McPherson (2020), the senior editor of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) notes that the only actual new word added to the dictionary is "Covid-19", whereas the others are pre-existing terms that have gained new meaning at a time when many people are subject to a "stay-at-home order" (US), "movement control order" (Malaysia) or "enhanced community quarantine" (Philippines), "restricted traffic/movement" (Romania).

They include among others the following:

"maskne," an acne outbreak caused by facial coverings;

"zombombing," that is an intrusion of uninvited on video conferences;

"quarantini," a cocktail consumed in isolation, even "quaranteams" which are online teams created during lockdown;

"covidiot," depicting someone who ignores public safety recommendations;

"doomscrolling," or "consuming a large amount of information that can affect you emotionally, without you being able to stop doing it." The expression reflects the reality experienced by many of us, who daily watched more and more tragic news.;

"vax" stands for vaccine, vaccination along with its derivative "vaxer", "anti-vaxer"/ anti-vaxxer referring to a person opposed to vaccines and vaccination on principle.

"coronababies" are the children born or conceived during the pandemic and the word is obtained by prefixation.

The beauty of the language relies also on the metaphors people use when talking about our response to Coronavirus, making use of war metaphors invoking "battles", "enemies", and "front-lines" that are being widely applied to the pandemic, all these being already analysed by linguists. The psychological explanation of this reliance on emergency vocabulary could be explained by the need of building unity and mobilising swiftly. On the other hand, the perpetuation of this way of thinking and verbal expression might become dangerous by generating anxiety and distorting things about the pandemic.

2.4. Idioms of the pandemic

Toe the line meaning to conform to a rule or standard, to do what you are expected to do without causing trouble for anyone or to stand poised at the starting line in a footrace. e.g. Biden toes the line on Covid-19 vaccine messaging.

Break loose is an idiom that stands for suddenly stop being attached to something, get away from someone or something by using force or effort. e.g. A Novel Coronavirus is Breaking Loose.

Go to the wall means to fail, to be destroyed e.g. Lots of companies went to the wall during the pandemic.

Pull oneself together is recovering after emotions or painful, unpleasant actions. e.g. As a travel agency owner, she was terrified by the effects of the pandemic, but she pulled herself together.

Show promise refers to indicate a likely success. e.g. The vaccine research against Covid-19 infection has been showing promise.

Taking a toll means causing harm over time. e.g. Corona virus is taking its toll on people's lives.

At the crossroads is at a point where an important decision needs to be made. e.g. These days Romania stands at a crossroads in its fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. The vocabulary of pandemic in Romanian – English influences

The Romanian Academy organized, on the occasion of the Romanian Language Day, a debate in which Prof. Gabriela Pană Dindelegan, drew attention on the ever-increasing use of some terms related to the pandemic of coronavirus in Romanian.

"Asymptomatic versus symptomatic; quarantine, quarantining, quarantined, quantization; comorbidity, comorbidities; confirmed; contacts; contaminated, contamination; covid; sanitized; infection, infected; isolation, isolated; mask; plateau; positive, positivized, repositioned; relaxation with strictly referring to complying the rules; testing, tested and others ", were among the words enumerated by prof. Dindelegan (2021).

The current Romanian language behaves exactly like all the other languages, proving an impressive linguistic dynamic as the recent and rich vocabulary of the pandemic prides with newly created terms, new meanings, extensions, and deviations of meaning, some forming real families.

Nevertheless, linguists call these new words *barbarisms*, more precisely terms borrowed from a foreign language without being necessary and unassimilated or slang words (language specific to certain social or professional categories). They are usually terms improperly translated from the international press. These terms have been rolled out in official press releases and have often been taken up in public discourse without being explained. Still, language is a living organism, which transforms, evolves. It is possible that these newly entered terms in our vocabulary will disappear as quickly as they appeared.

They also began to be used out of the need to save words: we say "to quarantine" instead of "to set to quarantine"; or the verb "to impact" which has not been used before, whereas the noun "covid" as a short form of COVID 19 was turned into a verb proving once again the immense flexibility and versatility of Romanian language or, as pointed out prof. Gabriela Pană Dindelegan (2021), this phenomenon highlights the "vigor, richness and creative force" of the Romanian language.

3.1. Examples of Romanian use of the vocabulary of the pandemic

Some terms were just modeled according to foreign patterns, that is mainly English as it the most important source of information for Romanians, consequently new terms are being imported with identical form, others adapted, others simply translated. Here is a list of the most present one in the everyday discourse of non-specialists and media.

- *distantare sociala* (<engl.*social distance*) - "... pentru radicalii carora *distantarea socială* e o utopie, sau apropierea de infern".(<https://www.dw.com/ro/lumea-de-dupa-corona/a-53064317>)
- *carantina* - Metodologie pentru ieșirea din carantină în a 10 a zi cu efectuarea testului pentru SARS-COV-2 în a 8 a zi de *carantină* (https://dspb.ro/dspb-uploads/2021/08/IMG_0001.pdf).
- *Lockdown* (<engl.*lockdown*) -Frica de *lockdown* întârzie măsurile care ar putea salva vieți.
- *certificat digital* (<engl.*digital certificate*) (<https://romania.europalibera.org/a/romania-lockdown/>). *CertIFICATELE digitale* COVID-19 pentru călătoriile în UE se pot descărca din portalul <https://certificat-covid.gov.ro/>.
- *auto-izolare* (<engl.*self-isolation*) - Care este diferența dintre *autoizolarea* la domiciliu și *carantină*? (<https://www.unicef.org>)
- *Asimptotic, asimptomatica, asipmptomatici, asimptomatice* (<engl.*asymptomatic*) - Prevederi importante în cazul celor *asimptomatici* (<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate>).
- *Campanie de vaccinare* (<engl.*vaccination campaign*) – *Campanie de vaccinare* da roade, 80.627 de români s-au vaccinat în ultimele 24 de ore. (<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate>).
- *Rata de vaccinare* (<engl. *vaccination rate*) - *Țările cu rate mari de vaccinare din Europa iau măsuri din ce în ce mai dure.* (<https://alephnews.ro>).
- *noua normalitate* (<engl.*new normal*)– *Munca de acasa e noua normalitate* pentru români.(<https://www.mediafax.ro/social>)
- *munca de acasă/ munca remote* (<*working from home*) - *Munca remote* îi afectează și pe noii angajați deoarece aceștia nu se integrează în echipă (<https://www.mediafax.ro/social>).
- *Lucrători în prima linie* (<engl.*front line workers*) - *Protejarea tuturor lucrătorilor din prima linie este importantă, ei fiind cei mai vulnerabili la riscurile pentru sănătate* (<https://www.unicef.org/moldova/>).
- *Prima doza/a doua doza* (< *first dose*) - Pentru doza a doua au mers 44.348 de români, în timp ce 17.978 au făcut a *treia doza* (<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate>).
- *Primul val/ al doilea val* (<*first wave*) – Focarul initial din Wuhan a fost *primul val* al pandemiei (<https://www.dw.com/ro>).
- *Școala on-line* (<online school) - când elevii de la stat reiau cursurile după ...să se intre în *școală online* (<https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-educatie-25135647-cimpeanu-exista-sanse-din-8-noiembrie-scoala-inceapa-online.htm>).

Metaphors for COVID-19 are also taken from the war terminology as in English:

- *război* - Acest *razboi* a silit tarile sa-si inchida granitele si sa-si opreasca exporturile, ... (<https://www.dw.com/ro/lumea-de-dupa-corona/a-53064317>)
- *criza prezentă* - Sper că ne vom aduce aminte de asta nu doar pe durata *crizei prezente*, ci și după ce aceasta se va fi încheiat. <https://www.dw.com/ro/yuval-noah-harari-cel-mai-mare-pericol-nu-este-virusul-%C3%AEn-sine/a-53224160>
- *situația epidemiologică* - În cazul în care *situația epidemiologică nu se îmbunătățește*, elevii nu se vor întoarce fizic la școală după vacanța de două săptămâni. https://www.romaniatv.net/scoli-inchise-si-dupa-8-noiembrie-elevii-vor-face-cursuri-online-dupa-vacanta_5930148.html

Abbreviations that became words themselves copying the English model: PCR test, ATI, DSP, with the derivative DSP-ist, DSU.

- COVID itself was initially taken as an acronym, hence the writing of each component in capital letters, but has lost its acronymic meaning over time.
- *test PCR* – Dacă o persoană a trecut prin boală și deține certificat digital mai are nevoie de test *RT-PCR negativ* pentru a călători? (<http://www.mae.ro/node/51759>)
- *DSP* - Datele *DSP* de duminică dimineată confirmă trendul de scădere (<https://www.bihon.ro/stirile-judetului-bihor/bihorul-cea-mai-mare-incidenta-covid-din-tara-trei-orase-din-bihor-ocupa-primele-trei-locuri-3853391>).

In this process, Professor Dindelegan (2021) noted that not only the simple terms, invaded the vocabulary, but also the derivatives themselves", such as "izoletă", after the model *bicicletă*, *motocicletă*, "anticovid", "noncovid", derivatives with negative prefixes.

Romanian speakers convert 'COVID' into a verb- Câți *s-au covidat* zilele acestea? There are compounds with proper prefixes and those with prefixoids or suffixoids, such as *coronavirus*, *coronasceptic*, *pandemic*, *thermoscanning*, *vaccinosceptic*..

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we have provided information on aspects regarding the neologisms of the pandemic vocabulary and the attitudes and energy it causes in a language. Some of these words, phrases, idioms looked upon gravitate around the theme of dealing with difficult situations. Linguists believe that many of the terms currently in use will not endure. The ones with a stronger chance of remaining and maybe being included in dictionaries are those that describe lasting behavioural changes. Creativity is the key word of the present vocabulary, and it reflects the role of language as a means of coping mechanism. These innovative usages, enable people to name even the unnameable; and once you can name whatever is difficult, for instance, the practices, it just gives people power and a sense of belonging through shared vocabulary and of belonging, of not being alone. Ingenuity with vocabulary communicate as well that the current difficult situations will not last forever. As always, language serves its purpose.

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