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COVID-19 and its Linguistic Variants from “Miss Rona” to “Boomer Remover”

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact on everyday language and has led to unprecedented linguistic innovation and lexical explosion, ranging from the medicalisation of everyday language to the creation of new word formations that have defined new situations and overcome the fear of an unknown disease. In this paper, after briefly introducing the main linguistic features of English neologisms created to define changes in life style during the pandemic, a survey of the main English monikers coined to rename COVID-19 will be given taking into account the most recent studies on the subject.

Keywords: COVID-19 nicknames, corona coinages, the language of pandemic

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected our lives, strained the global health system and imposed the adoption of numerous new Covid-related terms that have quickly enriched our personal lexicon in various ways. Old and new medical terms, phrases and abbreviations such as *COVID-19*, *incubation period*, *asymptomatic*, *super spreader*, *PPE* (Personal Protective Equipment) have become part of everyday usage, forcing us to understand important differences (e.g. epidemic vs. pandemic) or mechanisms (e.g. *mRNA-vaccine*; *cytokine storm*) to keep abreast of the ongoing pandemic.

In addition, many pre-existing words such as *remote* and *breakthrough*, to name a few, quickly took on new pandemic-specific meanings. For example, prior the COVID-19 outbreak, the word *remote* mainly referred to something that was distant in space (e.g. a *remote* village), in time (e.g. *remote* times) and in kinship (e.g. a *remote* cousin), or it was associated with control mechanisms (e.g. *remote* control). With the advent of COVID-19, this word was mainly used in the context of learning (e.g. *remote* learning), working (e.g. *remote* working) and voting (e.g. *remote* voting). The word *breakthrough* originally referred to a sudden, dramatic and important discovery or development (adj. *breakthrough* discovery; n. medical *breakthrough*) but its new pandemic-specific meaning has been associated with vaccines and inoculations. A *breakthrough* infection is indeed an infection of a fully vaccinated person (CDC, 2021). At the same time, pre-existing words, such as *facemask* or *mask*, have had a ‘cultural’ update in their meaning. Before the pandemic, this disposable device was mainly worn by health professionals in surgery or by immunocompromised individuals. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became important to reduce the risk of spreading pathogens through the air and wearing a mask in public took on two different symbolic meanings. On the one hand, some people saw it as a prosocial act to protect the community, while others considered it as a violation of personal freedom by the authorities (Kemmelmeier & Jami, 2021). These new symbolic meanings led to the proliferation of 1) derivations such as the affixed forms *anti-mask* (e.g. *anti-mask* movement) and *anti-maskers* referring to people who refuse to wear a face mask and argue that the compulsory wearing of a mask violates their civil rights; 2) compounds such as *mask-shaming*, a contronym (a word having two opposite meanings) that “can refer either to the action of shaming someone for not wearing a mask, or the action of shaming someone for wearing it” (Oxford Languages, 2020: 12). These linguistic changes occurred simultaneously with an unprecedented proliferation of new words created at a rapid pace by journalists in the press and people on social platforms as a coping mechanism against social isolation (Ro, 2020). Indeed, from mid-March 2020 until the start of the vaccination campaign, people around the world were forced to *stay at home* to reduce the risk of contracting and spreading the virus, experiencing negative feelings of fear, uncertainty and stress. In this stressful state, the Internet became more than ever the only contact with the outside world, leading people to a compulsive use of social and video platforms and causing the *#doomscrolling* effect, i.e. the practice of compulsively checking and reading gloomy news online about COVID-19. In this scenario, social platform users and journalists

began to coin the so-called *coronacoinages*¹, new words to name what was going on in the world, using *netspeak* - the special language people use when communicating online (Crystal, 2001) - in a slightly anxious humorous way as a coping mechanism for fear and anxiety (Dalzell, 2014; Dickson, 2011). Wordplays such as the blends² *covidiot* (covid + idiot), an epithet for someone who ignores safety protocols to prevent the spread of the virus and *Blursday* (Blur + Thursday) denoting the weak sense of time when in isolation, or compounds such as *covideo party*³ (an online party via video platforms) were coined by ordinary people and, to some extent by journalists in the English speaking world, to make sense of the profound changes that have become part of our lives (Lawson, 2020; Al-Salman & Haider, 2021). These linguistic changes (the medicalisation of everyday language, the semantic expansion of pre-existing words and the neologisms) have led many lexicographers around the world to follow and study the language of the pandemic (*coronaspeak*) to identify the main linguistic changes and the new lexical formations that 'affected' the vocabulary of ordinary people when they talked about the new coronavirus.

Apart from the medicalisation of everyday language and the semantic expansion of pre-existing words, most of the new lexical formations are mainly English neologisms that have emerged on the Twitter platform. *Covidiot*, for example, is originally an English word coined on social platforms and translated into other languages (Fr. *covidiot*; It. *covidiota*). Of course, these neologisms are not confined to English, and Latin-based languages, such as French and Italian, have their own new words (e.g. Fr. *Lundimanche*, *coronabdo*; It. *covida*, *coviddiano*), even though it is undeniable that English neologisms are the most numerous. One of the main reasons for the high frequency of new English words to define life changes during the pandemic is that they were mainly coined on the Twitter platform. This platform is one of the most popular social media in English-speaking countries. The US is the most active Twitter country in the world (76.9 million) and the UK is among the top 10 countries with the most Twitter users (18.4 million), while countries such as France (10 million), Spain (8.75 million) and Italy (not among the top 20 countries with the most Twitter users), are less active. Moreover, most of Twitter users in English-speaking countries belong mainly to the young generation (18-34) and partly to the middle-aged

¹*Coronacoinages* is a term coined by the American linguist Zimmer who first used the *#coronacoinages* to track the pandemic-era new blends on Twitter platform on 13th March 2020 (Zimmer, 2020).

²A blend is a word formed by fusing two (or sometimes more) words together, so that part of the material of these words is lost (Beliaeva, 2019).

³*Covideo* is a blend in which the beginning of the word *Covid* is joined with the ending of the word *video*.

group (35-49). Therefore, it is not surprising that most of the studies on these new word formations have focused mainly on this platform. In the following sections, after introducing the main linguistic features of these neologisms, an overview of the new ways of renaming COVID-19 on the Twitter platform will be given according to the most recent research on the topic.

When netspeak meets coronaspeak: the coronacoinages

Since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic more than 1,000 new words have entered the everyday language in a very short time (Thorne, 2020). To track and analyse these new lexical formations, Thorne (2020), a linguist and specialist in contemporary English slang, compiled an online *Lockdown lexicon, Covidictionary, Glossary of coronacoinages* using various sources such as his website and the Twitter platform to collect the *coronacoinages* created during the pandemic. The *coronacoinages*, included in his lists, are not only new words but also adaptations of existing terms and old technical words that have passed into everyday usage. The neologisms included in his glossary are nicknames, abbreviations, slang and puns used by ordinary people (rarely by journalists). They are divided into four main lexical categories: 1) description of new realities (e.g. *coronapocalypse* (corona+apocalypse) that indicates the effects of the pandemic seen as a catastrophe; 2) home working and teleconferencing (e.g. *WFT* – working from home); 3) demographics (e.g. *Coronials*, a blend of corona and millennials, referring to the generation born during the pandemic); 4) security measures (e.g. *Wuhan shake*, a greeting to avoid shaking hands). Many of these terms are neologisms but some of them such as *elbpump* or *elbow pump*⁴ are words reintroduced during the pandemic. Neologisms are in fact ‘nonce words’, that is lexemes created for a single occasion to meet an immediate need and cease to be so when they are adopted by a community (Crystal, 2008). Several lexicographers believe that many of these new terms will not be used anymore with the end of the current pandemic, as they are closely associated with this need (Crystal, 2020). Although these neologisms may no longer be part of our everyday language in the post-pandemic era, they have brought with them various forms of linguistic innovation. In the search for the main linguistic features of Covid-related neologisms, recent studies (e.g. Nabila & Abdulrahman, 2021; Orel & Vasik, 2021; Crystal, 2020; Afrika *et al.*, 2021; Al-Salman & Haider, 2021) have found that these lexemes are more popular on social platforms (especially on Twitter) and are mainly hashtags created through word formation processes such as blending, compounding and shortening. It is not surprising that most of the new lexemes are hashtags as, during the first phase of the pandemic,

⁴*Elbow pump* is a greeting introduced during the 2009 swine flu pandemic in which two people touch elbows instead of shaking hands to reduce the risk of infection.

most of the conversation about COVID-19 took place on social media. Hashtags - words, acronyms and phrases preceded by the symbol # acting as a kind of keyword that categorises posts on particular topics - have indeed quickly become an extremely efficient way to facilitate conversations and discussions about COVID-19. Analysing five million of Covid-related hashtags collected from January to June 2020, Al-Azzawi & Ali Haleem (2021) found that new Covid-related words were created through blending, compounding and clipping⁵ to describe new situations or people's behaviour. These coinages also included various humorous wordplays created to rename COVID-19 although some of them were unfortunately derogatory and offensive.

COVID-19 and its virus: their official and common terms

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2015) gave scientists specific guidelines for naming an emerging disease to avoid using terms that included geographical locations (e.g. Spanish flu), people's names (e.g. eponyms), animal species or food (e.g. swine flu), cultural or occupational references (e.g. Legionnaires) and hyperbolic terms that create fear (e.g. fatal, plague), as these terms can have serious consequences for people's lives and livelihoods. Therefore, the name for an emerging disease should consist of general or specific descriptive terms (e.g. respiratory syndrome) in which the pathogen that causes the disease should be part of the disease name (e.g. COVID-19) and pathogens do not discriminate.

When the first cases of COVID-19 appeared in Wuhan, China, in December 2020, the disease was referred to as pneumonia of unknown cause. A month later, the virus that caused this unknown type of pneumonia was called 'novel coronavirus' abbreviated as 'nCov' or '2019-nCov'. It was not until 11 February 2020 that the WHO coined the acronym COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019), a descriptive and monoreferential term to refer to the disease caused by a new coronavirus first identified in 2019. At the same time, the International Committee for Taxonomy of Viruses referred to the virus causing the disease as SARS-CoV-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome- Coronavirus 2) where the number 2 refers to a new type of coronavirus that is genetically related to SARS-CoV-1 (the agent responsible for the 2003 SARS outbreak in Asia) but different. Nevertheless, the WHO decided to use the phrases 'the virus responsible for COVID-19' or the 'COVID-19 virus' to name SARS-CoV-2 when communicating with the public, as the name SARS may have created unnecessary fear for some populations that had been affected by the SARS-outbreak in 2003 (WHO, 2020). Furthermore, these sentences are easier to understand and memorise

⁵Clipping is the process of shortening a word without changing its meaning or part of speech.

because they avoid the use of opaque abbreviations (SARS-CoV-2) that might be difficult for laypeople to understand.

The term COVID-19 was added to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) in April 2020 in small letters except for the initial letter (Covid-19). According to the OED, the preferred form in New Zealand and British English is *Covid-19*, while in the United States, Canada and Australia *COVID-19* is preferred. However, health organisations such as the WHO and the CDC (Center for Disease Control) always use capital letters. From a linguistic point of view, one of the most important changes associated with the word *COVID-19* concerns the semantic change of the word *coronavirus* in the press and in common usage. In general, coronaviruses are a large family of RNA viruses that can cause respiratory infections in humans ranging from the common cold to severe respiratory syndrome (SARS). Indeed, SARS-CoV-2 is a subtype of coronavirus and COVID-19 is a disease caused by this specific coronavirus subtype. However, a study (Haddan Haddan & Montero-Martinez, 2020) on a large corpus of international electronic newspapers written in English found that journalists' articles incorrectly used the word coronavirus as a synonym for COVID-19. This trend can also be observed in Latin-based languages such as French and Italian which widely used *coronavirus* as synonym for COVID-19 often shortened into *Covid*.

The inaccurate use of the term *coronavirus* in the press may have contributed to the spread of this false association in common usage, as the media played a central role in informing people during the pandemic. Indeed, *COVID-19* and *COVID* were widely used incorrectly and interchangeably with *coronavirus*, and once disease names become established in common usage through the Internet, social media and political parties, they often change their original names.

COVID-19 and the popularisation of a disease

A recent in-depth analysis (Lillo, 2020) of the different ways COVID-19 has been renamed on Twitter showed that *Covid-19* and *coronavirus* are used as synonyms and are often reduced to *Covid* or shortened to *corona*. This study also found that Twitterers used affixation and shortening to create playful variations, rhymes and puns of these base lexemes. In particular, the word *corona* seems to be the most productive base lexeme when it comes to creating playful formations, while *Covid* seems to be less prolific. Alternative variants for *Covid* are terms formed by adding: 1) suffixes for jocularly such as *coviddy* (UK), *coviddo* and *covidsky* (Australia), *covids* (Canada), *covidz* (US); 2) decorative suffixes to the clipping of *Covid* such as *covvy* or *cove*. *Covid* is also, sometimes, shortened to atypical initialisms as *C-19*, *CV-19*, *CV*, *C-virus* and *the C* or used in compounds as *the big 19*, *the big C*, *the C-disease* and the *C-word disease* or *C-word*.

The term *coronavirus* is instead often shortened to *corona* or to the informal clipped form *rona* leading to create forms based on the homophony between *rona* (coronavirus) and the feminine name *Rona* such as *Lady Rona*, *Sister Rona*, *Aunt Rona*, *Mama Rona* or *Miss Rona*. Playful variations of the truncated *rona* include *macarona* and *macaroni* for comic effect, and the alternative *macarena*, which recalls a famous Spanish song from the 1990s. Other direct references to the world of music include: 1) *Sharona*, *My Sharona* or the compound *Sharona virus*, referring to the famous 1970s song “My Sharona” written by the singer Doug Fieger and dedicated to his girlfriend Sharona; 2) the rhymed slang *Miley Cyrus* or *Billy Ray Cyrus*, the singers (daughter and father) whose surname is phonetically reminiscent of the word virus (Cyrus vs. Virus). Finally, another creative playful variation is the shortening *nCoV* (novel coronavirus) which has led to amusing phrases such as ‘No Chocolates on Valentines’, ‘No Contact on Valentines’ or ‘No Care on Valentines’, reinvented during the lockdown period on Valentine’s Day (Cahapay, 2020). These playful neologisms highlight the well-known linguistic creativity of Twitterers (Orel & Vasik, 2021; Roig-Marin, 2021), who triggered by the desire to be funny and ironic in a stressful situation, usually create unique hashtags\words to make their followers smile and to build a sense of community (Rauschnabel *et al.* 2019).

The Beer Virus

Among the different slang monikers used to rename COVID-19, several nicknames are based on the association between the novel coronavirus disease and a famous Mexican beer brand, poking fun at the homophony between the clipped form *corona* and the famous Mexican beer. Coinages such as *beer virus*, referring to the novel coronavirus disease, were launched on the Twitter platform with a humorous intent, leading to various interesting nicknames but also unintended negative consequences for the company’s brand. One of the most common monikers used on social platforms is the above-mentioned homophone-based pun *beer virus*, a moniker that was also used as synonym for COVID-19 by Congressman Don Young during a public event in 2020 in Alaska. When politicians use coinages as taunts in public and on official occasions, these coinages are “perceived not as wit or humour but as heartless mockery” (Lillo, 2020: 420), leading to outrage and hurting those who are the target of these taunts. As a matter of fact, the use of the *beer virus* as a synonym for the coronavirus disease has had a negative economic impact on the beer brand. Two surveys conducted during the first phase of the pandemic in the US found that 38% of Americans would not buy Corona beer under any circumstances because of what they believed to be a link between the coronavirus disease and the beer, as shown by the increase in online searches for ‘corona beer virus’ and ‘beer coronavirus’. However, the name

association between the disease and beer appeared to be specific to English speaking consumers. In neo-Latin languages such as Italian and Spanish, the term *corona*, of Latin origins, means crown, while in English it is used only in specific contexts such as astronomy, but means nothing in general English. The word *coronavirus* is, in fact, a compound (*corona* + *virus*) in which the first element refers to the Latin word *corona* (crown). This word is also a metaphor based on the similarity between the appearance of the virus, which has crown-like spikes under a microscope, and a crown. The name of the Mexican brand, on the other hand, is derived from the crown that adorns the Cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the town of Puerto Vallarta. Although there is no semantic association between the two words, this homophony has produced various interesting names, mainly made up of compounds. Among the various examples listed by Lillo (2020), there are noun phrases in which the word *corona* as synonym for COVID-19 is associated, in a jocular way, with Corona beer, such as *Mexican lager beer*, *Pale lager virus* or *Mexican beer disease*. In these cases the premodifiers *Mexican*, *pale* and *lager* respectively denote the origin, the characteristics and the style of the beer (*lager* is a type of bottom-fermented and conditioned cool beer). Lillo (2020) also mentioned compounds that refer directly to COVID-19, such as *beer-19* and its Spanish equivalent *Cerveza19*. In some cases, *beer* is used in compounds that elicit fears such as *beer pox* or *beer plague*. The hyperbolic terms *plague* and *pox* refer to infectious diseases that decimated populations. In particular, the word *pox* generally refers to any viral disease that causes a skin rash and pustules (e.g. chickenpox). However, *pox* may also refer to syphilis known as the Great pox or French disease and in an informal context is also historically associated with smallpox. Other compounds, on the contrary, refer to the deadly virus in a less scary way, associating it with a flu⁶ downplaying the virus, e.g. *beer flu* or *lager flu*. This strategy is also used in other compounds where *corona* is defined as a *bug* (an informal word referring to a mild disease caused by small organisms), such as *cerveza bug* or *beer bug*, which once again mitigates the severity of the disease. The tendency to downplay or amplify the severity of COVID-19 is not only confined to these nicknames but is also common to other monikers which are used in a derogatory and discriminative way and refer to specific groups of people.

COVID-19 and its derogatory nicknames: the case of holocough

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the use of racist, xenophobic and offensive new terms used on social media to rename the disease which have been triggered by conspiracy theories or racist behaviours (Tsao *et al.*, 2021). Conspiracy theories often emerge and spread in times of confusion (such as

⁶ The clipped word *flu* is commonly used to indicate *influenza*.

the current pandemic) and upheaval, leading people to look for a scapegoat (Hay, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theorists assumed that COVID-19 was deliberately created for malevolent purposes, which provide fertile ground for anti-Semites who blamed Jews for spreading the virus. On social platforms, derogatory hashtags such as *#holocough* or *#Jewflu* proliferated offending the Jewish Community and showing that whenever there is a major crisis in the world, anti-Semites use it to spread their hatred for Jews (CST, 2020). *Holocough* is in fact an offensive blend (Holocaust+cough) in which the initial word *holocaust*, truncated into *holo*, refers to the genocide of European Jews during World War II while the second element, *cough*, refers to one of the main symptoms of COVID-19 and/or one of the primary modes of transmission of the novel coronavirus. This offensive hashtag sadly jokes on the assonance between holocaust and *holocough* and finds its root in the historical practice of associating Jews with disease and in the ancient myth of the Black Death. During the Black Death, Jews were falsely accused of causing the bubonic plague by poisoning wells, with the malevolent intention of killing the whole Christendom and gaining lordship over the world (Gilman, 2021). Furthermore, the root of this anti-Semitic attack could also be that during the pandemic in the UK and in the US (New York), positive rates in Ultra-Orthodox communities were twice as high as elsewhere and Jews were labelled as spreaders of the virus because of their religious and social life. Indeed, one of the memes used in anti-Semitic posts encourages people to ‘give a hug if you have a bug spreading the flu to every Jew’ reinforcing the anti-Semitic hoax that Jews were the main spreaders of the virus. Unfortunately, these discriminative and offensive new terms linking Jews to plagues and viruses (Black Death and COVID-19) show that history repeats itself and older models of stigmatisation re-appear blaming a population (in this case Jews) for epidemic outbreaks.

But as the pandemic evolves, discrimination takes new forms and shifts the focus on the people who, for different reasons, were exposed to the virus that in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic were Chinese and older people.

The Chinese virus

The name of diseases, especially contagious ones, have often been associated with geographical locations (e.g. Spanish flu). Syphilis, for example, was renamed in different ways. Germans and British people renamed it *French disease* and blamed the French for its spread, while the French renamed it *Neapolitan disease* and blamed the Italians for its spread. In search of a scapegoat, people all over the world usually rename a contagious disease by using toponyms to shake off the responsibility for causing it. Thus, it is not surprising that in the first phase of the pandemic, China became ‘the foreigner’

responsible for causing and spreading COVID-19 since the first cases of this emerging disease were identified in that country. Indeed, China and Chinese people were immediately associated with the pandemic, reactivating the old negative stereotype of the corrupted ‘Sick man of Asia’ living in the home of plague because of his unusual habit of eating a wide range of exotic wild animals. Thus, offensive toponyms such as *Wuhan Flu*, *Wuhan virus*, *Chinese Flu*, *China virus*, *Kung flu* and *China plague* were launched on social platforms, also triggered by the unethical and questionable behaviour of Donald Trump who often used these toponymic compounds at public events and on Twitter as shown by a recent study on Trump’s speeches during the presidential election campaign (Kurilla, 2021). According to this study, Donald Trump used *China virus* 228 times, *China plague* 43 times, *Chinese virus* 25 times and *Chinese plague*, *Wuhan virus*, *Kung flu* and *Chinese flu* less than 20 times. The constant and targeted use of these new xenophobic compounds has undoubtedly exacerbated discrimination against Asian Americans and Asian people living all over the world. Although the WHO warned against referring to COVID-19 as the *China virus* and media accused Trump of xenophobic views, these discriminatory monikers spread on Twitter mainly as hashtags. Most of these hashtags were widely adopted in the US (Kurilla, 2021) and included compounds where the head noun was often *virus* or *coronavirus*, alternately associated with Wuhan, the epicentre of the new coronavirus outbreak, or China (e.g. *Chinese virus*, *China virus*, *China coronavirus*, *Chinese coronavirus* or *Chinese virus corona*, *Wuhan virus*). Moreover, various neologisms referred to specific symptoms triggered by viral respiratory tract infections such as *Wuhan wheezer* where *wheezer* denotes a person wheezing due to *Wuhan virus*, or potential complications such as *Wuhan pneumonia* or the blended form *Wumonia* (Wuhan + pneumonia). Other neologisms, however, downplayed the severity of COVID-19 by using as base lexeme *flu* defining the new disease as *Wuhan flu*, which is sometimes clipped into *Wuflu* or blended into *Wufluenza* (Wuhan + Influenza) or by including *Covid* in their formation such as the clipped compound *Chicovid flu* (China+Covid). Hyperbolic terms are, on the contrary, included in compounds such as *Wuhan plague* or clipped compounds such as *Wubonic plague*, where *Wubonic* (a blend of *Wuhan* and *bubonic*) is a clear allusion to the massive bubonic plague that claimed 50 million lives in the 14th century, but also a sad pun on the assonance between Bubonic plague and *Wubonic*. Other coinages are formed by compounds such as *Chinese Aids* and *Wuhan Aids*, which associate COVID-19 with AIDS and emphasise the discrimination against the Chinese. At last, another word compound used to define COVID-19 is *Kung Flu*, a pun on Chinese martial arts (Kung Fu) originally used by a White House official to refer to the deadly virus, although it appears that *Kung Flu* has been used in other contexts. *Kung Flu fighter* is in fact the brand of a flavoured

herbal infusion that appears to protect against ‘nasty viruses’ and whose packaging features a caricature of an Asian fighter dressed like ‘Kill Bill’, the main character of Quentin Tarantino’s film (Kurilla, 2021).

Ageist monikers

The overrepresentation of COVID-19 deaths among older adults during the ongoing pandemic has led to the proliferation of ageist hashtags coined to rename COVID-19 on the Twitter platform. The idea that anyone over 70 (in Australia) or 65 (in Europe) should be isolated exacerbated the stigmatisation and marginalisation of older persons (Ayalon *et al.*, 2020). Older adults were portrayed as vulnerable, frail and helpless in the face of COVID-19 and their deaths were seen as an inevitable and normal outcome of this pandemic (Fraser *et al.* 2020), while young adults perceived themselves, especially in the first phase of the pandemic, as immune to the virus but were also portrayed as potential super spreaders. These representations have contributed to providing a fertile ground for the timeless intergenerational war transforming COVID-19 into a *boomericide*. Ageist hashtags such as the compounds *senior deleter*, *boomer doomer*, *elder repeller*, *boomer deleter*, *boomer eradicator*, *boomer eraser*, *boomer remover* or the word *boomericide* have been used to describe COVID-19 on social media. These neologisms implied that COVID-19 was designed to remove/delete older adults from society in favour of the young. As a matter of fact, except for *boomer doomer*, the neologisms *boomericide*, *boomer remover*, *boomer purge*, *boomer killer*, *boomer eliminator*, *boomer eradicator*, *senior deleter* and *elder repeller* have in common the dehumanising idea of erasing (*eraser*, *eliminator*), repressing (*repeller*), killing (*-cide*) and removing (*-purge*, *eradicator*) a waste matter (Boomers) from society. Hence, it seems that Boomers, the generation born between 1946 and 1965 during the baby boom, who were at higher risk in the COVID-19 pandemic were accused of doing something wrong and for that reason had to be ‘removed’. Among the above-mentioned compounds, the hashtag *boomerremover* is undoubtedly the most widely used and studied. Several studies (Skipper & Rose, 2020; Jimenez-Sotomayor *et al.*, 2020; Sipocz *et al.*, 2021) have found that *#boomerremover* reflects the younger generation’s resentment towards Boomers who are blamed by younger Twitter users as responsible for many of today’s problems such as climatic changes, healthcare and social security. As a matter of fact, this crowded cohort is staying in the workforce longer (for financial necessity and the desire to remain active) holding on to jobs that would otherwise be filled by the next generation. With the number of people aged 65 and older growing much faster than the working-age population, rising long-term government spending will drive the national debt to alarming levels, leaving younger generations with a mountain of debt. Moreover, Baby Boomers are also blamed for producing

islands of plastic, decimating forests and filling the atmosphere with carbon dioxide at a rate that scientists warn will warm the globe by several degrees, with catastrophic effects on the atmosphere. Thus, the hashtag *boomerremover* as a synonym for COVID-19, unfortunately, functions as a ‘generational equaliser’ (Skipper & Rose, 2020) that devalues the role and value of the elderly. Although this hashtag is often defined as a joke and a playful way of describing old people, presenting the Boomer removal as a problem solver or a solution to the problems of younger generations, inevitably and sadly undermines the value of Boomers’ lives.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on our daily communication proving that world events and major social changes always entail important linguistic changes. In trying to make sense of the profound changes that have become part of our lives, various linguistic changes have affected all registers from the formal to the informal, resulting in an unprecedented lexical explosion that has occurred faster than ever before. Many of these new word creations have emerged on social platforms which, in the first phase of the pandemic, quickly became a virtual place where people expressed their frustrations and fears, and used their linguistic creativity as a coping mechanism (Orel & Vasik, 2021; Roig-Marin, 2021). Many of these Covid-related neologisms included a wide range imaginative, colourful and playful hashtags or words used to rename COVID-19, revealing a desire to face the grim reality of the disease with a smile. Unfortunately, in some cases, these coinages were also offensive and made fun of certain groups of people sarcastically or in a mocking tone, looking for an established scapegoat or reactivating old stereotypes and racist and ageist prejudices. In conclusion, although many of these word creations are likely to disappear completely by the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the widespread use of slang names for COVID-19 on social platforms illustrates the lexical creativity of their users who triggered by the need to discuss and share emotions reflected their fears and prejudices in a time of unprecedented global anxiety.

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