

The Impact of The Covid-19 Pandemic on The Lexical System of The French Language

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Abstract: This article analyzes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lexical system of the French language from a linguistic perspective. It explores the emergence of new words, the semantic expansion of existing terms, and the integration of anglicisms and social neologisms. Through examples such as covidiot, coronapéro, déconfinement, and distanciation sociale, the study examines the mechanisms of linguistic adaptation to rapidly evolving social realities. The article highlights how global events like pandemics accelerate neologization, terminological shifts, and semantic transfer. The findings reflect the dynamic relationship between language and social context during times of crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19, neologism, lexical change, neologisms and neonyms, neosemy, polysemy, semantic neologism, covidiot, coronapéro, déconfinement, distanciation sociale.

Introduction: In our daily lives, new technologies and innovative devices are being developed continuously. Naturally, these innovations and inventions are reflected in language. In this process, the way people perceive and conceptualize the world, as well as the stylistic choices they make in conveying these perceptions, play a crucial role. Sometimes, newly created objects are named through analogies and metaphors; at other times, borrowed terms are employed.

Throughout this development, we also encounter force majeure situations, which raise the issue of how new objects and processes are to be named and how these names are reflected in different languages. In recent years, the emergence of Covid-19—a global crisis that shook the world—has given rise to new concepts and representations across all languages, including French.

The World Health Organization (WHO) assigned the viral disease the abbreviated name SARS-CoV-2 for the virus and COVID-19 for the illness. The abbreviation “COVID-19” is derived from English: “CO” for “corona,” “VI” for “virus,” “D” for “disease,” and “19” indicating the year 2019, when the outbreak occurred.

Literature review

According to Professor Benoît Melançon, this linguistic phenomenon—namely, the desire to mitigate a difficult situation and to restore a sense of control through language—has also been observed in historical events. He draws attention, for example, to the semantic expansion of the word corbillard (hearse) dating back to the time of the Black Death, and that of tsunami following the devastating disaster of 2004. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact not only on the global public health system but also on the lexical systems of various languages. In the French language in particular, it has led to the creation of new words, the semantic expansion of existing terms, and notable changes in patterns of usage within social discourse.

These transformations have been officially documented in dictionaries such as Le Petit Robert 2022 and Le Petit Larousse illustré 2022, which respectively added 26 and 48 new words or meanings. For instance, Marie-Hélène Drivaud, in her article “Lexicovid,” analyzes neologisms, terminological shifts, and processes of semantic adaptation that emerged during the COVID-19 period. She does so within the broader tradition of studying how historical events—such as wars and terrorist attacks—leave a linguistic

imprint.

METHODOLOGY

As a consequence of the pandemic, a wide range of neologisms (such as *distanciation sociale*, *quatorzaine*, *covid long*), neosemantic developments (*télé médecine*, *télétravail*), metaphors (*guerre contre le virus*, *épidémie comme catastrophe naturelle*, *frontière sanitaire*, *bulle familiale*, *coupe-circuit*), and borrowed terms (*lockdown*, *cluster*) have contributed to the emergence of a distinct and context-specific lexicon. These new conceptualizations reflect how individuals and societies sought to comprehend an unprecedented situation and to rapidly adapt to numerous challenges.

RESULTS

Additionally, the internal resources of the language were activated, leading to the productive use of prefixes such as *anti-* (*antivax*), *dé-* (*déconfinement*, *déconfiner*), *télé-* (*télétravail*, *téléconsultation*), and *re-* (*reconfinement*), as well as the emergence and widespread usage of new formations with the prefix *corona-* (e.g., *coronabond*, *coronapas*, *coronapiste*, *coronapéro*). In response to the specific needs and circumstances of the time, new terms were also coined to address local or situational realities. While many of these were not officially integrated into dictionaries, they gained wide usage among the population.

For example, the term *coronapistes* was created to refer to temporary bike lanes (*pistes cyclables*) established in some cities during the pandemic. Other neologisms emerged—often in humorous or satirical forms on social media—such as *covidiot* (referring to individuals who denied or disregarded public health measures), *mélancovid* (denoting a sense of melancholy linked to the pandemic), *covidivorce* (referring to divorces occurring during lockdown), *quarantini* (a cocktail consumed during quarantine), and *quarantine fatigue* (describing the physical and emotional exhaustion caused by prolonged lockdown measures, restrictions, and social distancing).

Words such as *confinement* (isolation), *lockdown* (quarantine), *distanciation sociale* (social distancing), and *passe sanitaire* (health pass) became widespread through news coverage, political discourse, and public health communications. Social media platforms—including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok—further amplified their dissemination. Hashtags and memes became popular tools for the informal, often

localized or humorous reinterpretation and circulation of these concepts.

Institutional and political discourses—those of health authorities, governments, and experts—acted as primary vectors for the spread of technical and medical terminology, often in forms adapted for public understanding. For instance, terms such as *quatorzaine* (a 14-day quarantine), *test PCR* (PCR test for detecting the coronavirus), *vaccin obligatoire* (mandatory vaccination), *immunité collective* (herd immunity), *couvre-feu* (curfew), and *pénurie* (shortage of medical protective equipment such as masks and respirators) entered everyday language through press conferences, public awareness campaigns, and institutional communication strategies.

Some terms—such as *travailleurs essentiels* (workers whose duties are considered critical during emergency or crisis situations)—not only described functional roles but also contributed to shaping social hierarchies and reflecting political priorities during the pandemic.

Concepts often spread through mechanisms such as imitation and repetition. Terms like *bulle sanitaire* (a personal health safety zone) or *courbe épidémique* (an epidemic curve used to represent the intensity and duration of disease transmission) were adopted and adapted by various segments of society, including organizations, families, schools, and others. Repetition in mass media facilitated their acceptance and integration into everyday discourse.

At the same time, cognitive processes such as metaphorization, personification, and metonymy played a significant role in how these concepts were perceived. These figurative strategies helped render certain terms more emotionally resonant and comprehensible. For instance, the widespread adoption of the metaphor *guerre contre le virus* ("war against the virus") illustrates how individuals conceptualized the threat of COVID-19. While some interpreted the pandemic as a war that needed to be won, others perceived the measures taken as excessive or oppressive. The reception of such metaphors directly influenced how people protected themselves and interacted with others.

For example, during the 2021 lockdown, the front pages of major French newspapers such as *Le Figaro*, and *Les Échos* frequently featured metaphors and personifications in their coverage of the pandemic.

Figure 1. Front-page headlines on COVID-19 from Le Figaro, and Les Échos.



Headlines such as “L’Europe face à la menace de pénurie” (“Europe faces the threat of shortages”—referring to the lack of masks and sanitary supplies), “L’Angleterre se reconfine, l’Europe s’inquiète” (“England reenters lockdown, Europe is worried”), and “Paris se masque, à son tour” (“Paris wears a mask, in turn”) illustrate the use of personification and semantic extension, where geographical entities like Europe, England, and Paris are animated to convey the urgency of the societal crisis. These linguistic choices aimed to render abstract developments more tangible and emotionally engaging for the public.

In the subsequent phase—after the diffusion of these

concepts—the acceptance of new terminology significantly influenced pandemic management and the shaping of social behaviors. The way individuals integrated these terms into their everyday vocabulary affected not only their perception of health measures but also their attitudes toward others and their conduct in social contexts.

The interpretation of pandemic-related terminology varied according to cultural and societal contexts. For example, the term quatorzaine (14-day quarantine) carried more flexible connotations in certain regions, allowing for localized adaptations that better aligned with cultural practices. In contrast, in other areas,

staying at home was not strictly enforced, and the associated restrictions were less rigid.

Similarly, the concept of *distanciation sociale* (social distancing) resonated differently across communities. In more tightly knit societies, this notion was more difficult to accept, as it conflicted with core values such as social closeness and solidarity.

Social factors such as age, socio-economic status, or group affiliation (e.g., young adults or the elderly) also played a crucial role in the reception and adoption of pandemic-related terminology. For instance, terms like “Zoom fatigue”—describing the mental and physical exhaustion resulting from prolonged virtual meetings on platforms like Zoom—were predominantly used by workers in the tertiary sector. Meanwhile, “long COVID”, referring to the condition in which symptoms persist well beyond the acute phase of illness, was primarily adopted by patients and health communities.

Pandemic-related terminology and concepts sometimes served to highlight or even intensify social disparities. The term “travailleurs essentiels” (essential workers), for example, exposed professional and social inequalities, drawing a distinction between those working in healthcare and those in other occupational sectors. At the same time, terms like “solidarité” (solidarity) and “unité nationale” (national unity) were employed to promote collective cooperation in the face of crisis.

Certain terms provoked resistance or critical reinterpretation. The phrase “passe sanitaire” (health pass), for example, sparked significant public debate, as some perceived it as an infringement on individual freedoms. In other contexts, terms such as “confinement” (lockdown) were rejected by segments of the population who viewed such measures as overly restrictive or unjust.

The reception and interpretation of COVID-19-related terminology were shaped by a variety of personal and social factors. Acceptance was often mediated by cognitive uncertainty, emotional responses, and personal experiences, all of which contributed to the differential integration of these concepts across contexts—and, in some cases, to their perception as sources of threat.

CONCLUSION

Emotional, cognitive, and social factors had a profound impact on the reception and understanding of COVID-19-related concepts. Cognitive processes such as categorization, metaphorization, and assimilation not only facilitated the comprehension of the public health crisis but also reshaped social behavior and attitudes toward the pandemic. How individuals interpreted and

internalized these concepts significantly influenced crisis management, compliance with health measures, and social dynamics within communities. Studying these cognitive processes provides deeper insight into the interaction between language, perception, and action during times of crisis.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a linguistic turning point in the contemporary development of the French language. It clearly demonstrated the direct link between newly formed lexical units and socio-cultural realities. This analysis offers valuable scientific material for understanding linguistic adaptation, social semantics, and how languages function within the framework of stability and change.

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