

# ***PANDEMIC LANGUAGE: A BATTLE FOR CONTROL OVER MORE THAN THE VIRUS***

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Days after the events of September 11, 2001, the world wrestled with finding words for many aspects of our changed lives, including the events themselves. "September 11," "nine one one," and "the attacks" all circulated with the term that was eventually settled upon: "nine eleven." Very little discussion about what this event would be labeled occurred during those early days. Later, the media would step back and reflect on how we got to "9/11": its resonance with emergency 911, and even the numeral 11 represented on bumper stickers as the twin towers. In other words, the discourse preceded the meta-discourse. The year 2020 brought us, seemingly overnight, another new world, a pandemic world, one in which we again search for language. As we wrestle with these present traumas, the linguistic navigation continues. Our need to make tangible something both invisible and global, touching so many lives and areas of each life, can again be found at the linguistic level, in how we communicate our shared experiences. This, our COVID-19 era, is also the world's first digital pandemic within an age of social media, and it is one of the first times we can watch language emerge and evolve simultaneously.

Our digital media world, developed when we first became accustomed to Internet use, has many characteristics, but one of its most prominent is its eradication of boundaries of time and space. People can communicate with

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whomever they want, wherever they want, and whenever they want. We might remember making “long-distance” calls, but our children have never heard that term referred to for communication. No communicating is long distance to them. Humans, natural meaning-making machines, are searching for labels and metaphors to make the abstract and unthinkable more concrete and knowable. The pandemic forces us to make time and space more visible and contained because both are essential to understanding and controlling the virus. Creating new language around concepts that seem particularly abstract and ephemeral in our digital world results in language that is developed and used, and then meta-analyzed through social media, all at the same time.

Much of the need to create a language out of, and to exist with, COVID-19 comes from the urgency of translating science for everyday people. This process includes developing new terms and metaphors to understand the science. Numbers related to time feature prominently in COVID-19: from the date in its very name to the required number of seconds of handwashing (20), and to the number of days of a quarantine (14, lately 7 to 10—while all along the root *quaranta* means 40 in Italian). People have learned how much the concept of time is bound up in our everyday activities as seen in the popularity of “What day is it?” memes. The answer usually is “Blursday.” One of the first techniques COVID-preventing people developed to translate, make sense of spans of time, such as the 20 seconds needed for sufficient handwashing, was to associate it with singing Happy Birthday (twice) or the “ABCs” (once), thus turning a vague time unit into an everyday concept. Other songs and familiar choruses followed as people began posting their favorite hand-washing tunes on the Internet (Silver 2020). In fact, the use of songs is not new but reminiscent of oral cultures, as described by scholar Walter Ong (1982). Ancient societies relied on lyrics and singing as a memory tool to help their cultures endure. Forcing adults to slow down their time by singing already-ingrained childhood songs is both practical and returns us to the comfort of ritualized singing to bring about safety. The pandemic, another time when society needs to focus on survival, takes us back to techniques that have worked in the past.

Songs, however, are not enough for more difficult time-embedded concepts. Trying to explain exponential growth and prediction of infection and death rates to members of a public who do not see themselves as “math people” was going to require first a new term, and then a way of explaining it, and thus the birth of “flatten the curve.” The term has had blander associations, usually in the world of finance, such as in a 2004 *New York Times* business article about “flattening the yield curve” (Fuerbringer 2004). The term, as related to COVID, first appeared in the *New York Times* in news and op-ed pieces in March 2020.

The phrase's usage changed little over the next three months, those early days to lockdown, except for a gradual disappearance of its surrounding quotation marks. The term first shows up within quoted interviews, then with scare-quotes around it, and then without, showing that it had been accepted by the paper and readers. But within those three months, digital social media was moving at a faster pace than that of the paper of record, and the phrase became embedded in popular culture. The metaphor of "flatten the curve" softens the far blunter "lower the death toll," but it also does more: it moves math into action. It brings these important numbers back to our tactile world to allow the public to see consequences and to make choices. The term, coupled with the visualization of it—our own and those images of curves in the paper—offers people understanding and control by allowing us to visualize time and space.

The control of COVID-19 also forces us to make space visible. One of our favorite memes is a picture of Winnie the Pooh annoyed with Piglet for violating social distancing. Imagining an angry Winnie is transgressive, but it also reflects how we tend not to notice space unless it is breached. Many stores have found that drawing boxes and lines at checkout counters is better than relying on the brains of humans to process and maintain these distances. Some elevators even have feet painted on the floor that face in opposite directions, reminding folks to turn away from each other. But there are times when we don't have painted feet, and conjuring what six feet really means will involve metaphors. Comedian Conan O'Brien used a life-sized cut-out of James Comey (who is famously 6 feet 8 inches tall) for a visual guide (Moore 2020). Other tips tell us to imagine being a refrigerator or two of our mailboxes away from the next person. New metaphors and new phrases are becoming a part of a COVID vocabulary that we are all creating, learning, and experiencing together.

Language innovation is not new. The natural tendency of language is always toward change, for several reasons. First, as with any variation in a population, new language learners (children) are "imperfect" and introduce innovation in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Since language is symbolic and malleable, it invites reinterpretation. Over time, for example, "a norange" became "an orange;" the adjective "nice" shifted from an insult to a compliment; and in recent decades, the "who/whom" distinction has been merging (Behrens 2018). Furthermore, when groups of speakers (speech communities) are separated over time, space, and the time/space boundaries of social divisions, in-group changes in language take root but do not spread, thus accelerating language distinctions. Sometimes language change is slow, as when the slang of a younger generation goes mainstream: the word "selfie" was considered edgy at one point in the recent past. Sometimes change is fast, seen

within weeks when a phrase goes “viral,” such as the introduction of the term “ghosting” to illustrate suddenly being ignored in a world where communication is instantaneous. Sometimes new words don’t take off, such as the 2006 American Dialect Society’s (2007) word of the year “plutoed” to mean demoted. Popular and social media can be just one piece of a complex puzzle as to why some words end up part of our everyday language and some are forgotten. The television program *Seinfeld* coined phrases like “double dippers” and “close talkers.” Jerry Seinfeld’s “Did you ever notice...” observational stand-up filled a need for us to label and process phenomena that we intuitively understood but had not thought to name. With the plethora of reruns, the language of *Seinfeld* still influences the language.

At the beginning of the pandemic, groups on Twitter were imagining their favorite characters stuck in the pandemic world. Now, during a time of psychological temporal and spatial distortion for so many, people are searching for language and meaning within the world of digital social media. Social media is a new place for language trends to emerge faster and wider than with more traditional media. Our worlds are smaller if we are quarantining. At the same time, however, our worlds are larger if we are called more to the social outreach afforded by our electronic devices. The resources of social media, blogs, websites, and a quick ability to Google search “Is it allergies or COVID?” foster a media environment different from earlier crises.

Creating new language around concepts that seem abstract in our digital world results in language that is developed and used, and then meta-analyzed through social media all at the same time. The discourse and the meta-discourse are simultaneous on social media. This instantaneous feature can be enormously helpful, such as quickly teaching people how to properly wash their hands and social distance; but at other times, the processing happens so fast that a term barely has a chance to emerge. The ability to spread messages quickly to (and through) so many different audiences sometimes reveals that the term that has been chosen isn’t the right one. For example, within the three months from our state’s shutdown to the end of the Spring 2020 term, our college wrestled with the following terms for what we were doing: teaching and learning online, remotely, distance, live, and virtually. There is still no one agreed-upon term, but with more nuanced versions emerging, such as “online but synchronous classes,” we need new vocabulary to be on the same page, talking about the same phenomena in the same language.

Another term that went through reconsideration is “social distancing.” Soon before the COVID second wave, some proposed relabeling social distancing as physical distancing since many people were not complying with the

softer, metaphorical versions of six feet. The phrase “social distancing” likely took off originally because it reflects the emotions behind the demand to be separate in space—that in physical distancing we are depriving ourselves of our social nature. Journalist Steven Poole (2020) in his “Word of the Week” column in *The Guardian* traces the roots of the phrase “social distancing” to sociologist Karl Mannheim, who in 1957 used it to describe how the upper classes would distance themselves physically, through segregated neighborhoods, from the socially “undesirable.” Even today, it has become clear that not all racial and class groups suffer the effects of this virus equally, thus giving a double meaning to “social distancing” vis-a-vie the hidden inequities of the pandemic. “Contact tracers,” a now familiar phrase, is both a reminder of the human desire for contact and the emergent need to be able to recall when it was all so much simpler. It is also frequently misspelled (or misprocessed) as “contract” tracers. In the linguistic world, this change reflects a phenomenon called “anticipatory assimilation”; your brain predicts the “tr” blend and produces it earlier, which still makes an English word, just the wrong one. The exchange also happens to highlight the purpose of tracing people who “contracted” the disease.

The term “contact tracer” itself illustrates shifts in our communication systems. Scholar James W. Carey (1992) argues that when the telegraph was first created: “It permitted for the first time the effective separation of communication from transportation” (203). Thus, it linked people not bound by space. This then-new networked media relied on being able to make “contacts” through technology with various communication nodes across technological systems. In fact, amateur radio hobbyists still refer to reaching another person through their ham radios as making “contacts.” Contact tracing involves using the metaphor of information networking to track people and potential illness. Using machine metaphors helps turn tracking into practical science but also reduces a person to a node in the network where their only value is their connection to other nodes. Contact tracers locate the points of the spread and work to isolate them, but the challenge is that the “points” are actually people—requiring food, shelter, and potential medical care: the needs of humans, not nodes.

The digital media world changes how we see language. Language has always been owned by those in positions of power. The “doublespeak” of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* sticks in our brains because the fear of authorities controlling our language runs deep, and the beauty (and later manipulation) of Katniss’ Mockingjay of the *Hunger Games* reminds us that language can be a weapon or a moment of revolution. Yet, the digital world speeds up language development. It’s not simply that there are more

things to name ("OK, boomer," "Karen," "Doomscrolling") but that there are more opportunities to do the naming. If *Webster* is taking too long to add a term, then *Urban Dictionary* can take its place. With COVID-19, we are witnessing a free-for-all in language. It's not just the virus that is escaping boundaries but the language as well, and that poses challenges for those trying to contain both the virus and the language. Authorities might try to use language to tell us how to behave, but the serious discourse can become overshadowed by humor, perhaps unintentionally trivializing and minimizing the issue. Singing *Happy Birthday* might help you learn to wash your hands, and conjuring James Comey might help you remember what 6 feet looks like. However, when your social media feed is dominated by jokes, memes, and gifs about washing hands and social distancing, the "why" associated with these behaviors becomes lost in the joke instead. Social media is conveying both the message and the commentary about the message, and the language can become unbalanced with a focus too heavily on the meta-discourse rather than the underlying battle of the virus. It's not just the virus that we can't control; it is our narratives and metaphors for understanding the disease.

We look back and ahead. COVID-19 is now owned by 2020. And what does a post-COVID world of 2021 look like? We lived through numbered, chronologically ambiguous "phases" of reopening and frightening news about the "second wave," even when we were being warned by authorities that we were still in the first wave. Language and COVID continue to evolve in a complex relationship between humans and our digital world.

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