

Pandemic and Linguistic Contamination in News Reporting: Social and Communicative Aspects

Michele Russo

University of Catanzaro
(michele.russo@unicz.it)

Abstract

The spread of Coronavirus has contaminated people's vocabulary. The first part of my work aims to analyse the new expressions used in British news reporting. The discussion will thereafter center on the employment of neologisms and new phrases in less formal contexts. I will accordingly dwell on the relationship between the formal and informal registers of the Coronavirus-related vocabulary by taking into account Foucault's (1972: 96-105) theory of repeatable materiality, and Johnstone's (2008: 133-34) theory of indexicality. Finally, I will look into some Coronavirus-related medical lexicon (Thorne 2020). The second part will concentrate on the social aspects of the pandemic on a global scale. It will investigate the concept of space and distance by considering Lotman and Uspenskij's (1975: 155-65) space theories. This discussion will go on to highlight the social inequalities brought about by the pandemic (Tsuda 2013: 445-56), and to ultimately point out how social changes have generated a space-cultural entropy (Shannon 1948: 381-82) and, therefore, social and linguistic chaos.

1. Introduction

The Coronavirus outbreak has abruptly affected our lives since its spillover from China. As the weeks go by, it has forced governments all over the world to face unforeseen challenges and has raised unprecedented problems to deal with. Economy, education, transport and communication have been profoundly hindered by the pandemic (Chomsky 2020: 12-25). In addition to the changes that different aspects of our lives have undergone, people have been compelled to rearrange their own ways of life and have adopted new words in their everyday language. As a result of the information released by TV news and newspapers, people have become more and more familiar with medical expressions, as well as with issues on the risks connected with the spread of the Coronavirus. More specifically, with regards to the British context, the news and reports about the virus have resulted in a surge of contamination of the English language with words and expressions, which have affected people's behaviour and actions. Although as we know, this phenomenon has actually occurred all over the world, due to the introduction of Coronavirus-related vocabulary into different languages, I will presently be considering the British linguistic context. Not only has English been influenced by the language of the pandemic, but verbal and non-verbal language has changed along with social behaviour (Žižek 2020: 5-7).

Briefly turning our attention to the global context, Coronavirus-related expressions have redesigned people's living spaces and their daily relationships. Although some terms have not been translated into different languages and have maintained their English use, like *lockdown* and *clusters*, a great many words, translated into other languages, have somehow influenced people's lives all over the world, including their daily routine and priorities. As a result of TV reports from

healthcare authorities about daily statistics of new infections and victims, people have now become used to thinking of the quality of their own lives in terms of figures and quantities: the fewer the victims and contagion, the better their lives are. The main channels of transmission of medical lexicon and issues were thus represented by the media.

2. Aims

Against this background, the first part of this article aims to examine the new Coronavirus-related English vocabulary employed in British news broadcasting. It will discuss the usage of lexical patterns, collocates and wording in some of the BBC reporting, with the purpose of pinpointing the most frequent lexis which has been recently introduced into English. Besides the formal register of British news broadcasting, the discussion will centre on Coronavirus-related vocabulary employed in informal registers. It will, therefore, dwell on the most frequent expressions used in news broadcasting and on less formal expressions used by networking communities. While there have been a certain number of articles on this matter (De Marco 2020; Kreuz 2020; Russell 2020; Skapinker 2020)¹, insightful investigations into this new vocabulary have been fewer, and often resort to sentence samples, along with general considerations on the coinage of new phrases and words in the English language. The relationship between the formal and informal registers of the Coronavirus-related words and expressions will be analysed by considering Foucault's (1972: 96-105) theory of repeatable materiality, which studies different contexts of a message, and Johnstone's (2008: 133-34) theory of indexicality concerning the social meanings of expressions. After a short illustration of the most common medical lexicon introduced into the British context by the pandemic (Thorne 2020), the work will focus on the connection between certain expressions and the idea of distancing, a paradigmatic concept which permeates the reporters' sentences. The repeated use in English of lexis referring to the pandemic has exerted remarkable influences on socio-cultural aspects as well, especially in the worst hit countries.

Owing to the serious consequences caused by the outbreak in the world, I will, therefore, shift the analysis, after examining the Coronavirus-related vocabulary in the British linguistic context, to a wider scope through a cultural and social perspective, so as to investigate how the language of the pandemic has been influencing proxemics in communication and common social distances. By highlighting the changes brought about by the outbreak in the English language, this study will show how these changes have led, on a more general scale, to mark social and physical distances. In this regard, the discussion will conjure up the image of space, which is being mentioned often and reconceived of in contrast to the spread of the virus. Taking as a starting point the social rule of *noli me tangere* (Žižek 2020: 5-18) and the fear of physical and material contacts it ensues from, the work will take into account Lotman's theories on the relationship between two different cultural spaces (Lotman and Uspenskij 1975: 155-65), in order to examine the extent to which the vocabulary of the pandemic has impacted people's perception of spaces and distances. Another issue that has emerged with the public health emergency is characterised by social inequalities. It appears that the new physical distances, despite being offset by virtual communication, have emphasised social differences. In light of Lotman's theories on the different spaces represented by unequal socio-cultural entities, the work will look into the new boundaries which the pandemic has created, in particular with regard to the opposition between positive and

¹ All online articles cited in this work do not include the indication of page numbers.

negative spaces, good and bad spaces (Wodak 2008: 62). I will thus discuss, on a wider scale, the effects of amplified distances on social differences.

In addition to studying the vocabulary of news broadcasting and reporting to illustrate the influence of linguistic contamination on people's socio-cultural aspects (Tsuda 2013: 445-456), my final and more general aim is to show how such contamination has paved the way, in the international context, for an unpredictable space-cultural entropy in the globalised era. More specifically, I set out to address the issue of how the language introduced by the Coronavirus outbreak has created social division and fragmentation, characterised by the entropy of communication and daily interactions. Entropy, a physical concept which refers to the chaotic state of a system, *e.g.* the universe (Shannon 1948: 381-82), stands for the chaos generated by the pandemic both at a social and a linguistic level. As to the former aspect, it is a fact that governments all over the world have been disoriented and the ever-changing measures adopted to reduce infections have been confusing social behaviour. As to the latter, I will underline that the linguistic entropy has been amplified by the fact that some English Coronavirus-related terms are not being used in the same way by experts and non-experts, scientists and common people, owing to changes in their traditional meanings.

To sum up, this study will firstly examine the linguistic changes generated by the pandemic in the British linguistic context and will then expand on the socio-cultural impact of such changes on a wider scale. By discussing the revised concepts of space, distancing and isolation, it will shift to the entropic dynamics brought into being by language and communication during the Coronavirus outbreak, in order to highlight the state of chaos and uncertainty that the changing meanings of certain Coronavirus-related terms have caused.

3. Coronavirus-related collocations and lexis

The analysis takes the BBC reporting of the first months of 2020 as a starting point, when the risk of Coronavirus spreading in Europe was believed to be low. In the BBC news broadcasting of January 20, 2020, the reporter announces the following:

China is battling a new and rapidly spreading respiratory virus. The number of people infected has tripled to more than two-hundred and President Jinping says it needs to be resolutely contained. [...] The virus first appeared in Wuhan in December. The authorities say it passed to humans from animals [...]” (New China Virus, BBC News, 2020)².

Prior to the use of the new linguistic expressions associated with the pandemic, the geographical location of the outbreak stands out in most of the first TV news on the Coronavirus; the city of Wuhan is identified as the epicentre of the pandemic. As the weeks went by and the spread of the virus all over the world was thought to be inevitable, the geography of the virus itself became broader and confusing, since certain bordering areas were differently hit by the pandemic. As the geographical location of the virus was expanding, the unnamed virus, the Chinese virus, was known as Coronavirus (*corona* means *crown*, owing to the spikes on its spherical surface, which give it a crown-like shape). From the geography of the Coronavirus, the reporting obviously zeroed in on specific vocabulary which expressed the main issues generated

²Due to lack of punctuation in the reporters' comments quoted from the footage, I have punctuated all reporters' quotations in this essay.

by the virus. Shifting to the BBC reporting, the BBC news of 9 March, 2020, announces the spread of the virus in Italy, the first epicentre in Europe:

[...] within the past couple of hours the Italian Prime Minister has announced restrictions on movement across the entire country, in the most drastic response yet to the spread of Coronavirus. The measures include a ban on all public gatherings, and all schools and universities will be closed. [...] Italy [...] is facing the most dramatic restrictions it has faced in peacetime. Two days since much of the north was quarantined, Coronavirus cases continued to soar and so now the restrictions have been extended to cover the whole of the country (Coronavirus: Italy extends strict measure, BBC News, 2020).

The BBC reporting of March 10, 2020, says:

[...] we start tonight with the unprecedented measures being enforced right across Italy to try to limit the spread of Coronavirus. [...] Italy faces growing isolation with thousands of flights cancelled and stringent controls on its borders with Austria and Slovenia. Public gatherings, including sports events, are banned and schools and universities are closed. Italians are being advised simply to stay at home (Coronavirus: Italy in lockdown, BBC News, 2020).

The most frequent collocates and single words used in the BBC reporters' comments quoted above are *battling*, *spreading*, *infected*, *tripled*, *contained* (BBC reporting of 20 January 2020); *restrictions*, *drastic response*, *spread of Coronavirus*, *measures*, *ban*, *public gatherings*, *dramatic restrictions*, *quarantined*, *soar*, *extended* (BBC reporting of 9 March 2020); *unprecedented measures*, *limit*, *spread of Coronavirus*, *growing isolation*, *stringent controls*, *borders*, *public gatherings*, *banned stay at home* (BBC reporting of 10 March 2020). The adjectives used in the BBC reporting, as well as the verbs "spread", "limit", "soar", emphasise the tremendous impact of the pandemic on a specific geographical area, Northern Italy. A number of formal expressions consist of single nouns and collocates, the latter composed by the structure adjective + noun. The repetition over time of these expressions in the reporting has made common numerous combinations of words, whose formal register and space-time associations have amplified the perception of the infective power of the virus. The examples of single words and collocates represent the most frequent official vocabulary employed in the news broadcasting of BBC reporters (Montgomery 2017: 27). The formal use of such lexis is also characterised by the presence of Latinisms, like "stringent", "unprecedented", "limit", "extended", "restrictions", "contained".

In addition to the peculiar language used in BBC news broadcasting, the Coronavirus-related words and expressions increase if non-newspaper language is taken into account. Unlike the formal register used by BBC reporters, the informal vocabulary of online sources and social networks, like Facebook and Instagram, often merges words of the linguistic register of technology to form Coronavirus-related neologisms. Some of them are (Lawson 2020) *covidiot*, *covideo party*, *covexit*, *WFH*, *quaranteams*, *blursday*, *zoombombing*, *elbow bump*, *stockpile*, *panic buy*, *hamster*, *swab*. Although the newly-coined words are mainly used by non-experts, such neologisms may be hardly known by certain age groups of people. Looking into the meanings of the terms listed above, Lawson (2020) claims that "covidiot" is "[...] someone ignoring public health device [...]", "covideo party" is an online party by means of Zoom or Skype, and "covexit" is "[...] the strategy for exiting lockdown [...]". Moreover, the acronym

“WFH” stands for “[...] working from home [...]” and “quaranteams” are “[...] online teams created during lockdown [...]”.

As to time-related terms, “Blursday” is, to concur again with Lawson (2020), an undefined day of the week, as a consequence of the blurring effect of lockdown on people’s perception of time, and “zoombombing” means “[...] hijacking a Zoom videocall [...]”. Moreover, “elbow bump” is an informal way of greeting somebody by having two people bump their elbows (this way of greeting has inevitably been extended to formal contexts too). “Stockpile”, “panic buy” and “hamster” refer to people’s food hoarding, and “swab”, mainly used in medicine, has maintained its literal meaning and is now largely mentioned in everyday surveys and reports to examine the trend of the pandemic curve (*Coronavirus Vocabulary* 2020; *New Coronavirus Oxford English Dictionary Words* 2020). The diffusion of informal Coronavirus-related vocabulary clearly ensued from the media usage of formal words and expressions to describe the pandemic. Although the two lexical categories (formal and informal) belong to two different registers, the informal words and expressions are often semantically and conceptually connected with the more formal ones employed by news reporting. “Quaranteams” is evidently a derivative of “quarantine”, and other neologisms indirectly recall some of the words used by BBC reporters, like “covexit”, which alludes to the need to work out a strategy to lift “restrictions” and to avoid “growing isolation”, and “WFH (working from home)”, which implies that people must “stay at home”. Many neologisms originated by blending words in specific registers of the British linguistic context. In light of this, the diffusion of specific terms during the pandemic is obviously determined by the daily repetition of such terms through the media.

In his analysis of statements and of the enunciative function, Foucault (1972: 96-105) centres his discourse on the influence that different contextualization exerts on a statement or a message. With respect to this, he explains the concept of repeatable materiality, which

[...] reveals the statement as a specific and paradoxical object, but also as one of those objects that men produce, manipulate, use, transform, exchange, combine, decompose and recompose, and possibly destroy. Instead of being something said once and for all [...] the statement, as it emerges in its materiality, appears with a status, enters various networks and various fields of use, is subjected to transferences or modifications, is integrated into operations and strategies in which its identity is maintained or effaced (Foucault 1972: 105).

Likewise, the Coronavirus-related neologisms used in informal statements and communication result from the repetition through the media of existing words, which have rapidly entered the everyday linguistic context. The new expressions and collocates introduced into people’s informal communication from a formal source, like news broadcasting, have entered different social strata, and have been coined by means of linguistic interferences of the everyday register. The modification of formal lexis has been conditioned by the needs to adapt certain semantic peculiarities to less formal linguistic environments. To concur with Foucault (1972: 105) once again, each expression “[...] circulates, [...], serves or resists various interests, [...], and becomes a theme of appropriation [...]”. The audience’s appropriation of certain words concerning the pandemic has generated numerous neologisms, which address different contexts through manifold semantic overtones. The need to express specific meanings and contexts has paved the way for new connotative fields in non-newspaper language.

Unlike the words and lexical patterns used in the press register, whose literal meaning makes communication clear and straightforward, the neologisms used by non-experts in informal

contexts have originated from the connotative overtones of the words or compounds they derive from. As a consequence of their multiple semantic value, whose aim is to describe new specific social contexts, the neologisms have resulted from the linguistic needs of such contexts. It is a fact that the meanings of words are often conditioned by social and cultural processes and, therefore, undergo semantic recontextualization. Similarly, by considering the relationship between text and context, Johnstone (2008: 133) defines the concept of indexicality in light of the influences exerted by the environment on the meanings of words. According to her, “An indexical form is a linguistic form or action which, in addition to or instead of contributing to the denotational or ‘literal’ meaning, points to and sometimes helps establish ‘social’ meaning”. The indexical, figurative use of many expressions during the outbreak accounts for the impact of the public health emergency on everyday language, along with the remarkable influence of technology and of networking communication on the Coronavirus-related lexis. Thus, the non-formal vocabulary is mainly composed by blending words, like “quaranteams” and “Blursday”, semantic neologisms, namely existing words with a new metaphorical meaning, like “hamster”, and collocates, like “elbow bump” and “panic buy”, generating indexical forms, namely social and figurative meanings which are mainly shared by networking communities.

In addition to the formal and informal vocabulary, some words and expressions from medical lexicon have come into use among non-experts (Thorne 2020), like asymptomatic, cluster effect, contact tracing, flatten the curve, furlough(ed), immunity passport, incubation period, intubation, patient zero, PPE (Personal Protective Equipment), R rate, red zone. Among the medical expressions, we find a relatively high number of collocates, often formed by two nouns, as well as numerous Latinisms. As Scott (2020) argues, apart from the medical terms which the pandemic has brought into everyday language, new collocates and lexical patterns have come into being in different fields of the English language:

[...] few of us could have imagined that it [language] would change as fast as it has in the last few weeks. From the coinage of new words (*social distancing, viral load, the shielded*) to the redefinition of existing terms (*selfish, essential*), and the centre-staging of rarely-used ones (*furlough*), change is evident at the lexical level”.

The introduction of such scientific words has changed people’s perception of their own quality of life. It has made them used to looking at everyday life in terms of quantities and figures. Owing to social restrictions, people tend to consider the quality of their own lives according to the daily figures released by healthcare authorities concerning the infections and the victims over the last twenty-four hours in their own areas³.

4. Linguistic changes and socio-cultural aspects

On a global scale, the changes in the vocabulary have first and foremost affected social life and people’s habits. The invisible enemy was primarily spread from person-to-person through coughing, sneezing or simply speaking, due to droplet transmission. The most immediate feature of this virus consisted, therefore, in the fact that its proliferation multiplied in social spaces, above all indoors, where social distances are reduced and facilitate the transmission of the virus.

³ In Italy, for example, the figures pertaining to Coronavirus victims and infections have been considered to assess the quality of life in each province (“Qualità della vita” 2020).

Avoiding meetings and all the events that attract crowds became one of the main priorities of governments, starting from China, Italy and South Korea, the first worst-hit countries. The first weapon - to mention one of the war metaphors used during the coronavirus pandemic (Federici 2020: 32; Wallis and Nerlich 2005: 2632-36) - to lessen the spread of the virus was the cancellation of all social events, from concerts, sports matches to private parties and anything that did not allow for a safety distance to be respected. Pictures of empty megalopolises in Asia, apparently uninhabited, represented the dystopian settings of many sci-fi films and books (Federici 2020: 19-23). The narrow and crowded spaces of many city centres turned into empty places, where wandering and curious animals sometimes made their first appearance. Considering that most Coronavirus-related expressions refer to the concept of space, a new reconfiguration of city spaces emerged during lockdown. In this context, new social and linguistic rules have been introduced into city spaces owing to the outbreak, and the dynamics of social and linguistic interactions have changed. Signs like "Sorry, we are closed", "Keep your distance", "Save lives" (*Coronavirus: UK lockdown*, BBC News, 2020) have been posted everywhere, not to mention the numerous warning signs on the threshold of public places, reminding people to wear a mask, keep a safe distance, use hand sanitizers and avoid crowding.

The reconfiguration and the reorganization of spaces represent an important aspect of communication, and the changes in communication have created physical and social borders in the hardest hit areas in the world. Isolation has increased, in many cases, people's fear of physical and material contacts, and such a fear has exacerbated the social rule of *noli me tangere* (Žižek 2020: 5-18), namely *do not touch me*. The separation of spaces and the limitation of physical contacts have paved the way for virtual communication and, at the same time, have increased people's fear of being even approached by others. If the one meter-distance has become a norm to respect in all public places, the social rule of *noli me tangere* has conditioned social behavior. Our idea of spaces has been modified, and, as Žižek (5-18) claims, human reconstruction should start from the ruins left by this pandemic.

With regard to space and its cultural and social organisation, one cannot do without considering the analysis which Lotman and Uspenskij (1975: 155-65) carried out in their studies about cultures. In particular, in their description of the relationships among different cultural spaces, they consider the interaction between the internal space, one's own cultural space, which includes the elements of *my* and/or *our* culture, and the external space, the *others'* cultural space, which includes all that does not belong to one's culture, but only what is foreign, far and unknown. In this distinction, the former stands for order and organisation, whereas the latter represents chaos and disorganization. The opposition between the internal and the external spaces well applies to the context of the pandemic, because the risk of being infected was deemed to be very low, in different parts of the world, at the beginning of 2020, and the Far East was seen as an isolated epicentre. As long as the Coronavirus outbreak existed within the borders of China and other Asian countries, the space representation of the worst hit countries was included in the external space, seen as the symbol of chaos and contamination. China was the *other* space, *their* space, since it was not likely, according to most governments, to be in contact with *our* space. In Wodak's words (2008: 62) who, in the wake of Lotman and Uspenskij's cultural model, studies the socio-cultural spaces and the boundaries generated by different kinds of discrimination, the opposition between *our* space and *their* space has brought to light the stereotype of the "positive self- and negative other-presentation"; it is characterised by the difference between the contaminated countries in the Far East, the negative models, and other countries in the world,

still not affected by the virus and standing, therefore, for positive models. As time went by and the infection reached different parts of the world, the “in- and out- groups” (Wodak 2008: 62) model changed as a consequence of the introduction of further borders within the hit countries. The social pattern represented by the opposition *us* versus *them* has become common even within the borders of many European countries; the chromatic divide between different areas of countries, associated with the figures pertaining to daily contagion, has marked such borders.

Many have underlined the effects of the virus on social inequalities (Coen and Coury 2020). As it was easily predictable, the social and physical distancing imposed by the spread of the virus has deepened social and cultural differences. In spite of globalisation and easier communication among countries, many communities in many parts of the world have been denied the possibility of being provided with correct information about the virus. Starting with the sudden use of certain English loanwords, the language of distance has emphasised social inequalities (Tsuda 2013: 445-456; Sen 2020; Federici 2020: 19-23). It is well-known that lockdown policies implemented by many governments have affected the jobs of economically weaker communities in both developing and wealthy countries, not to mention discriminations in the digital field which, as a result of rapid technological changes, have denied access to many developing countries, where technology is less up-to-date. Furthermore, the growing isolation generated by the spread of the virus has led to an increase in the gender gap, due to the fact that women have often had to take care of housework and children. Another issue connected with economic inequalities is the different access to vaccine from countries, since it is likely to be more easily distributed to European and North-American countries. Last, but not least, education has been remarkably affected by the pandemic, because of many people’s lack of technological devices and literacy, as a consequence of the closure of schools and universities.

5. Effects on communication

The lack of social and physical contacts, as a result of the spread of the virus, has led to the fragmentation of communication and to an increase in misunderstanding over the information released by official sources, like the media and newspapers. I have previously argued that the language associated with the Coronavirus, characterised by expressions and words which conjure up the concepts of distance and isolation, has changed people’s social behaviour.

Since its supposed origin in China, the virus has brought with it chaos, disorder, fear and confusion. In this regard, the concept of entropy is pertinent to the new reconfiguration of physical and imaginary spaces, given that it is associated with the chaos created by the pandemic. The contamination of countries all over the world by the virus has amplified social and linguistic entropy. Entropy is, as it is already known, a physical concept and represents the chaos of any physical or imaginary system. It increases as different parts, *e.g.* molecules, or two or more elements, come into contact. The interaction of different particles from different physical systems mixes heterogeneous elements, creating confusion and a new chaotic layout of any system. Similarly, the spread of the virus from China into neighbouring countries, and then all over the world, has been the source of social confusion (Natividad 2020) and has raised fear and mutual suspicion among people. The proliferation of the virus and the chaos it has brought with it have affected communication as well, which the concept of entropy applies to. As Shannon (1948: 381-82) claims, the origin of entropy in the field of communication depends on three elements: a source of data, a communication channel, and a receiver. In the pandemic context, all three elements have been distorted by the entropy of contradicting or misleading information. It has

often been claimed that sources of data were manipulated by Chinese authorities at the beginning of the pandemic (Federici 2020: 11-25). However, even the figures that European governments have been releasing are thought to have been tampered with. The news released by communication channels is not often understood by receivers; accordingly, people's wrong and often confused interpretations of the news have added to the entropy of communication, with consequent increased ambiguity of the meaning attributed to certain Coronavirus-related words.

A closer look at the meanings given by *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (2003) for some Coronavirus-related words and expressions shows that, in many cases, such words have preserved their traditional denotative aspects. However, this does not hold true in other cases. In this regard, I have selected the most common Coronavirus-related medical expressions from the *Glossary on the COVID-19 Pandemic* (2020) and compared their current meanings with the traditional ones given by *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*. "Cluster site", for example, is defined by the *Glossary on the COVID-19 Pandemic* as follows: "A specific site where the number of cases of an infectious disease that occurs over a specific period of time is higher than the expected number", whereas the word cluster is, according to *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, "a group of things or persons close together" (392). The two definitions share the basic meaning; however, the one from the *Glossary on the COVID-19 Pandemic* highlights the connection between the idea of gathering with the higher rate of an infection. Among the collocations, a red zone is, according to Thorne (2020), "a geographical area or location classified as having the highest levels of infected individuals and which should be placed under quarantine". The compound noun "superspreader", which does not appear in *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, is, according to the *Glossary on the COVID-19 Pandemic*, "A single contagious person who contaminates a disproportionately large number of people compared to the number of people contaminated by the average contagious person". The word isolation deserves particular attention. According to the *Glossary on the COVID-19 Pandemic*, "isolation" is "[a] preventive measure against the spread of an infectious disease involving the separation of an infected person from non-infected people during the communicable period of the disease. Not to be confused with quarantine and lockdown". *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* defines it [isolation] as "quarantine" (1013). According to the *Glossary on the COVID-19 Pandemic*, "quarantine" is "[a] measure to prevent the spread of an infectious disease in which a healthy person who may have been in contact with an infected person is isolated during the incubation period of the disease". The current difference between "isolation" and "quarantine" lies, therefore, in the period of the disease when a person is put into isolation: the period of the disease is "communicable" when it refers to isolation, while it is of "incubation" when it refers to quarantine. The word lockdown, mostly untranslated all over the world, lends itself to an attentive analysis as well. *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* defines "lockdown" as "the confining of prisoners to their cells, as following a riot or other disturbance" (1128). In the *Glossary on the COVID-19 Pandemic*, "lockdown" is "[an] emergency protocol intended to limit movements and gatherings in a population for public health or safety reasons". Moreover, the *Glossary* points out that "The word 'confinement' does not have this meaning in English. It is used as a synonym for lockdown under the influence of the French term 'confinement' and should be avoided".

Turning our glance to the most common Coronavirus-related words and collocations, the current meaning of the word "lockdown" has had further connotative meanings during the second wave of the pandemic in some European countries, like Italy and Germany. As Brunelli

(2020) explains in his article about the new measures adopted in Germany, “the part lockdown”, or “soft lockdown”, eases some restrictions, unlike the hard lockdown, which forbids any movement of people unless for urgent reasons. Some observations should be made with regard to the collocations “social distancing” and “social gatherings”. The former means “the practice of keeping a safe distance between yourself and other people in order to prevent the spread of disease” (*Oxford Learner’s Dictionary*); however, as some TV news reporting shows (*Coronavirus: protests in Italy over new pandemic crackdown turn violent*, to mention one), protests against social restrictions have occurred all over Europe, with gatherings lacking social distancing. Social gatherings of more than six people were banned in England in September 2020, as Cooper (2020) writes, while the number was reduced to no more than two people in Italy in March 2021 (Italian Prime Minister’s Decree of March 2, 2021: 8). De Marco (2020) has pointed out how certain expressions have switched from a positive connotation to a negative one and vice versa since the beginning of the pandemic. He (2020) has observed, for instance, that being asymptomatic used to be a bliss, as it meant having a disease without showing any symptoms. Today, as he puts it, being asymptomatic could mean being a plague-spreader.

The communicative ambiguities between experts and non-experts have been widened by steady revisions of social rules, anti-Coronavirus measures and decrees, thus making communication less clear. The entropy of communication should be intended as the fragmentation and the ambiguity of the language of news broadcasting, which has frequently turned out to be misleading from the perspective of non-experts. The linguistic fragmentation in the global context is not the only consequence of the outbreak. The geography of the Coronavirus has divided the worst affected countries, like Italy, into chromatic areas, where different colours, ranging from yellow to red through orange, indicate the differences in terms of social restrictions in each region (Giuffrida 2020). The darker the colour of an area is, the higher the contagion rate is. The chromatic symbolism of different regions in countries has increased people’s misunderstanding over daily news, characterised by numerous differences in the *dos and don’ts* in each chromatic area. Even the darkest colour, red, which meant categorical prohibition to leave one’s house in the first wave of the pandemic, has often been misinterpreted. The entropy of communication has made announcements and recommendations on anti-Coronavirus measures less trustworthy to people. The latter’s general perception is that the strictness of the rules during the first wave of the pandemic has been inevitably eased – for economic reasons - and this is proven by the fact that, according to the media, anti-Coronavirus measures are not often being respected as much as they used to be during the first wave of the pandemic (Giordano 2020).

6. Final remarks

The aim of this essay was to investigate linguistic changes in three main contexts of everyday communication in the British area: news broadcasting, networking communities and the medical sphere. The study has then switched to a wider scale to discuss the effects of the Coronavirus-related language on social aspects, in order to fathom the dynamics of the entropy of communication, as an increase in linguistic ambiguity. Through the analysis of the formal vocabulary used in the press register, space and time-related expressions have been brought to light, emphasising their semantic connection with the concept of social distancing and with the uniqueness of such a dramatic event as the pandemic. The list of neologisms used in informal contexts has also shown that a number of terms, coined in networking communities, are often blending words, semantic neologisms and collocates derived from formal expressions. The discussion of the relationship between the formal and informal Coronavirus-related words and

expressions has shown that many neologisms used in informal contexts have resulted from their lexical contextualisation (repeatable materiality) and from the social negotiation of their meanings (indexicality). Ordinary communication has been invaded by medical vocabulary as well, with the introduction of numerous collocates and Latinisms, shaping people's ordinary language.

As to the influence of the pandemic on the rearrangement of physical and imaginary spaces, the second part of the study has focused on the social aspects of the pandemic, on people's fear of physical contacts and on the distinction of social spaces into positive and negative ones, generating inevitable social discriminations, e.g. digital, gender and economic discriminations. The analysis of the Coronavirus-related vocabulary and of the rearrangement of social spaces have unearthed the ongoing process of the entropy of communication, characterised by the fragmentation of communication and by the increased ambiguity of formal and ordinary language. Frequent revisions of rules and decrees have augmented communicative ambiguity and misinterpretation, in addition to misleading people who are having to deal with the ever-changing chromatic configuration of their own areas and to adapt to new rules. The entropy of communication and the heterogeneity of TV news have added to misconceptions about social behaviour.

As a result of the discussion of such linguistic and social phenomena, it is the author's intention to continue this project not only by extending the list of Coronavirus-related vocabulary, but also the investigation into the linguistic and social aspects in the worst hit countries in the post-pandemic time. New words and expressions will be coined when vaccine is distributed to countries. At the same time, it is not easy to predict how the social and linguistic context will change, or whether it will change and to what extent people's lives will be the same as they used to be.

References

- Brunelli, R., "Come funziona il 'lockdown soft' in Germania", *AGI*, 2020, <https://www.agi.it/estero/news/2020-11-09/germania-lockdown-soft-10231680/>, last accessed December 20, 2020.
- Chomsky, N., *Crisi di civiltà. Pandemia e capitalismo*, Ponte alle Grazie, Milano, 2020.
- Coen, A., CORY, D., "Political Talk: the Political Implications of Pandemic Language", *CAHSS and EFFECT*, 2020, <https://cahsseffect.org/faculty/political-talk-the-political-implications-of-pandemic-language/>, last accessed September 7, 2020.
- De Marco, D., "Parole che non lo erano: da autocertificazione a Zoom, la neolingua della pandemia", *cheFare*, 2020, <https://www.che-fare.com/parole-autocertificazione-zoom-pandemia-2/>, last accessed October 10, 2020.
- Federici, R., *Confini stravolti. Entropia e pandemia di un secolo incerto*, Intermedia, Orvieto, 2020.
- Foucault, M., *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language*, by A. M. Sheridan Smith (trans.), Pantheon Books, New York, 1972.
- Giordano, C., "Christmas market closed as shopping crowds spark concern in Nottingham and London", *Independent*, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/christmas-shopping-oxford-street-regent-street-nottingham-coronavirus-b1766994.html>, last accessed December 12, 2020.
- Giuffrida, A., "Brutal Covid second wave exposes Italy's shortage of intensive care staff", 2020, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/18/brutal-second-wave-of-covid-exposes-italys-healthcare-weaknesses>, last accessed December 10, 2020.
- Johnstone, B., *Discourse Analysis*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA, 2008.

- Kreuz, R., "The Pandemic is changing the English language", *The Conversation*, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/10/16/health/english-language-changing-coronavirus-wellness-partner/index.html>, last accessed December 2, 2020.
- Lawson, R., "Coronavirus has led to an explosion of new words and phrases – and that helps us cope", *The Conversation*, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-has-led-to-an-explosion-of-new-words-and-phrases-and-that-helps-us-cope-136909>, last accessed August 1, 2020.
- Lotman, Y., M., *Tipologia della cultura* (Lotman, Yuriy, M. and Uspenskij, Boris, A.), by R. Faccani and M. Marzaduri (eds), R. Faccani, M. Marzaduri and S. Molinari (trans.), Bompiani, Milano, 1975.
- Montgomery, M., *The Discourse of Broadcast News. A Linguistic Approach*, Routledge, London and New York, 2007.
- Natividad, I., "Covid-19 and the media: the role of journalism in a global pandemic", *Berkeley News*, 2020, <https://news.berkeley.edu/2020/05/06/covid-19-and-the-media-the-role-of-journalism-in-a-global-pandemic/>, last accessed August 31, 2020.
- Russell, K., "How the Coronavirus Has Infected our Vocabulary", *The New Yorker*, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/13/a-temporary-moment-in-time>, last accessed November 10, 2020.
- Scott, B., "Language in the Time of the Coronavirus Crisis", *Diplo*, 2020, <https://www.diplomacy.edu/blog/language-time-coronavirus-crisis-uk-case-study>, last accessed June 10, 2020.
- Sen, K., "Five ways Coronavirus is deepening global inequality", *The Conversation*, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/five-ways-coronavirus-is-deepening-global-inequality-144621>, last accessed September 20, 2020.
- Shannon, C., "A Mathematical Theory of Communication", *The Bell System Technical Journal*, XXVII (3), 1948, pp. 379-423.
- Skapinker, M., "Coronavirus crisis creates new words that enter everyday language", *Financial Times*, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/b7a6b3f0-830b-11ea-b872-8db45d5f6714>, last accessed November 20, 2020.
- Thorne, T., "#CORONASPEAK – the language of Covid-19 goes viral", *Language and Innovation*, 2020, <https://language-and-innovation.com/2020/03/31/coronaspeak-the-language-of-covid-19-goes-viral/>, last accessed November 18, 2020.
- Tsuda, Y., "The Hegemony of English and Strategies for Linguistic Pluralism: Proposing the Ecology of Language Paradigm", in M. K. Asante, Y. Miike and J. Yin (eds), *The Global Intercultural Communication Reader*, Routledge, New York, 2014, pp. 445-56.
- Wallis, P., NERLICH, B., "Disease metaphors in new epidemics: the UK media framing of the 2003 SARS epidemic", *Social Science and Medicine*, 60 (11), 2005, pp. 2629-39.
- Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, Barnes & Noble Books, New York, 2003.
- Wodak, R., "'Us' and 'Them': Inclusion and Exclusion-Discrimination via Discourse", in G. Delanty, R. Wodak, P. Jones (eds), *Identity Belonging and Migration*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2008, pp. 54-77.
- Žižek, S., *Virus: catastrofe e solidarietà*, Ponte alle Grazie, Milano, 2020.

Videos

- Coronavirus: Italy extends strict measures to whole country*, BBC News, March 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2mw6agIRuM>, last accessed August 26, 2020.

- Coronavirus: Italy in lockdown*, BBC News, March 10, 2020,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_69sOxWU0jo, last accessed September 2, 2020.
- Coronavirus: protests in Italy over new pandemic crackdown turn violent*, Euronews, October 27, 2020,
<https://www.euronews.com/2020/10/27/coronavirus-protests-in-italy-over-new-pandemic-crackdown-turn-violent>, last accessed November 2, 2020.
- Coronavirus: UK lockdown to be eased next week*, BBC News, May 6, 2020,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqp-IfkkoG8>, last accessed June 6, 2020.
- Coronavirus Vocabulary. How to talk about the Coronavirus in English*, March 14, 2020,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aN5yPMzp_o4, last accessed September 10, 2020.
- New China virus: Cases triple as infection spreads to Beijing and Shanghai*, BBC News, January 20, 2020,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyiHDbciNwI>, last accessed August 30, 2020.
- New Coronavirus Oxford English Dictionary Words 2020*, April 12, 2020,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDp_RB5P88Q, last accessed September 8, 2020.

Other Online Sources

- Glossary on the COVID-19 Pandemic*, by the Translation Bureau, Version: June 11, 2020,
<https://www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/publications/covid19-eng.html>, last accessed December 10, 2020.
- DPCM [Italian Prime Minister's Decree] of March 2, 2021*,
https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/DPCM_20210302-txt_0.pdf, last accessed February 28, 2021.
- Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>, last accessed February 27, 2021.
- "Qualità della vita: Pordenone prima, Foggia ultima. La provincia più sicura? Ascoli Piceno"*, *Il Messaggero*, November 29, 2020, last accessed December 2, 2020.