

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

AN ANALYSIS OF THE COVID-19 NEOLOGISMS IN SRI LANKAN PRINT MEDIA

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has made a significant impact on the daily lives of people and language has not been exempted. A considerable amount of our everyday lexicon is a reflection of the health crisis and its impact on society. New words are constantly added to the vocabulary while existing words have received new meanings and medical terminology has found its way into the everyday spoken and written discourse. In inventing and disseminating this new terminology, mass media plays a crucial role. Hence, this study is an attempt to analyze the common COVID-19 neologisms in Sri Lankan print media with emphasis on their word formation processes. The data was gathered based on a Sunday newspaper and the identified neologisms were categorized based on their structure. The findings revealed that acronyms, abbreviations, compounding, blending, coinages, derivation, backformation, semantic shift and borrowing are the most frequently used strategies in the formation of neologisms.

Keywords: Covid-19, neologisms, word formation

1. Introduction

According to Bharati (2020), “Language, being a social phenomenon, undergoes changes when there are social upheavals.” As suggested in this statement, human language is constantly adapted to accommodate the various communicative needs of its speakers. The present-day communication provides a fine example for this as spoken and written language is heavily influenced by the societal changes caused by the global pandemic. Based on a study to investigate the impact of the pandemic on language and communication, Salman and Haider (2021) have observed that “the surge of new words and phrases accompanying the sudden COVID-19 outbreak has created new lexical and sociolinguistic changes that have become part of our lives.” As highlighted in this statement, the pandemic that the world is grappling with today has affected the everyday communication with the arrival of a new terminology reflecting the disease and its socio-cultural and psychological impact on human life. With the wake of the pandemic, these new lexical items have been replacing and dominating the language of our everyday communication. In this light, the present study investigates the COVID-19 neologisms in print media; a key medium of language production and existence. According to Behera and Mishra (as cited in Khalfan, Batool and Shehzad, 2020), neologisms are “newly coined terms, words, or phrases in mainstream language to fulfil a need in speech often created by a new experience”. The COVID-19 pandemic saw the invention of a significant number of neologisms which later became part of our daily communication. In disseminating these new lexical items among people, print media plays a crucial role. Hence, this study attempts to analyze

those terms with emphasis on their word formation strategies. It is expected that the findings will be beneficial for the language learners and speakers of second language in enriching their vocabulary.

2. Methodology

The study was a descriptive research based on the news articles published in the Sunday Observer newspaper during a period of one year. The COVID-19 neologisms identified in the paper were categorized based on their structure and word-processing method. Newly invented words, words that have undergone semantic change and the words from the medical jargon which have become part of everyday communication were considered for the study.

3. Results and Discussion

A total number 60 neologisms were identified in the news articles selected for the study. They were categorized based on the following strategies of word construction.

3.1 Acronyms and Abbreviations

According to Mweri (2021) an acronym is “a word that is formed from the first letters of different words and pronounced as a word on its own right.” The term COVID-19 which has become part of our daily communication today, is an acronym for, Corona Virus Disease of 2019. The shortened forms of words, commonly known as abbreviations were also identified to have been often used in the newspapers. PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction), PPE (Personal Protection Equipment), MOH (Ministry of Health) and MO – MCH (Medical Officers of Maternal and Child Health) were some of the frequently written abbreviations related to the pandemic.

3.2 Compounding and Blending

Compounding, the process of “combining two words (free morphemes) to create a new one” (Salman and Haider, 2021) was observed to be one of the major strategies of forming COVID-19 neologisms. Accordingly, the terms such as lockdown, hand washing, coronavirus outbreak, face-shields, e-consultation, affected districts, confirmed patients and preventive measures were commonly employed compounded terms in discussing the pandemic. Blending was also identified in the study where two or more words combine to create a new word. The examples include low-risk areas, in-house patients, coronavirus task force, one meter distance, inter-provincial movements and frontline healthcare workers. In addition, the findings revealed that several new terms have been stemmed from the base forms; quarantine and curfew. Thus, self-quarantine, quarantine centers, curfew pass, curfew regulations and night curfew were commonly used lexical items in the news articles.

3.3 Coinages

Based on a study by Yule (as cited in Salman and Haider, 2021), a coinage is “the invention or creation of totally new terms either deliberately or accidentally”. In the present study, it was observed that the pandemic has generated several coinages which have become common expressions in our everyday repertoire. While the term COVID-19 is the most dominant coinage, social distancing, work from home, foot bath, traveler screening, integrated medicine (Western + Ayurveda), infodemic (spreading information about the disease) and new normal were some of the frequently observed coinages in newspaper writing.

3.4 Derivation

In the process of derivation, new words are formed by adding prefixes or suffixes which result in a word with changed meaning. In the terminology of COVID-19, derivation was identified in the terms including maskless – Adj. (to describe a person who is not wearing a mask), reopening – V. (to open an area or a country after lockdown) and reimpose – V. (to impose curfew for a second time after being lifted)

3.5 Backformation

Backformation occurs when an affix of a word is removed to create a word with new meaning and new part of speech. Accordingly, this was observed in the news articles in the formation of terms like vaccine (derived from vaccination) and sedate (derived from sedative).

3.6 Semantic Shift

Rets (as cited in Azzawi and Haleem, 2021), has emphasized that “semantic shift is not a change of meaning per se, but can add meaning to the semantic system or indicate the loss of meaning from the semantic system while the form is maintained...” As suggested in this statement, semantic shift denotes change of meaning in a lexical item or an expression. This was frequently observed in many neologisms identified throughout the study. It was evident that the pandemic has paved way for creating new meanings for the existing words in the language. Accordingly, cluster (COVID-19 clusters, local clusters, home cluster), isolation (isolated areas, early isolation, self-isolation), contacts (close contacts, contact tracing), wave (first wave, second wave) and cases (recovered cases, positive cases, confirmed cases) were identified to have undergone semantic change.

3.7 Borrowing

In the present study, borrowing refers to the expressions from the medical jargon which have become part of the daily discourse of people. According to Azzawi and Haleem (2021) “common people became gradually more aware of the meaning of these medical terms and started to use them accordingly because their daily life discourse during the pandemic required them to be able to differentiate between medical vocabulary and use it correctly.” In the news articles selected for the study, borrowing was a common observation. The terms including asymptomatic, pandemic, airborne, immunity, virulent, interim period, mutant variant, community spread/ transmission, epidemic curve, ventilators, epidemiology and incubation were identified as commonly used medical terms in communication.

4. Conclusion

While the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significant changes in people’s lives and cultures across the world, language has also been adapted to reflect the transformation taking place in society. While lexical innovations are constantly becoming part of the human repertoire and the existing expressions are receiving new meaning, words from the medical jargon which have thus far remained unknown to the ordinary people have become part of the daily discourse. Today, this COVID-19 terminology is dominating the communication as a means of reflecting the societal changes, new cultural practices, social restrictions, laws and regulations and even the concerns of people and the psychological impact that the pandemic has brought over their lives. So, our everyday discourse has gradually transformed into denoting the ‘new normal’ life style that people are required to comply with. This has paved way for a COVID-19 jargon comprising of neologisms reflecting the pandemic and its aftermath. Based on the present study which analyzed aforementioned new lexical items appearing in local print media, it was identified that acronyms, abbreviations, compounding, blending, coinages, derivation, backformation, semantic shift and borrowing are the key word

formation strategies employed in the construction of these neologisms. Among them, compounding, semantic shift and coinages were observed to be the frequently used methods. The findings of this study can be utilized for enriching the vocabulary of English language users while the language learners can also benefit from the new lexical items and word formation strategies discussed in this study to enhance their repertoire and to develop understanding on language change.

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