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**HOW THE  
PANDEMIC HAS  
IMPACTED AND  
ADDED TO THE  
ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE**

# LANGUAGE CONSTITUTES OUR WORLD.

It is well accepted that language constitutes our world. And if it is our world that has been so appallingly and inexcusably shaken up by the onslaught of the dreaded **SARS-CoV-2 - Covid 19 virus**, so has been our language.

English, the principal language of the world today, has come to bear the imprint of the **pandemic**, as well as of the **infodemic** arising from its incessant coverage on multiple fora and media. The English vocabulary of these bizarre times has come to include several medical terms, new coinages, acronyms, phrases, collocations and abbreviations. Novel nuances have come to be attached to old words. These describe our present predicament, our alienation, our fears, grief and uncertainty. And lots more.

Language also assumes importance as effective communication is the sine qua non for the success of preventive measures against the dreadful disease. Uses of inflammatory language and war analogies to motivate action are marked during this pandemic. It is proclaimed that we are facing 'an invisible, elusive enemy'. But this has its limitations. On the one hand, this is leading to fatalistic responses bordering on paranoia and, on the other, the defiant labeling of the '**viral apocalypse**' by some as no more than a '**small time flu**' is resulting in people letting down their much needed guard. At both extremes, the fight against the deadly virus gets diluted.





It is noteworthy that English used to borrow words from other languages – the words **epidemic**, **plague** and **pestilence**, for example are all French in origin. Today, however, English is the predominant language of the pandemic. Many consider this dominance troubling, and claim that over-reliance on English weakens public messaging.

Be that as it may, a team of researchers at **Michigan State University** believes that historically, major events such as natural disasters and wars have proven to have big impact on language. They expect the coronavirus pandemic will, similarly, have an impact on language and the way we communicate. They claim that, just as the Second World War was a big inflection point for language change partly because it brought people from so many different nations together, who ordinarily wouldn't have had contact with one another, now we are seeing the opposite – people being kept apart,

who in normal times would have been together. This too shall similarly have 'seismic effects' on language use.

On related lines, a recent BBC article opines that, at times of crisis in the past, writers have coined words to describe our lives. It explores how words like '**frustrating**', '**spring-clean**' and '**outsider**' came to be in an earlier era. Presently, the surreal realities of the Internet age of '**hyper**' and '**virtual**' and '**post**', that have been with us for some time now, have abruptly been jolted. We suddenly find ourselves in a strange and unsettling world. This weird world will have its own lexicon. This is being witnessed now.

It is no surprise that **quarantine** has defeated **lockdown** and **pandemic** to be crowned '**Word of the Year 2020**' after data showed it to be one of the most highly searched for words in the **Cambridge Dictionary**.

In a recent poll, the editors of the dictionary report that 33% of respondents say **quaranteam** - combining quarantine and team, meaning a group of people who go into quarantine together - should be added to the dictionary. Other suggestions include the portmanteau words **quaranteen** (a teenager affected by Covid-19 lockdowns), **coronial** (in times of corona) and **lockstalgia** (nostalgia for a time when the country was in lockdown or in a more extreme form of lockdown).

However, the most comprehensive appraisal of the change in the English language has been undertaken by the eminent lexicographers of the **Oxford English Dictionary**. They too claim, 'Great social change brings great linguistic change, and that has never been truer than in this current global crisis'. The rapidity of the change is such that they have issued monthly, rather than their usual quarterly, updates to document the impact of the pandemic on the language, thereby capturing the dominant changes as the Covid 19 situation evolves. They have pointed out several such interesting trends in our language use by analysing keywords used since the **outbreak**. So much so that, some English words, such as **immune, infection, symptom, vaccine** and **virus**, have come to form part of the basic vocabulary of many languages. Others, like **droplet, swab** and **testing**, are also common.



STOP COVID-19

In a series of studies, they observe that, beginning January 2020, the words that have gained currency in these tense and trying times are mainly related to naming and describing the virus: **coronavirus, SARS, virus, human-to-human, respiratory, flu-like**. In February '20 - **Covid 19, quarantine, self-quarantine, pandemic, epicenter** and **self-isolate**, amongst others, become current. The controversial terms '**Wuhan virus**' or the '**Chinese virus**' have given way to the more politically correct **Covid 19/COVID 19** (used for both the disease and the virus), avoiding problems with terms like **Spanish flu** and **gay cancer** (HIV/AIDS) that associate a disease with a particular group of people. Similarly, the new highly **contagious triple-mutant variant** needs to be called by its scientific name, **B.1.617**, not the **India Strain**.



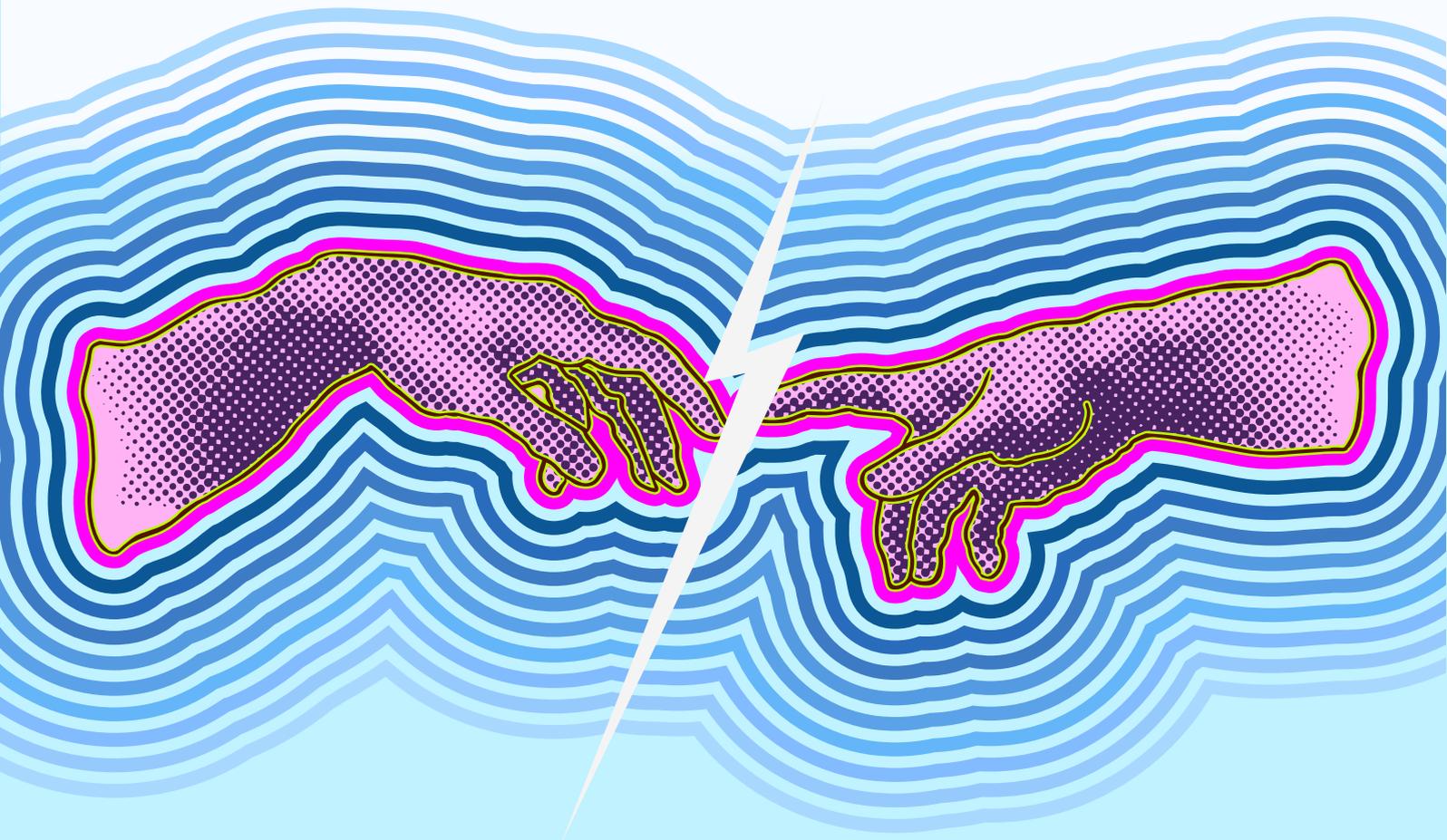
By March '20, the keywords reflect the social impact of the virus and issues surrounding the medical response: **social distancing, self-isolation** and **self-quarantine, lockdown, non-essential** (as in **non-essential travel**), **WFH (work from home)** and **postpone** are all especially frequent, as are **PPE, frontline warriors and workers** and **ventilator**. The data of the following months reveals the ebb and flow of the disease. **Sport and support bubbles, keyworkers** and **circuit-breaker** become frequent.



In April, it is pointed out that there is a continued focus on the social and economic impacts of Covid-19, and words like **lockdown, social** or **physical distancing**, and **furlough** are often used. The need for online and remote communication give rise to references to the video-chat application **Zoom**, including its use as a verb. **Mask** and **covering** are also keywords throughout. **Telemedicine** and **tele-health**, along with **tele-consultation** are also often used.



In May, with the first signs of life opening up **post-lockdown: reopen, phased** (as in **phased return to work, phased reopening**), and **easing** (especially in the **easing of restrictions/measures, easing of the lockdown, de-confinement**) are all keywords. When the fear of the virus abates and there is a return to **face-to-face** interaction: **in-person** increased in frequency, and is used as in **in-person worship** and **in-person graduation**.



They observe that some words have been there in the past, but now these have been invested with new meanings. **Self-isolation** (first recorded in 1834) and **self-isolating** (1841) are now used to describe self-imposed isolation, whereas earlier, they have been applied to countries which chose to detach themselves from the rest of the world. **Social distancing**, first used in 1957, described an attitude of aloofness or deliberate attempt to distance oneself from others socially-and not keeping a physical distance between ourselves and others to avoid infection. And an **elbow bump** has been, in its earliest manifestation (1981), a celebratory gesture rather than a means of avoiding hand-touching when greeting.



The pandemic has also led to several new terms that are blends of other words. Many of these are on the OED editors' watch list e.g., words like **maskne** - an acne outbreak caused by facial coverings; **Zoombombing** - when strangers break into a video meeting; **covidiot** - someone who ignores public safety guidance; **doomscrolling** - when you skim worrying news on your smartphone; **hamsterkauf** - a German word meaning panic buying. Other neologisms like **coronacoma**, **coronials**,

**covidivorce**, **coronaspeak** have also begun to be used. **Coronial Moms** blessed with **coronial babies** are expected to bear the burden of home, workplace and the children's school with **coronial fathers** chipping in as well.

Addressing medical and other service personnel in frequent interface with people as **covid warrior/hero** and **frontline worker/employee/staff** has become universal. The names of the clinical tests like **RT-PCR tests**, **CT scans** and **MRIs** have become widely known, though we are told that only the severely infected need the latter ones. Other disease related words, like **cytokline storm or spike**, (describing the overactive immune response that can lead to organ failure and death), **community transmission** or **community spread**, dealing with the spread of a disease, and the likelihood that it will either subside, remain at a stable level within a population, or result in a pandemic, are all related to **R** (also **R number**, **reproduction number**, and **reproductive number**). **CFR**, or **case fatality rate**, **morbidity rate**, and **mortality rate**, have also tragically entered our everyday vocabulary.

Checking disease propagation demands a combination of **social distancing** measures, instant **historical contact tracing**, and **restricted access** to areas by creating **geo-fencing** and **micro containment zones**, along with **physical testing** and **screening** of both **symptomatic** and **asymptomatic patients**. Platforms and applications to map the **spread, contain and break it** have led to the development of the **Aarogya Setu and CoWin** apps in India and several other such apps across the world.

Personal hygiene for the prevention of infection has given importance to **disinfectants, face masks, face shields** and **hand sanitisers/hand washing**. Mask wearing has given rise to phrases such as **mask up, anti-mask, anti-masker** and **mask-shaming**. Also, words like **remote, distant, online/offline, mute/unmute** have proliferated. There is a spurt in **online, digital** and **hybrid** pedagogy. Then, words like **workcation** – a holiday during which you also work – and **staycation** – a holiday at home – have also been formed.

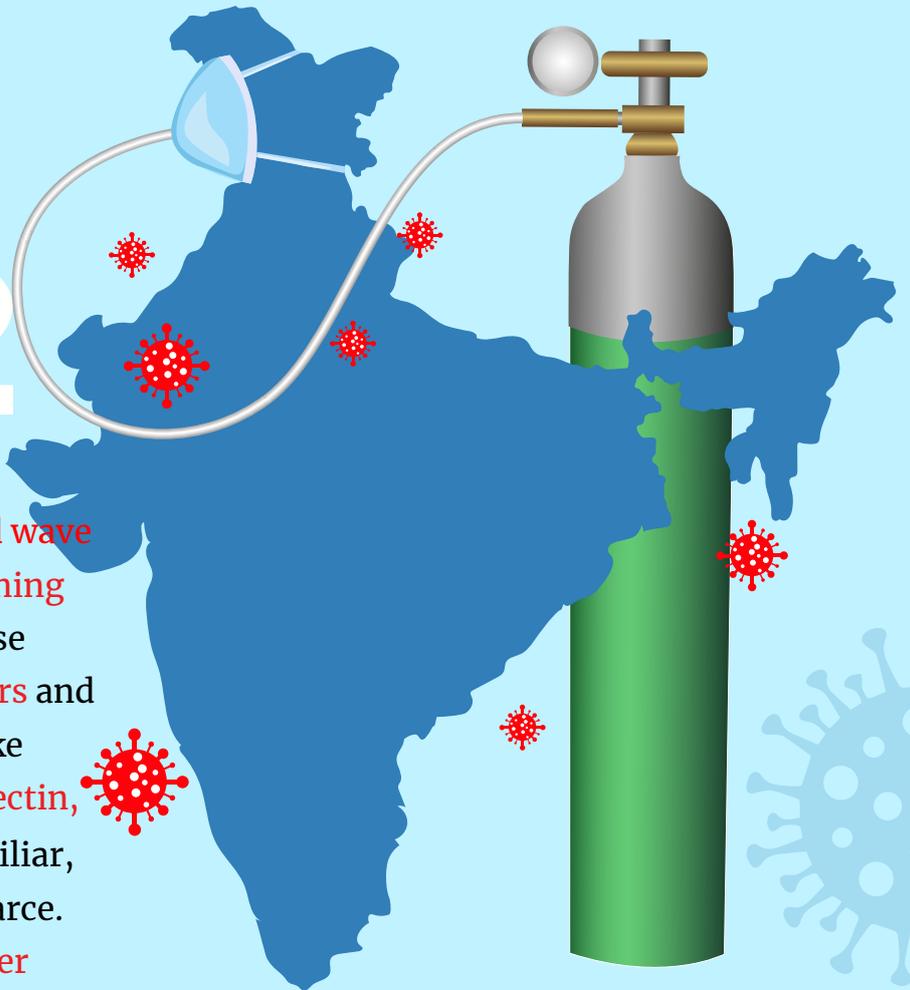
Travel restrictions have highlighted the need for **bio-bubbles** and **travel bubbles**. And the **breach** of these has resulted in various crises, including, for many in India, the postponement of the IPL matches. At the same time, the India-England series has been the first **bio-secure** Test series (held in February and March) this year. To leave our homes during **lockdowns, quarantine** or a **curfew**, an **e-pass** – that authorises a person's movement – is mandatory. The pandemic requires effectual medicines. With specific ones yet to arrive, old drugs like **chloroquine, hydroxychloroquine** and **dexamethasone** and processes such as **plasma therapy** and **CPAP, continuous positive airway pressure**, and medical equipment like **ventilators** are in great demand. Then we have fearsome **mutants** that have come with the emergent **strains** of the virus. Now the virus is air-borne and the disease is now less **surface** driven and transmitted more through the **aerosol** route.



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These days, in India, the **second wave** has resulted in the need for **proning** (lying on the stomach to increase **oxidation**), **oxygen concentrators** and **cryogenic tankers**; and drugs like **remdesivir, tocilizumab, ivermectin**, etc., have become painfully familiar, outrageously exorbitant and scarce. Unfortunately, the **superspreader** religious, political and social events have multiplied and we see their ominous effects countrywide. It is devastatingly clear that we have failed to “**detect, test, treat, isolate, trace and mobilise...**” people. The need for community and military led **field hospitals** has arisen. The medical term **Triage** - a process of assessing and assigning treatment to patients, depending on the likelihood of their survival in view of the severe shortage of hospital beds and medical supplies, has taken on alarming implications. **Black-marketing** and **hoarding** of essential supplies, **fleeing** practices that seem so dated, have returned, raising agonising questions about our moral fibre and social commitment.

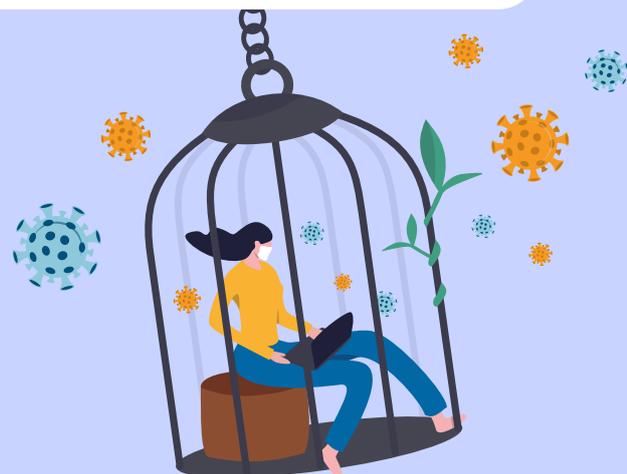


As we desperately try to **flatten the curve** and achieve **herd immunity** by adapting to the **SMS** of ‘**sanitising, masking and social distancing**’, we find our world has turned upside down. This is captured in the ubiquitous oxymoron, **social distancing** that has become the **new normal**, another oxymoron in this new, creepy world. We have been urged to remain **physically separate** and not **socially separate** in these distressing times. The **vaccines** that have arrived promise help in the development of **antibodies** that can target the **viral spike protein**. Though **jabs** and **shots** have begun, there is **vaccine hesitancy**; nevertheless, **covid appropriate behaviour** is here to stay. The governments have

announced **stimulus packages and sops** to mitigate the hardships faced by individuals and companies. The **endgame**, however, seems quite some time away.

Of course, language of old does not just wither away. Our most solemn thoughts remain ensconced in the immortal words of great poets. Keats, in 1819, wrote the lines below and their import is brutally true 200 years later. Like the speaker in the poem, we too are facing the exhaustion, sickness and anxiety that come with being part of the human world. Here, people sit and listen to each other groan in excruciating pain, where disease relentlessly strikes the old, and where youth fades and dies. And, where, even just to think is to feel intense suffering, heavy sadness and hopeless pain. Witnessing the horrifying pictures of the floating **covid corpses** in the sacred river Ganga, one can only lament...

**The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and  
dies; Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs...**





Red Lab sincerely thanks its Advisor,  
Avanindra (Abu) Chopra, Associate Professor  
and Head of the Department of English at DAV  
College, Chandigarh for this insightful piece.

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<sup>TM</sup> Rediffusion Consumer Labs  
Lotus Corporate Park,  
18th Flr, A-Wing, Unit No.1801-1802,  
Graham Firth Steel Compound,  
Off Western Express Highway,  
Goregaon (East), Mumbai 400063