Language and COVID: An Overview of Pandemic-Related Medical Translation

with Pablo Mugüerza
Saturday, October 15 at 08:30 PT
As you may know, I am a physician and medical translator. My first presentation was more oriented to my side as a physician, and the second to my side as a linguist. But if any medical emergency arises during either presentation...feel free to call ANOTHER physician: I have not practiced for many years.
For my presentation I have decided to address

1) the gender, the pronunciation, and the capitalization of the terms COVID and SARS-CoV-2 in four different languages and

2) the response from users of each of those languages in the form of term creation.
HIV/AIDS: a precedent

To talk about the response of languages to a challenge such as a pandemic, we have a perfect precedent: HIV infection and one of its consequences, AIDS.
HIV made the jump from other primates to humans in west-central Africa in the early-to-mid 20th century.

AIDS was first recognized by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 1981 and its cause—HIV infection—was identified in the early part of the decade.

It’s sobering to reflect that we’ve been fighting the last big pandemic for four decades, and that more than 34 million people have died of it. Tuberculosis, largely forgotten in high-income countries, still causes around 1.4 million deaths per year. It was the biggest infectious disease killer before Covid-19 emerged, and will likely retain that designation when Covid-19 fades away.
1. HIV/AIDS should only be written when referring to both entities at the same time (something very infrequent).
2. HIV is NOT a disease, but the name of a virus.
3. “HIV infection” is a disease, though mostly asymptomatic in treated patients.
4. “HIV infection” is communicable (mostly by fluids exchange, but AIDS is not).
5. Technically, AIDS is NOT even a disease: it is the late and advanced stage of UNTREATED chronic human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection.
6. Lexicalization is strongly encouraged, at least for aids.
An investigation across 45 languages and 12 language families reveals a universal language network

In summary, we have established that key properties of the neural architecture of language hold across speakers of 45 diverse languages spanning 12 language families, and the variability observed across languages is similar to or lower than the inter-individual variability among speakers of the same language.

In spite of their shared features, languages do exhibit remarkable variation

En resumen, hemos establecido que las propiedades clave de la arquitectura neuronal del lenguaje se mantienen entre los hablantes de 45 lenguas diversas que abarcan 12 familias lingüísticas, y la variabilidad observada entre las lenguas es similar o menor que la variabilidad interindividual entre los hablantes de la misma lengua.

A pesar de sus características comunes, las lenguas presentan una notable variación

Source (August 2022): https://go.nature.com/3Vg1Cq9
The gender of COVID and SARS-CoV-2 in English

Most English nouns have no gender

It is often stated as objective fact that Modern English has “no grammatical gender.” This is not, however, entirely true. Modern English does, in fact, have grammatical gender to some extent, but it is very limited compared to other Indo-European languages, and a noun’s grammatical gender usually corresponds to the natural gender of the person or thing to whom it refers.

Source: https://bit.ly/3ECI7SG
What about capitalization? Should you write COVID in uppercase or lowercase letters? This depends who you ask!


However, in some newspapers, like the New York Times and The Guardian, you will find only the C capitalized: Covid-19. The New Yorker loves to be difficult about matters of style, and their preference is for small caps: COVID-19.

Note that the word “coronavirus” is generally not capitalized.

Source: https://ginsengenglish.com/blog/covid
The pronunciation of COVID and SARS-CoV-2 in English

NO doubts: /ˈkəʊvɪd/ and /ɛs-ɛi-ər-ɛs-CoV-2/
Sur le genre de cette maladie, l'Académie française s'est prononcée en mai 2020. On devrait donc dire la covid 19, puisque le noyau est un équivalent du nom français féminin maladie.
The capitals of covid and SARS-CoV-2 in French

Comme nous l'avons vu dans la déclaration de l'Académie française sur la diapositive précédente, en mai 2020, cette institution avait déjà lexicalisé le terme et n'utilisait pas de majuscules. Mais la réalité est qu'en 2021, il était plus courant de voir "covid" écrit avec une majuscule initiale.

As we saw in the statement from the French Academy on the previous slide, by May 2020, that institution had already lexicalized the term and was not using capital letters. But the reality is that by 2021, it was more common to see "covid" written with an initial capital letter.
The pronunciation of COVID and SARS-CoV-2 in French

NO doubts: /kovi’d/ and /sarscovddø/
The gender of COVID and SARS-CoV-2 in German

In the German language, "der Virus" is used almost as often as "das Virus". This was recorded by the Digital Dictionary of the German Language.

But there are regional differences: In Austria, for example, "the virus" is used four times as often. The use of der or das also seems to depend on the type of virus.

According to the digital dictionary, the written language usually says "the computer virus". There is no scientific explanation for this.
In German, they write all nouns with a capital letter. Nouns are these words that describe a “thing” or a “person” as “das Auto” or “die Frau”.

The capitals of COVID and SARS-CoV-2 in German
The pronunciation of COVID and SARS-CoV-2 in German

/ˌkoːvɪtˈnaɪntSe:n/  
/sarskoːnəviruszwai/
In June 2021, a Twitter user asked the RAE about the gender of this disease: el covid or la covid? This was the answer:
The acronym "COVID-19", which gives its name to the disease, is normally used in the masculine form ("COVID-19") due to the influence of the genus of "coronaviruses" and other viral diseases ("Zika", "Ebola"), which take their name from the virus that causes them.

June 2021
The gender of COVID and SARS-CoV-2 in Spanish

But the use of the feminine form ("la COVID-19"), as the WHO does in its Spanish pages, is justified because "disease" is the core of the acronym ("COronaVIrus Disease"). Both are considered valid.

Its lexicalization as a common noun with the form "covid", in lower case and omitting the numerical part of the acronym, follows the same pattern: "el/la covid".
The capitals of COVID and SARS-CoV-2 in Spanish

In October 2022 all 3 possibilities are common for the disease: covid, Covid and COVID.

As for the virus, coronavirus is usually seen without an initial capital letter.

Please be very careful when translating, so that it is always clear when you are talking about the virus and when you are talking about the disease.
The pronunciation of COVID and SARS-CoV-2 in Spanish

In Spanish there are 6 words with more than 2 syllables ending in –id in Spanish:

- Madrid
- Valladolid
- David
- Ardid
- Adalid
- Áspid
The response of English speakers

Whether you are vaxxed, double-vaxxed, or unvaxxed, the language relating to vaccines and vaccination permeated all of our lives in 2021. For lexicographers, it is rare to observe a single topic impact language so dramatically, and in such a short period of time become a critical part of our everyday communication.

However, the story of vaccines embedded in the English language is an old one which started at the end of the 1790s with the coinage of the word vaccine, followed soon after by words relating to opposition to vaccination, such as anti-vaccinist.

The word vaccine itself, already very common, more than doubled in frequency between September 2020 and September 2021
The response of English speakers

Caremongering: solidarity and mutual aid; social altruism.
Corona-snitch: person who notifies the police to denounce the covididiot of the day.
Dracula sneeze: coughing in the elbow; coughing in the sleeve.
Miss Rona: no explanation needed.
Moronavirus = covidiot.
Stay home: confining oneself; staying at home; not going out.
Tested pozzy (pozzi): positive.
Wuhan shake (foot shake): footshake; toe touch; toe greeting.
**Fauci ouchie:** FAUCI-OUCHIE means "COVID-19 Vaccine.

**Covid arm:** an apparent side-effect of some Covid-19 vaccinations, where a temporary rash develops at the injection site

**Vaxxident:** an unfortunate incident that happens unexpectedly and unintentionally, typically related to vaxxination.

**Vaxdar:** a Gaydar for vaxxed people

**Jab or jag?:** Remember the Rubella vaccination at school? That was a jag. ‘Jag’ is correct. After all, the Scots invented medicine, so what we say goes.

Source: https://bit.ly/3yv8y9i
The French for ‘vaccine’ is ‘vaccin’ (vak-san). Interestingly, in recent months, the word ‘vaccin’, when used on its own, has increasingly come to refer only to the inoculation against Covid-19, as if all other vaccines had disappeared.

Source: https://bit.ly/3yullc2
The response of French speakers

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The response of French speakers

**Mélancovid**: Morosité causée par la pandémie de Covid-19

**Panachage vaccinal**: une stratégie vaccinale où les premières injections de la primo-vaccination se font avec des vaccins différents, le plus souvent issus de plateformes vaccinales distinctes

**Bélenophobie**: une phobie peur des aiguilles et des objets pointus.

**Fracture vaccinale**: fortes disparités géographiques et sociales.

**A la vaccinglinglin**: formé sur l’expression «à la Saint-Glinglin». Projection dans un avenir incertain où tout le monde sera vacciné, y compris dans les pays à faibles revenus.

**Inégalité vaccinale**: L’inégalité d’accès aux vaccins

**Ecouvillonner**: prélever un échantillon dans (une cavité naturelle) à l’aide d’un écouvillon.

The response of German speakers

COVID and German language

In Germany, lexicographers at the Leibniz Institute for the German Language have compiled more than 1200 new words related to the coronavirus pandemic.
The response of German speakers

For example, *Coronamutationsgebiet* is an area where coronavirus mutations are widespread.

A *Geisterveranstaltung* (ghost event) is an event with no people in attendance, usually sports. Live music is allowed, provided the audience remains in their cars, at an *Autokonzert*.

*Mundschutzmode* includes "*Mund* for mouth, *Schutz* for protection and *Mode* as a term for fashion. So a literal translation would be mouth protection fashion," Stefanowitsch says.

But Germans have also referred to a *Gesichtskondom* — a "face condom," which he notes creates a "novel image" in your head. *Behelfsmundnasenschutz* would be an "improvised mouth nose protection."
The response of German speakers

*Maulkorb*, or muzzle (bozal), is not on the list of new words. But people opposed to mask requirements are using the word muzzle in a new way: "to portray adherence to sensible public health measures as an act of submission under an authoritarian government," Stefanowitsch says. "So that's been a stroke of genius from their perspective."

Source: [https://n.pr/3Cog3ji](https://n.pr/3Cog3ji)
In all honesty, "SARS-CoV-2" is the name of the new disease, but it is not easy to pronounce. The abbreviated form "Corona" has therefore quickly become established, which has led to a considerable risk of confusion with a well-known beer brand.

In fact, the brewing company has seen a drop in profits. This was certainly not only due to the fear of contracting the virus over a pint of beer, but was also due to the fact that production came to a standstill at various locations. Namely, where only stores and facilities belonging to the critical infrastructure were still open.
The response of German speakers

But the abbreviation "Corona" didn't just get the beer producer into trouble. It also caused other neologisms such as "Corona-Krise," "Corona-Pandemie," and even "Corona-Virus." While the short forms "Corona-Krise" (instead of "Coronavirus-Krise") and "Corona-Pandemie" (instead of "Coronavirus-Pandemie") simply make pithy catchphrases that have saved many a copywriter from a nervous breakdown in the face of frequently imposed character limits, the word bloom "Corona-Virus" caused (hopefully) maximum head-shaking among the editorial staff. But why, actually?

In fact, there are two ways to form compound nouns in German: by writing them together and by hyphenating them. So "Corona-Virus" shouldn't be a problem for the editorial office, should it? Yes it does.
The response of Spanish speakers

The use of “dosis”
The response of Spanish speakers

In May 2020 the first version of a glossary was ready, with more than 3200 entries from very diferente realms: virology, molecular biology, epidemiology, pharmacology, economics, sociology, microbiological tests, pneumology, protection equipments, and the colloquial register.

**twin*emic**

1 {adj.} **dobledémico** (o dobledémica)
2 {s.} **dobledemia**

**Sinonimia (en):** double epidemic.
**Sinonimia (es):** epidemia doble.
**Concepto:** sindemia (→ *syndemic*:2) consistente en la suma de dos epidemias (o pandemias) concurrentes o secuenciales en una misma población.
* • Aplicable al lema completo, en todas sus acepciones:
  **Sinonimia (en):** doubledemic.
In my opinion the users of these 4 languages were perfectly prepared for a tsunami like that of the covid pandemic, thanks to their centuries of existence and having faced numerous pandemics in that time. It is time to be extremely critical in our work and to do research in order to draw conclusions that will allow us to face new challenges of this kind...very soon.
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