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DR LAZAR VRKATIĆ

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## TAKING STOCK OF THE ENGLISH WORD STOCK: THE RISE AND EXPANSION OF COVID- 19-INSPIRED TERMINOLOGY

**ABSTRACT:** In just less than two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has managed to leave a mark on a number of areas of life and fields of study, and linguistics has not been exempted. As everyone deals with the ‘new normal’ brought about and shaped by the pandemic, we have had to rise to the challenge of deciding how to talk about the influence of the virus on our day-to-day lives. The constant changes that are occurring in medicine, politics, education, entertainment, among others, reflect the need for a greater use of already-existing lexemes, as well as new terminology that will help us make sense of those societal changes.

The English vocabulary is a work in progress, and the lexeme formation processes that occur are intensified by our online presence during the months-long lockdowns, quarantines, and restrictions. People’s creativity during online communication has resulted in many new terms and phrases, some of which have already been noted in online dictionaries – from the *Oxford University Press* and the *Cambridge University Press*, to *Macmillan* and *Merriam-Webster*. The lexemes looked at in this paper have been taken from a variety of mainly online sources, however, not just from the said dictionaries.

This paper will take a closer look at the meaning and function of these increasingly used lexemes, as well as the processes that have taken place in their creation, such as affixation (*zoomwear*), compounding (*social bubble*), clipping (*isolation*), blending (*covidiot*), and abbreviation (*WFH – working from home*).

**KEY WORDS:** lexeme formation (processes), (derivational) neologisms, productivity

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus pandemic has greatly impacted the English lexicon, which is very open to various linguistic innovations. The instant global connection that social media offers and the limited face-to-face interaction have been instrumental in the spread of COVID-19 terminology, allowing for new terms to be coined in all areas of society. Linguistic creativity has become evident where COVID-19 is concerned; forming new vocabulary with a collective cultural reference unites people and provides a communal sense of relief.

Lexeme formation in any language results in a richer vocabulary, further affirming that particular language. Bauer notes that it “deals with the formation of new lexemes” (1983: 33), while Yule says it is “the study of the processes whereby new words come into being in a language” (1996: 64). Though primary lexeme formation<sup>2</sup> allows spontaneity, secondary lexeme formation is usually connected to convention and influence. The new terms that appear are created to refer to already-existing terms to which they have to adjust.

This paper looks at COVID-19-inspired terminology, chosen arbitrarily from a variety of mainly online sources, the productivity of affixation, compounding, blending, and conversion, and discusses lexeme formation processes that Bauer (1983) considers unpredictable - clipping and abbreviation. The complexity of some of the newly-formed lexemes reveals that some processes are interrelated and can work together to fulfil the aims of lexeme formation in modern English.

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<sup>2</sup> The distinction we make between primary and secondary lexeme formation is that the former refers to the arbitrary creation of root morphemes/lexemes, i.e., lexemes not derived, compounded, or developed from other, existing lexemes (neologisms), while the latter refers to motivated lexeme formation, and, as such, refers to the creation of complex lexemes (derivational neologisms), i.e., lexemes formed on the basis of other lexemes or morphemes.

## 2. AFFIXATION

*Affixation* creates new lexemes out of already-existing ones by adding one or more derivational affixes before or after the root or the stem (Stefanovski, 2007). The root can be a whole lexeme or part of a lexeme that represents the smallest meaningful unit that cannot be reduced into smaller units.

Table 1 below presents the productivity of different prefixes and suffixes in COVID-19-inspired terminology:

<i>Prefix</i>	<i>Base</i>	<i>Suffix</i>	<i>Derivative</i>
anti-	fit	-	anti-fit
anti-	mask	-er	anti-masker
anti-	natal	-ism	anti-natalism
-	cottage	-core	cottagecore
-	fear	-ware	fearware
super-    fore-	cast	-er	superforecaster
tele-	therapy	-	teletherapy
-	zoom	-wear	zoomwear

Table 1. *Examples of affixation in COVID-19-inspired terminology*

Attaching bound morphemes to the front of a root or stem is known as *prefixation*. Stefanovski notes that “English prefixes have an exclusively lexical (derivational) role, allowing the construction of a large number of new words in the English lexicon” (2007: 139). The majority of prefixes in English are class-maintaining; this is why we look at their semantic rather than their syntactic role here. Some productive class-maintaining prefixes that appear in COVID-19-inspired terminology are illustrated in the following examples:

(1) anti- : [X]n – [antiX]n; ‘against X’ – <i>orientation</i> anti-fit (against a proper fit that follows the shape of one’s body)
(2) fore- : [X]n – [foreX]n; ‘before X’ – <i>time and space</i> forecaster (a person who predicts/estimates something ahead of time)
super- : [X] – [superX]; ‘above, beyond X’ – <i>time and space</i> superforecaster (a person whose job is to accurately predict the mortality rate and the total number of COVID-19 infected a year from now)
(3) tele- : [X] – [teleX]; ‘at a distance’ – <i>time and space</i> teletherapy (using videoconferencing tools as a safer way for therapists to treat patients during social distancing)

Table 2. *Some productive class-maintaining prefixes in COVID-19-inspired terminology*

The examples in (2) show that a lexeme can undergo derivation more than once until it reaches the form necessary to express the meaning it is intended to. This allows for the creation of many new context-specific derivatives.

*Suffixation* is when a bound morpheme is attached to the end of a stem (Stefanovski, 2007). Unlike prefixes, which are generally class-maintaining and have to do with grammatical meaning, suffixes are usually class-changing. As their primary function is to change the stem's grammatical properties, they should be classified syntactically and sub-classified semantically. On this account, suffixes can be classified as class-maintaining or class-changing, with further division of the lexical category of the base (denominal, deverbal, or deadjectival, respectively) and the derivative (generally a noun, verb, or adjective). This classification can be explored through the following suffixes:

(4)	-er : [X]v – [Xer]n; ‘one who Xs’, ‘engaged in X (if [X]n)’ <i>class-changing, deverbal nominal (V-N)</i> e.g. anti-masker
(5)	-ism : [X]adj – [Xism]n; ‘denoting Xism’, ‘belief in Xism’ <i>class-changing, deadjectival nominal (Adj-N)</i> e.g. anti-natalism
(6)	-core : [X]n – [Xcore]n; ‘very into X’, ‘X to the heart’ <i>class-maintaining, denominal nominal (N-N)</i> e.g. cottagecore, also farmcore or countrycore
(7)	ware : [X]n – [Xware]n; ‘classifying X’, ‘X used for a particular purpose’ <i>class-maintaining, denominal nominal (N-N)</i> e.g. fearware
(8)	-wear : [X]n – [Xwear]n; ‘a particular type of clothing associated with X’ <i>class-maintaining, denominal nominal (N-N)</i> e.g. zoomwear

Table 3. *Some productive suffixes in COVID-19-inspired terminology*

The productive suffix *-er* in (4) is a deverbal nominal – its base is a verb, and its derivatives are nouns. The deadjectival nominal *-ism* in (5) uses an adjective to create a (then-prefixed) noun referring to a philosophy that discusses the issue of overpopulation and the jeopardy of two, if not more lives during a pandemic. On the other hand, (6), (7), and (8) are all examples of class-maintaining suffixes that use a noun



base and result in noun derivatives. Furthermore, these suffixes have specific meaning only in limited contexts, so they can be referred to as *suffixoids*, traditionally lexeme-final segments with the characteristics of both free and bound morphemes. The suffix *-core* in (6) usually denotes a type, genre, or sub-category, but can also refer to different types of aesthetics that centre around idealized concepts – *naturecore*, *goblincore*, *metalcore*, etc. The suffix *-ware* is perhaps most productive in IT terminology, referring to programs executed by a computer. Similarly, to the mass noun *malware* (a malicious *software*), *fearware* is designed by cyber attackers to cause damage to systems or gain unauthorized access to one's data. The example in (8) makes use of the suffix *-wear*, which combines with nouns and adjectives to form derivative nouns that refer to a specific type of clothing (e.g., *outerwear*, *menswear*, *footwear*, etc.). *Zoomwear* has become popular with the transition from real meetings and classes to ones on the video conferencing platform Zoom. People in *zoomwear* have an office attire above the waist, but something more comfortable down below, out of the webcam's reach.

### 3. COMPOUNDING

*Compounding* combines two or more free base forms to form new lexical items - compounds. Stefanovski (2007: 163) says that “compounds resemble syntactic expressions in that the units combined also always exist independently as words – that is they are complete both phonologically and semantically”. Compounds may or may not be similar in meaning to their isolated constituents, and their components may or may not belong to the same lexical category.

Many terms that have emerged during this period have made use of compounding, as it is easier for people to combine already-existing lexemes, rather than try to coin new ones that have not been previously encountered. Though compounds may not necessarily be new, their recently acquired meaning may be.

For example, if one were not familiar with the video conferencing service Zoom, they would be unable to guess the meaning of *Zoom-bombing* - an intrusion into online events by internet trolls that join

uninvited. There are serious legal implications for those that behave in a distasteful and offensive manner, hence the second part of the compound is labelled *bombing* (akin to *photobombing*). Though Zoom was founded in 2011, it was in March 2020 that this term became popular, with most intrusions ensuing during students' online classes on the platform. In addition, both *shopping-starved* and *revenge spending* consist of lexemes that are not unfamiliar. However, their compound meaning corresponds to recent notions – people may be *shopping-starved* due to their inability to physically visit stores during quarantine, which is why they will then resort to *revenge spending*, i.e., the anticipated flood of purchases made post-lockdown.

Many other compounds have found their way into people's current vocabulary. Most of the compounds consist of two nouns; the combination *noun + noun* is common, but not exclusive. Table 2 below exemplifies instances of other combinations:

	<i>noun</i> (N) (2 <sup>nd</sup> element)	<i>adjective</i> (Adj) (2 <sup>nd</sup> element)	<i>verb</i> (V) (2 <sup>nd</sup> element)
<i>noun</i> (N) (1 <sup>st</sup> element)	cleanliness theatre, corona corridor, coronababies, coronavision, lockdown tache, quarantine and chill, Zoom mom	shopping-starved, touch-starved	doom-scrolling, doom-surfing, revenge shopping, revenge spending
<i>adjective</i> (Adj) (1 <sup>st</sup> element)	digital nutrition, double bubble, long covid, social bubble		

Table 4. *Constituent elements of compounds, with examples*

From Table 4, we also see the following patterns: *noun + noun*, *adjective + noun*, *noun + adjective*, and *noun + verb*. As compounds are typically classified according to their function in the sentence, the patterns of components in line with their lexical category indicate a sub-classification of compounds. Concerning the syntactic classification of compounds, there are three major types of compounds that correspond to three major lexical categories: compound nouns, compound adjectives, and compound verbs.

### 3.1 Compound nouns

*Compound nouns* consist of two or more lexemes that combine into a single noun, and they are typically formed with nouns modified by adjectives, verbs, or other nouns. Bauer (1983: 185) observes that noun compounds, especially the *noun + noun* combination, are the most common type of compounds in English. He also notes that “the vast majority of noun-noun compounds are right-headed, i.e., they have a head and this head is the right member of the compound”. Syntactically, the head properties are transferred to the whole compound, thus, if the head is a noun, the compound will be a compound noun. This can be seen in the following:

(9) a. <i>coronababies</i> <i>lockdown tache</i>  b. <i>long covid</i>
(10) a. <i>cleanliness theatre</i>  b. <i>double bubble</i> <i>digital nutrition</i>
(11) <i>quarantine and chill</i>

Table 5. *Examples of COVID-inspired compound nouns*

Semantically, in an *endocentric* compound its members A+B denote a special kind of B, i.e., the head determines the general lexical category that contains the meaning of the compound. Thus, *coronababies* = babies conceived during quarantine, and *lockdown tache* = a (mous) tache grown during lockdown. The endocentric forms in (9a) consist of two nouns, whereas the compound noun in (9b) has an adjective that modifies the head noun, and it refers to the lasting effects and symptoms of the disease.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* recognizes the general use of *COVID-19*, the shortened form of the compound *coronavirus disease 2019*, as a modifier of nouns in many compounds. A *COVID-19 case*, *COVID-19 test*, *COVID-19 virus*, etc., have all become commonplace.

The members A+B in the compounds in (10) result in a special kind of an unexpressed semantic head that holds the meaning of the compound. These compounds are *exocentric*. The *noun + noun* compound in (10a) does not refer to an actual theatre known for its cleanliness, but to the phenomenon of ensuring that people see the virus countermeasures in place so they can feel safer. The *adjective + noun* compounds in (10b) are also *exocentric*. *Double bubble* has nothing to do with a bubble, but with people from two separate households being allowed to see each other with the gradual ease of restrictions, and *digital nutrition* signifies the process of making sure one's increased use of electronic devices is not harmful to their physical and mental health.

The compound in (11) represents another semantic type of compounds with two semantic heads with no required dependency between them, i.e. A+B denotes 'the sum' of what A and B denote. A *copulative* compound, as *quarantine and chill*, describes two activities that happen at the same time, i.e., being quarantined and chilling with someone, especially a romantic/sexual partner.

Orthography-wise, Adams (1973: 59) notes that "compounds may be written as one [closed or solid] word, as two hyphenated words, or as two [open or spaced] separate words, sometimes regardless of the degree of unity that may be felt between the elements". Writing a compound may vary, though, as these words are rather recent creations.

### 3.2 Compound adjectives

*Compound adjectives* are formed when at least two lexemes are combined to modify the same noun (Stefanovski, 2007; Jovanović, 2017). They are not as widespread as compound nouns and verbs in English, and those that are in use are most frequently formed by a *noun + verb* combination.

Generally, compound adjectives are *endocentric* concerning their semantic classification. The first element is said to satisfy an argument position of the adjective. Syntactically, this argument appears next to a preposition, as for example, starved *for* something. In this way, the

compound adjective *touch-starved* = a metaphorical starvation for touch, as we practice social distancing, with physical contact among friends and colleagues being off limits. Along the same lines, *shopping-starved* consumers have spent months locked up at home, waiting for stores to open, so they can splurge on things they might not even need.

Spelling-wise, these terms are usually hyphenated to avoid ambiguity or confusion, but they can also be found as two separate words.

### 3.3 Compound verbs

As Bauer says (1983: 105), “compound verbs may arise in three different ways: by backformation from noun or adjective compounds, by zero derivation from noun compounds and, less often, in the same way as other types of compounds, by linking two words together”. In Table 6 below we note the process of *conversion*, through which a lexeme of one lexical category converts into a lexeme of another lexical category with no changes in spelling or pronunciation:

<i>Form</i>	<i>Function: compound noun</i>	<i>Function: compound verb</i>
<i>doom-scrolling / doom-surfing</i>	Daily <i>doom-scrolling</i> is bad for our mental health.	She has been <i>doom-scrolling</i> for hours; you need to take her phone away.
<i>revenge shopping / revenge spending</i>	As expected, <i>revenge shopping</i> is happening, and store-owners are thrilled.	He’s probably <i>revenge shopping</i> right now, so don’t even bother; he won’t pick up.

Table 6. *The double function of one and the same compound form*

If we take the present participle form in the examples as a gerund, the constituent combination will be *noun + noun*, and the compound will function as a noun. However, if we regard the *-ing* form as a verb,

the *noun + verb* combination will result in a compound verb. Due to their derivational nature, these verbs are sometimes called *pseudo-compound* verbs, and their conversion is considered the most productive form of conversion in English.

From a semantic perspective, the meaning of compound verbs, which are endocentric for the most part, can be deduced from the meaning of their components. Concerning orthography, compound verbs can be found in all three forms: closed, hyphenated, or open. Bauer notes, though, that “verb compounds are likely to be written solid or hyphenated; they appear as two separate words much less often than noun compounds” (1983: 106).

#### 4. CLIPPING

*Clipping* reduces a lexeme to one of its parts by dropping one or more syllables, while the lexeme’s original meaning remains. Bauer (1983) notes that truncated names and clippings are usually used to overtly express familiarity to a thing or person that we want to refer to. Some prosodic rules suggest that polysyllabic lexemes tend to be reduced to a monosyllabic truncation, or a disyllabic *-y/-ie-* diminutive with stress on the first syllable. However, from the following examples we can see that the phonetic loss of material results in the disyllabic *Rona*, devoid of the *-y* or *-ie* suffix:

(12)            *Corona* (or *coronavirus*) → *Rona*, *Miss Rona*, *The Rona*

Additionally, this clipping can be compounded with the definite article or the prefix *Miss*, which adds attitude and humor attributed to the virus. Some diminutive clippings, especially typical of Australian English, provide a sense of community and lighten the mood at the same time, supporting the view that using words we have created or feel some sense of ownership with can help us feel empowered in uncertain situations, as in (13):

<i>pandemic</i>	<i>pando</i>
<i>isolation</i>	<i>iso</i>
<i>quarantine</i>	<i>quaz(zie)</i>
<i>sanitizer</i>	<i>sanny</i>
<i>positive</i>	<i>(testing) pozzi</i>

Table 7. Examples of (typically Australian English) diminutive clippings

Clippings can also be found as elements of compounds, namely compound nouns, as in (14):

a. <i>lockdown moustache</i>	<i>lockdown tache</i>
b. <i>female den</i>	<i>fem den</i>

Table 8. Examples of clippings as elements of compound words

In (14a), it is the second element of the compound noun that undergoes clipping, while (14b) clips the first member of the compound.

Two main types of clippings are found in COVID-19-related terminology. The most common type is *final* or *back-clipping*, which leaves the beginning of the lexeme intact (e.g. *isolation*), and *initial* or *fore-clipping*, which retains the final part of the prototype (e.g. *moustache*). Rarely, both the front and the end parts can be clipped, resulting in both-end clipping (*coronavirus*). Some of the diminutive forms in (13) do not fit into the conventional types of clippings, containing extra letters that do not occur in the original lexemes, and they may be regarded as ‘irregular’ clippings, i.e., *quaz* (*quarantine*) and *pozzi* (*positive*).

Clippings are most often found in informal communication and slang, which often expresses humour, a well-known coping mechanism. They are short, practical, and funny, which is why this process of lexeme formation endures, especially during a social crisis. However, clippings are still most likely to be seen as reduced forms of their legitimate and longer counterparts.

## 5. BLENDING

*Blending* involves creating hybrid forms from parts of already-existing lexemes. Stefanovski points out that “like clipping, blending is unpredictable, and it is a hybrid one because it consists first of clipping of two words and then of blending the left-overs into a third one” (2007: 189). Blends differ from compounds in that their component elements are non-morphemic parts of lexemes, which points to their unpredictability and irregularity. The pandemic has resulted in an increased productivity of blending, and most blends can be formed in a few different ways, as shown below:

<i>Method</i>	<i>Blend</i>	<i>Constituent words</i>
The beginning of one word is attached to the end of the other	coronacation: coronarita: coronnials: infodemic: lockstalgia: quarantini:	coronavirus + vacation; coronavirus + margarita; coronavirus + millennials; information + pandemic; lockdown + nostalgia; quarantine + martini
The beginnings of two words are blended	flexi-schooling: covexit:	flexible + schooling; covid + exit
Two words are blended around a common sound sequence	Blursday: covidiot: covidivorce: quaranteens: spendemic: walktail:	blur(red) + Tuesday/ Wednesday/Thursday; covid + idiot; covid + divorce; quarantine + teens; spending + pandemic; walking + cocktail

Table 9. *Different methods of blending, with examples*

Table 9 illustrates that the pandemic has facilitated the creation of many blends, including synonyms (*walktail/coronarita*, *covidiot/moronavirus*, *coronnials/covidials*). The process of blending may produce even more blends in the future, but we shall see whether they will be long-lasting. The lexemes looked at in this article have been taken from various sources, online articles, newspapers, headlines, among others, not just from dictionaries, and as such, we may note that not all have already been ‘institutionalized’, hence, our approach to wait and see how many will actually ‘survive’ in the long run.



## 6. ABBREVIATION

*Abbreviations* are shortenings that unite parts of different lexemes, involving a loss of phonetic and orthographic material (Izura and Playfoot, 2011). They can be spelled in either lower-case or capital letters, and they consist of the initial letter(s) of each lexeme of a longer name or compound term. They are grouped according to two properties regarding spelling and pronunciation – *initialisms* (*letter words*) - pronounced by naming each letter, and *acronyms* - following regular reading rules and pronounced as a normal lexeme. In the context of pronounceable abbreviations, an example can be made with the *Coronavirus disease 2019* and its multiplicity of abbreviations, specifically the titular acronym *COVID*.

Both *corona* and the initialism *CV* are already-existing terms observed in 1985 and 1974 respectively, in reference to other coronaviruses. The strain of the virus responsible for the novel coronavirus is known as *Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2*, although the frequently referenced term is often replaced with the abbreviation *SARS-CoV-2*. This abbreviation consists of the pronounceable acronym *SARS* and the hybrid form *CoV*, in which *Co* is read as a word and the letter *V* is spelled out.

As Stewart notes in her public *Oxford English Dictionary* blog (2020), “while the official name for the disease caused by the coronavirus *Sars-CoV-2* is *COVID-19*, the terms *Covid*, *C-19*, *CV-19*, *CV*, and *corona* are also used to refer to the virus and the disease”. Other abbreviations include *2019-nCoV* (for the *2019 novel coronavirus*), as well as *HCoV-19* (*human coronavirus 2019*). These abbreviations are complex and consist of several parts, so a hyphen is used to separate the constituents, namely the pathogen (*SARS*), the disease (*COVID*), and the year (*2019*). All of the abovementioned abbreviations that refer to the same phenomenon point to the productivity and complexity of this process of lexeme formation during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic is also responsible for increased usage of the following abbreviations, as in (15):

a. WFH – Work(ing) from home PUI – Person (or patient) under investigation PPE – Personal protective equipment
b. OSHA – Occupational Safety and Health Administration ARDS – Acute respiratory distress syndrome

Table 10. *Examples of COVID-inspired abbreviations*

The examples in (15) are not newly-coined, but they have been noted for their increased usage. Both the initialisms (15a) and the acronyms (15b) demonstrate the tendency of abbreviations to be written in capital letters. Most of these belong to the medical field; medical professionals use this process to broaden the public’s knowledge of COVID-19 and its effects, as well as any methods of treatment. A number of terms are often abbreviated for ease of communication, and, as Stewart (2020) concludes in her blog, “the need for accurate communication of complex ideas and topics has never been greater, and the OED will continue to update its coverage of these specialist terms, charting their passing from scientific journals to newspapers and social media”.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This paper looks at the increasing influx of terms, analysing them through different lexeme formation processes. Affixation, compound-ing and blending are the most productive, followed by clipping and abbreviation. These processes work together to fulfil the central aim of lexeme formation – enriching the English lexicon.

In a social crisis, we wish to stay connected to avoid uncertainty, and to find comfort and strength to deal with the challenges we are faced with. So, we watch the news and browse the internet, which are flooded with new lingo, abbreviations and words that touch on every aspect of life. We shall ultimately decide the longevity of COVID-19-inspired terminology; some of the newly-created terms will be short-lived and only noted in online and urban dictionaries; others will undoubtedly remain, and adapt. The latter group has a referent which excites popular interest, both positive and negative, so these are more likely to stay relevant, even if they do undergo semantic change.

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