

Danica Salazar, Kate Wild

# The *Oxford English Dictionary* and the language of Covid-19

## 1 Introduction

Since the beginning of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has dominated public discourse and introduced a wealth of words and expressions to the general vocabulary of English and other world languages. The lexical adaptation necessitated by this global health crisis has been unprecedented in speed and scope, and in response, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) has continually revised its coverage, publishing special updates of Covid-19-related words in 2020 outside of its usual quarterly publication cycle. This article describes how OED lexicographers have analysed language corpora and other text databases to monitor the development of pandemic-related words and provide a linguistic and historical context to their usage.

## 2 Neologisms of the Covid-19 pandemic

The principal research tool that OED editors use to track the emergence of new words and senses to be considered for addition to the dictionary is Oxford Languages' monitor corpus of English (henceforth the Oxford Monitor Corpus), which currently contains over 14 billion words of web-based news content from 2017 to the present day, and is updated each month. Once a word is identified from the corpus as a candidate for inclusion, editors carefully research both print sources and digital text databases to make sure that there are various independent examples of the word being used, for a reasonable amount of time and reasonable frequency in the types of text in which one would normally expect to find it (see Diamond 2015). There is no exact timespan and frequency threshold for inclusion, as this may vary depending on the type of word. Some words are added to the OED after a relatively short period of time because of their huge social impact, and this has never been truer than in the case of perhaps the most important new word to come out of the Covid-19 pandemic – the word *Covid-19* itself.

---

**Danica Salazar**, Oxford University Press, Great Clarendon St, Oxford OX2 6DP, United Kingdom,  
e-mail: danica.salazar@oup.com

**Kate Wild**, Oxford University Press, Great Clarendon St, Oxford OX2 6DP, United Kingdom,  
e-mail: kate.wild@oup.com

## 2.1 The term *Covid-19*

Several of the lexical innovations that emerged during the pandemic are completely new words, or neologisms, the most notable being the name given to the disease at the root of the crisis. *Covid-19* first appears in a situation report published by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 February 2020 as the official name of the disease caused by the virus provisionally called *2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCov)* and later formally named *severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)*. *Covid-19* is shortened from *coronavirus disease 2019*, and follows the WHO's recently adopted best practices for naming new human infectious diseases (WHO 2015). *Covid-19* is an accessible term that indicates the disease's causal pathogen and year of first detection, while avoiding certain geographic, ethnic, cultural, or occupational references that could lead to stigmatizing associations with a particular place or group of people, as had happened in earlier pandemics (e.g., *Spanish flu*, *gay cancer* for AIDS) (Deang/Salazar 2021).

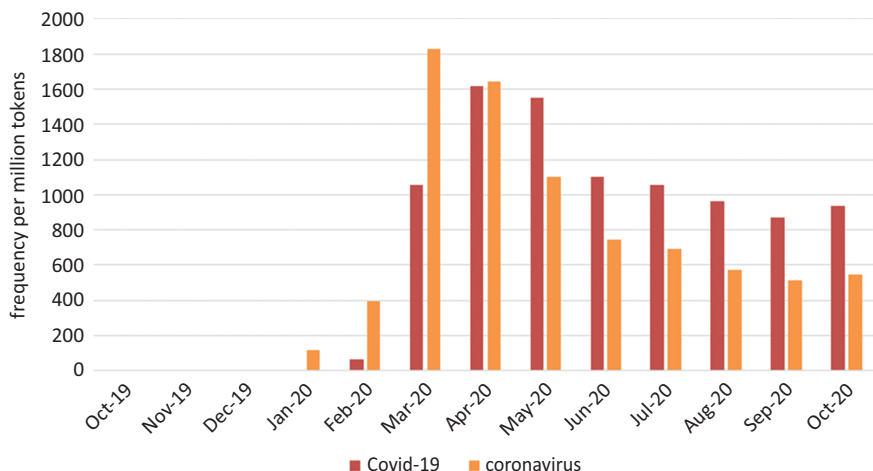
In the months following its coinage, *Covid-19* underwent an exponential rise in usage rarely seen by lexicographers in such a short period of time. By April 2020, when it was added to the OED, it was one of the top five nouns in the dictionary's monitor corpus data for that month (the other four were *people*, *time*, *year*, and *coronavirus*), and by May 2020 it had overtaken the word *coronavirus* in frequency (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

One of the challenges with adding extremely new words to dictionaries is that usage may be unfixed. Stewart (2020) explains that when *Covid-19* was first added to the OED in April 2020, it was defined as 'an acute respiratory illness', but in another special dictionary update in July 2020, this definition was changed to 'a disease . . . characterized mainly by fever and cough, . . . capable of progressing to pneumonia, respiratory and renal failure, blood coagulation abnormalities, and death', in order to reflect new information about the effects of the virus on multiple organ systems.

Another aspect of usage which may be subject to change is spelling. There has been quite a lot of discussion online, especially earlier in the pandemic, about whether *Covid-19* should be spelled with an initial capital (as in this article) or with full capitals, *COVID-19*, and different official bodies and news organizations follow different practices. This is the kind of information for which people often turn to a dictionary. Corpus frequencies help to show the most typical use, and in this case it has been found that there is considerable regional variation (see Figure 2): the form with only initial capital is more frequent in the United Kingdom, while there is a clear preference for the all-capital form in the United States. English speakers in Ireland, New Zealand, and South Africa also lean towards the initial-capital form, while those

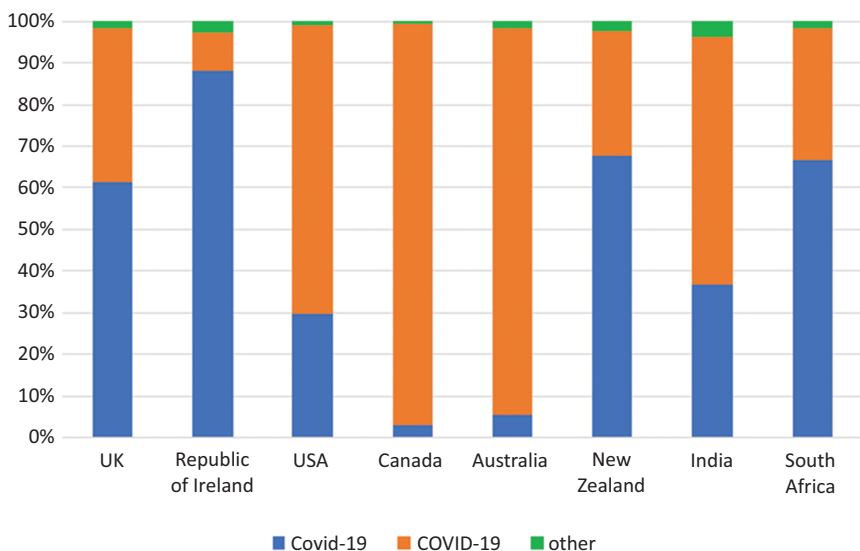
---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, charts show frequencies per million tokens. (Tokens are the smallest units of a corpus, typically either words or punctuation marks.) Also, variant spellings and inflected forms are included: for example, figures for *Covid-19* include those for *Covid19*, *COVID-19*, etc. (unless stated otherwise, as in Figure 2); figures for *frontliner* include those for *frontliners*, *front-liner*, and so on).



**Figure 1:** Frequency of *Covid-19* and *coronavirus* in the Oxford Monitor Corpus, October 2019 to October 2020.

in Canada, Australia, and India prefer the all-capital form. There may be fluctuations as time goes on, and this is something the OED will continue to track. Following its usual style, the OED entry gives the most common British form as the headword but lists the other forms as variants.



**Figure 2:** Relative frequencies of *Covid-19*/*COVID-19* in selected varieties of English in the Oxford Monitor Corpus, as of July 2021. “Other” includes *CoVID-19*, *Covid19*, etc.

## 2.2 Other neologisms

In addition to *Covid-19* itself, numerous other new words have entered the English language as a result of the pandemic. These include shortenings denoting Covid-19 or the coronavirus, like *Covid* (first recorded in a tweet on the same day that *Covid-19* was coined), *corona*, *rona* (particularly frequent in colloquial US and Australian use), *C-19*, and *nCoV*.

While pandemic-related words such as *lockdown* have been widely borrowed from English into other languages (see section 6), borrowing into English seems to have been a less common source of new vocabulary during the time of Covid-19. There are exceptions, such as *Hamsterkauf*, a German word meaning ‘panic buying’ (from the idea of a hamster – German *Hamster* – hoarding food in its cheeks) and occasionally used as an English word early in 2020: examples from the Oxford Monitor Corpus include “supermarkets are experiencing a wave of hamsterkauf” and “the initial hamsterkauf phase of the pandemic”. However, most of the uses refer to the word as a loanword from German, and *hamsterkauf* seems not to have taken root as a naturalized English word.

Much more productive methods of neology during the pandemic have been blending and compounding. *Covid-* and *corona-* have been particularly productive elements, especially in *covidiot* and also in more ephemeral formations like *covidivores* ‘divorces prompted by the stress of lockdown’ or, more positively, *coronials* ‘the generation of babies born during lockdown’ (from *Covid* and *millennials*). As face-to-face interactions began to be prohibited and the videoconferencing software *Zoom* became ubiquitous, coinages such as *Zoombombing*, *Zoom-ready*, and *zumping* ‘dumping someone over Zoom’ emerged. (The OED also added an entry for the use of *Zoom* as a verb.) There have also been various coinages formed with *-demic* (from *pandemic* or *epidemic*), such as *twindemic*, referring to a hypothetical pair of pandemics occurring at the same time, and sceptical formations like *scamdemic* and *plandemic*. Many other new blends and compounds – some serious, some more playful – have been created, including *anthropause* (the global slowdown of travel and other human activity during the pandemic), *pancession* (an economic recession caused by a pandemic), *isodesk* (a home workplace), *maskne* (acne caused by wearing a face mask), and a plethora of words denoting alcoholic drinks consumed during lockdown or self-isolation, such as *quarantini* and *locktail*.

Although some of these words have experienced widespread popularity, many are likely to be quite short-lived, and have not yet been added to the OED, but the dictionary’s editors will continue to track their development. Criteria for determining whether and when to add a word to the OED include longevity, frequency of occurrence, and variety of sources, although there are no rigid rules and each word is considered on its own merits (see further Diamond 2015).

### 3 Words with new senses or new significance

Not all of the lexical developments during the pandemic have been completely new words – in fact, our corpus monitoring has shown that most of them are existing words that have developed new senses or gained special significance as a result of the pandemic.

#### 3.1 Corpus keywords

Table 1 shows the top ten keywords in the Oxford Monitor Corpus for the first seven months of 2020. Keywords are words that appear significantly more frequently in one part of the corpus than in the corpus as a whole (Kilgarriff 2009), so these are words that were particularly frequent in the given months. Keywords relating to the coronavirus crisis are highlighted in bold in the table, where it can be observed that *Covid-19*, *Covid*, and other abbreviations are the only actual neologisms. The other keywords are words with a longer history, like *coronavirus*, *lockdown*, *pandemic*, *furlough*, and *covering*. A list such as this is used by OED lexicographers to check against the dictionary's coverage so as to determine whether any new information needs to be added to existing entries.

**Table 1:** Top 10 keywords in the Oxford Monitor Corpus, January to July 2020.

Jan 2020	Feb 2020	Mar 2020	Apr 2020	May 2020	June 2020	July 2020
bushfire	<b>Covid-19</b>	<b>Covid-19</b>	<b>PPE</b>	reopen	defund	<b>covering</b>
<b>coronavirus</b>	<b>coronavirus</b>	<b>pandemic</b>	<b>lockdown</b>	<b>lockdown</b>	Juneteenth	<b>Covid</b>
Iranian	<b>quarantine</b>	<b>distancing</b>	<b>pandemic</b>	<b>Covid-19</b>	brutality	<b>in-person</b>
<b>SARS</b>	<b>pandemic</b>	<b>coronavirus</b>	<b>ventilator</b>	<b>pandemic</b>	anti-racism	<b>mask</b>
Iraqi	<b>virus</b>	<b>self-isolate</b>	<b>stay-at-home</b>	<b>Covid</b>	racism	<b>mask-wearing</b>
sign-stealing	<b>outbreak</b>	<b>lockdown</b>	<b>Covid-19</b>	<b>distancing</b>	<b>Covid</b>	<b>pandemic</b>
koala	caucus	<b>self-isolation</b>	<b>furlough</b>	<b>hydroxy-chloroquine</b>	Confederate	<b>distanced</b>
<b>virus</b>	locust	<b>sanitiser/sanitizer</b>	<b>distancing</b>	<b>covering</b>	looting	<b>Covid-19</b>
impeachment	<b>infect</b>	<b>quarantine</b>	<b>coronavirus</b>	<b>furlough</b>	<b>covering</b>	<b>SARS-CoV-2</b>
airstrike	<b>epicentre/epicenter</b>	<b>ventilator</b>	<b>N95</b>	<b>stay-at-home</b>	kneel	<b>pre-pandemic</b>

The list of keywords presents a fascinating overview of changing global events and concerns in the first seven months of 2020. In January and February, some of the keywords were related to the coronavirus; others referred to different world events such as the Australian bushfires, the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, Donald Trump's impeachment, the Democratic caucuses, locust swarms in East Africa, and investigations into the Astros sign-stealing scandal. In March, however, every one of the top ten keywords was in some way related to coronavirus. This remained the case until June, when many of the keywords reflected the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement and the protests following the killing of George Floyd on 25 May 2020.

It is also revealing to compare the pandemic-related keywords in the table. In January 2020, the words mainly related to naming and describing the virus: *coronavirus*, *SARS*, *virus*. By March, April, and May the keywords reflected the social and economic impact of the virus: *social distancing*, *self-isolation*, *quarantine*, and *lockdown* were all especially frequent, as was *furlough*, following the introduction of the UK's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme in late March. Issues surrounding the medical response are reflected in the keywords *PPE* (for *personal protective equipment*) and *ventilator*.

In May 2020, we saw the first signs of looking ahead to life post-lockdown, with *reopen* as the top keyword. This trend continued in July, when there was an interesting pattern of contrast with virtual life as people started thinking about or tentatively restarted face-to-face interaction: *in-person* increased in frequency, used in contexts which previously would not normally have been necessary (since the “in-person” version was the norm), as in *in-person worship* and *in-person graduation*.

In July 2020, the top keyword was *covering*, overwhelmingly in *face covering* or in other uses referring to face masks (including *facial covering* or simply *covering* in this sense, in examples such as “shop staff do not have to wear coverings”). *Mask* and *mask-wearing* also appeared as keywords in July, reflecting ongoing discussions about when and where masks and coverings should be worn.<sup>2</sup>

Analysis of these keywords prompted a number of additions and updates to the OED. For example, new entries for *self-isolation* (and related terms), *face covering*, and *PPE* were added (although these terms are not completely new – see section 3.3). Some entries were revised to account for shifts in use or emphasis: for example, the relevant sense of *lockdown* was updated to include the public health measure aspect, while the entry for *furlough* was fully revised, including a new comment about the spread of the sense ‘dismissal or suspension from employment’ from the US to the UK and other countries.

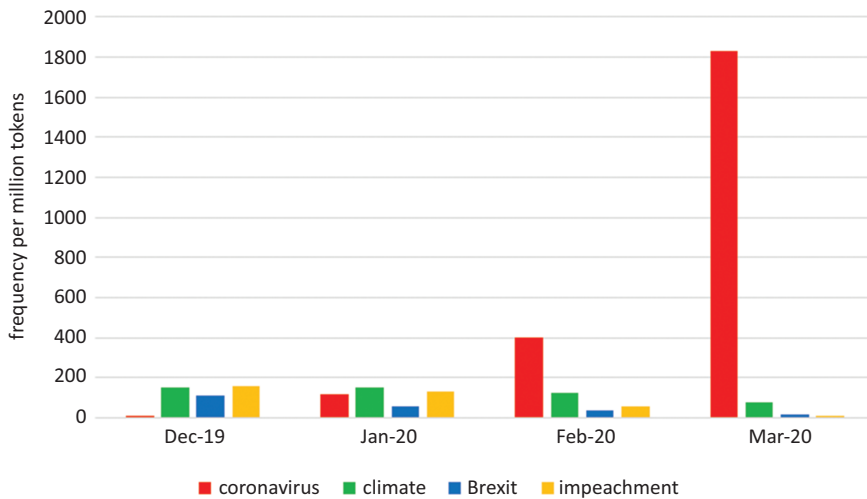
---

<sup>2</sup> The foregoing discussion draws on the analysis in Wild (2020a) and Wild (2020b). Table 1 shows keywords only up to July 2020: after this month, the corpus keyword lists were less dominated by Covid-19-related topics, and reflected other events such as the US presidential elections. However, Covid-19 certainly continued to be a theme, with keywords including *pre-Covid*, and, from the end of 2020 and beginning of 2021, *vaccine* and related words.

### 3.2 The term *coronavirus*

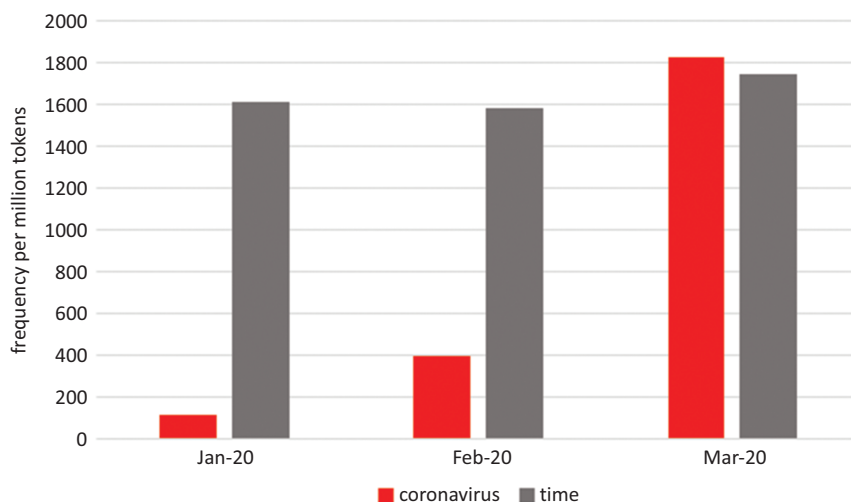
As noted above, many of the words used in the context of the pandemic are not completely new but were relatively uncommon before 2020. This is the case with the word *coronavirus* itself, the name of the group of enveloped, single-stranded RNA viruses of which the causal pathogen of Covid-19 is a member. The word *coronavirus* is first recorded in the OED in 1968, in an article in *Nature*, but before the Covid-19 pandemic its use was mainly confined to medical and scientific specialists. This is reflected in corpus data: as shown in Figure 1 (section 2.1), *coronavirus* was relatively rare in general news media before 2020; by March 2020, it was dominating the global conversation.

One way of illustrating the extent to which the word *coronavirus* became overwhelmingly frequent at the beginning of the pandemic is to compare its frequency with that of other significant words at the time. Figure 3 compares the frequency of *coronavirus* with that of words referring to other major news topics in 2019 and 2020 – *climate*, *Brexit*, and *impeachment* – and shows that *coronavirus* was over ten times as frequent as any of these words at its peak. Figure 4 shows that, by March 2020, *coronavirus* was as frequent as one of the most commonly used nouns in the English language, *time*.



**Figure 3:** Frequency of *coronavirus*, *climate*, *Brexit*, and *impeachment* in the Oxford Monitor Corpus, December 2019 to March 2020.

As with *Covid-19*, changes have been made to the OED's entry for *coronavirus* in light of developments during the pandemic (Stewart 2020). A second sense has been added to refer specifically to those coronaviruses that cause life-threatening diseases in humans, including SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), MERS



**Figure 4:** Frequency of *coronavirus* and *time* in the Oxford Monitor Corpus, January 2020 to March 2020.

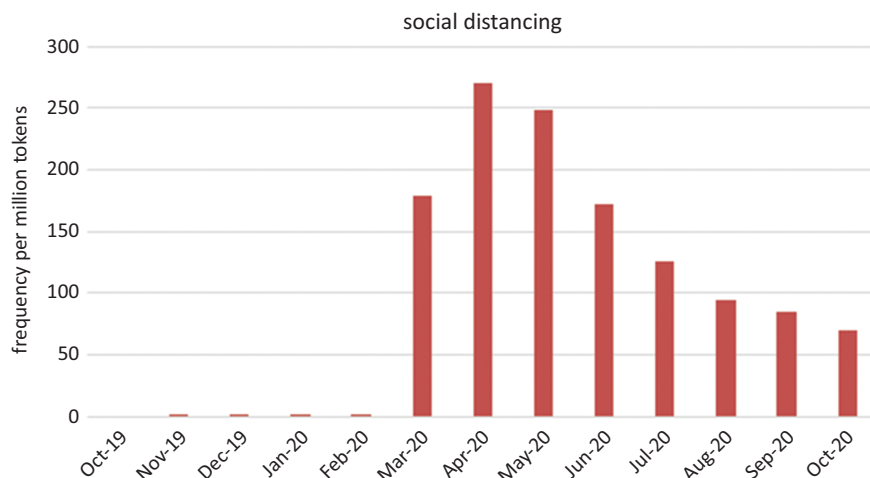
(Middle East Respiratory Syndrome), and Covid-19. Additionally, since the name of a disease often also ends up being applied to the pathogen causing it, and vice versa, both *Covid-19* and *coronavirus* began to be used interchangeably for the disease and the virus; again, this has been reflected in the updated *OED* entries.

### 3.3 Older words newly added to the *OED*

*Social distancing* was one of the entries added to the *OED* in its first special pandemic update in April 2020. As can be seen from Figure 5, this term saw an enormous increase in usage: its frequency was negligible before 2020; then by April 2020 it was occurring over 250 times for every million tokens in the Oxford Monitor Corpus, which is roughly the same frequency as that of the word *food*.

However, when *OED* lexicographers researched this word, consulting databases of books, newspapers, journals, and other types of written sources, they found that *social distancing* is far from being a new term. It dates back to 1957, originally signifying an aloofness or deliberate attempt to distance oneself from others socially. It is only decades later when it acquired the now more familiar sense of limiting physical contact in order to avoid infection, but even this sense goes back almost two decades, to 2004. This antedating of what may originally seem to be obvious neologisms is something that often occurs when a lexical item is researched for the *OED*, and there are several examples of such terms from the Covid-19 pandemic: *self-quarantine* dates back to 1876 as a noun and 1918 as a verb, *elbow bump* to 1902, and *contact tracing* to





**Figure 5:** Frequency of *social distancing* in the Oxford Monitor Corpus, October 2019 to October 2020.

1910; *face covering* is first recorded in 1732, and first used in a medical context in 1946. Although these terms were new to the OED when they were added as a result of the pandemic, they are not completely new to the language.

Some expressions were coined during previous public health crises or for other kinds of emergencies but have been revived during the time of Covid-19. *Infodemic*, a blend of *information* and *epidemic*, was coined in 2003 during the SARS epidemic to refer to the outpouring of often unsubstantiated information relating to a crisis, and was then also widely used to describe the proliferation of news around coronavirus. The phrase *shelter-in-place*, a protocol instructing people to find a place of safety in the location they are occupying until the all clear is sounded, was devised as an instruction for the public in 1976 in the event of a nuclear or terrorist attack but was then adapted as advice to people to stay indoors to protect themselves and others from disease (Paton 2020).

### 3.4 New senses or nuances of existing words

Collocational information gleaned from corpus data helps OED lexicographers understand the contexts surrounding the usage of a word and discover particular nuances or senses. For example, in the dictionary's entry for *frontline*, the sense of the adjective as used in *frontline worker/employee/staff*, etc., had been defined as 'of a person: working at the forefront of an organization's public activity, typically as the point of direct contact with customers, clients, users of the organization's services, etc.' This was an accurate summary when the entry was first revised a few years ago, but the

focus of the sense has shifted during the Covid-19 pandemic. OED editors compared salient collocates of *frontline* in 2020 with those of previous years and found that although some had remained unchanged – *frontline staff* is one consistently common collocation – others, such as the following, stood out as much more frequent in 2020: *frontline nurse/medic/caregiver*; *frontline healthcare/health-care workers*; *frontline warrior/hero*; *courageous/heroic frontline workers*; *essential frontline worker*. This very positive sentiment associated with frontline workers, and the focus on such workers as carrying out essential roles, especially in health care, led to the OED definition being expanded as follows: ‘of a person: working at the forefront of an organization’s public activity, typically as the point of direct contact with customers, clients, users of the organization’s services, etc., (now) *esp.* designating such an employee who provides a service regarded as vital within the community, such as a health-care worker, teacher, etc.; often in *frontline worker*’.

Another new pandemic-related sense added to an existing OED entry is *bubble*. *Bubble* is a word with a long history, its literal sense dating to the Middle Ages and various figurative senses (mainly relating to either impermanence or protection) to the Early Modern period. In 2021 a new sense was added, ‘a group consisting of a restricted number of people who have a close relationship or regular social contact; (later) *spec.* such a group whose members are, under public health measures, permitted to be in close physical proximity’. The first, general strand of this sense dates back to 2000, but the OED definition notes that the later specific strand ‘arose in 2020 as part of the official recommendations of some governments in response to the Covid-19 pandemic’. Again, the emerging new sense is discernible from corpus data: a comparison of collocates in 2020/2021 and previous years highlights new or newly significant collocations such as *household bubble* and *support bubble*.

## 4 The spread of scientific terminology in general discourse

Another notable feature of the language of the pandemic has been the way that it has introduced scientific terms into general discourse. As both scientists and the public endeavoured to increase their understanding of the coronavirus and its effects, specialist scientific and medical language became increasingly prominent. This development has already been discussed with reference to the term *coronavirus* (see section 3.2), and it is reflected in numerous other words in various fields.

Lexical items from the field of epidemiology that were previously known mainly to the scientific and medical community were suddenly being heard in the news and in everyday conversation. For example, *reproduction number*, *reproductive number*, *R number*, or simply *R*, became widely used as people became preoccupied with “getting the R down”. This crossing over from specialist to general vocabulary

is reflected in the set of quotations in the OED entry for this sense of *R*: the earliest use is from the proceedings of an epidemiology conference published in 1975, while the most recent example is from a news article.

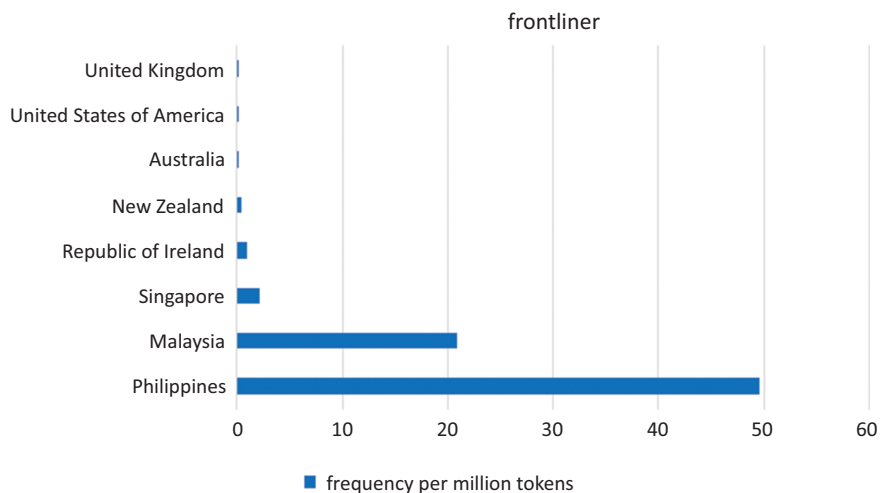
Other epidemiological terms such as *community transmission*, *community spread*, *case fatality rate*, and *flattening the curve* became widespread enough to merit inclusion in the OED's first special pandemic update published in April 2020. In its second special update three months later, the dictionary focused even more on scientific and medical terminology, adding such terms as *cytokine storm* 'an overactive immune response occurring in various infectious and non-infectious diseases, characterized by the excessive production of cytokines and resulting in intense localized or generalized inflammation'; *spike protein* 'a glycoprotein projecting from the envelope which binds to a receptor on the host cell and facilitates entry of the viral genome into the host cell', and *CPAP* 'continuous positive airway pressure, a method of respiratory therapy in which air at a pressure higher than atmospheric pressure is pumped into the lungs through the nose or nose and mouth during spontaneous breathing', a less invasive treatment for Covid-19 patients than one involving a ventilator (Stewart 2020). Again, these terms are not completely new, but they have become widely familiar to non-specialists as a result of the pandemic.

## 5 Regional variation

We have discussed the use of corpus data to identify new words, spikes in frequency, and shifts in collocation and other aspects of usage. Corpora also provide useful information about the distribution of a word in different varieties of English, which is reflected in the labelling and metadata of new or revised dictionary entries.

In the case of *self-isolate*, *self-quarantine*, and related words, OED editors working on these terms felt that although there are technical differences between them, they are often used interchangeably, the main difference being in regional distribution. To confirm this, they looked at various corpora. The clearest picture can be seen in the Coronavirus Corpus, a corpus of news articles relating to Covid-19 (Davies 2019–), which shows that *self-quarantine* is more common in the United States than in Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand, where *self-isolate* and *self-isolation* are preferred (see Wild 2020b). A note to this effect has been added to the OED's updated entry for *self-quarantine*, v.: 'In recent use, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, *self-isolate* and *self-quarantine* have often been used interchangeably, with *self-quarantine* being more common in the United States'.

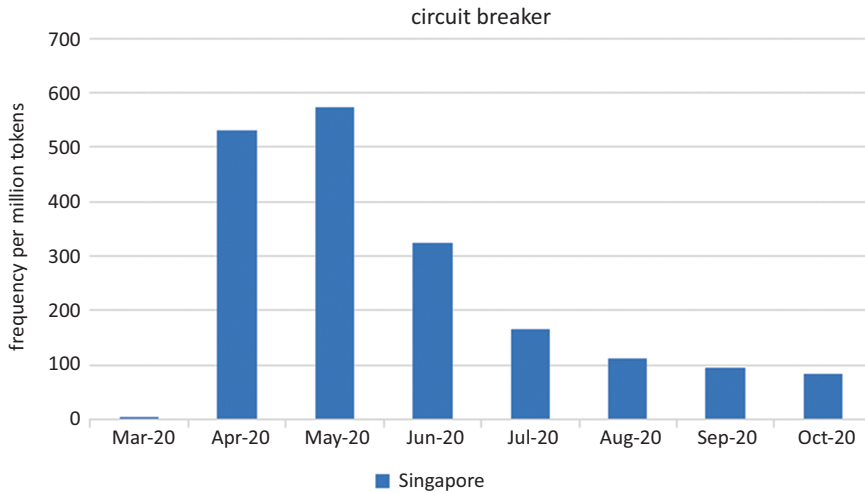
Corpus frequency data also enabled OED editors to analyse the regional distribution of the word *frontliner*. They discovered that although it is used worldwide, it is particularly frequent in Southeast Asia, especially in the Philippines and Malaysia (see Figure 6); in other countries the more usual term is *frontline worker* or similar.



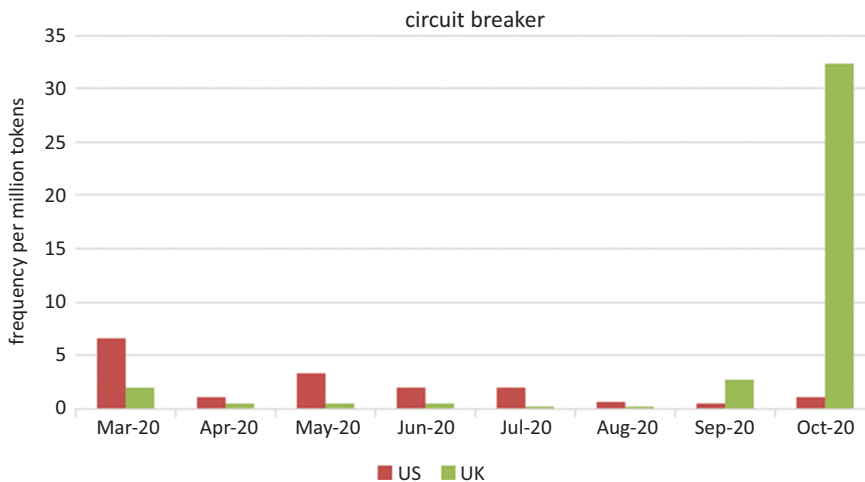
**Figure 6:** Frequency of *frontliner* in selected varieties of English in the Oxford Monitor Corpus, July 2020.

For this reason, the OED entry for the relevant sense of *frontliner* is labelled “now chiefly *South-East Asian*”.

Also showing some interesting geographic variation are the names for the set of measures that many countries have taken to contain the spread of the virus by severely limiting the movement of people outside the home. *Lockdown* is the word with the most widespread use and is the preferred term in countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. In the United States the coronavirus restrictions are called *shelter-in-place*. The word *iso*, short for *isolation*, is also used colloquially, especially in Australia and the United States. In Malaysia, the initialism *MCO* is used, short for *movement control order*, while in the Philippines, *ECQ* is preferred, short for *enhanced community quarantine* – both phrases are the official government designations for these countries’ stay-at-home regulations. In Singapore, there was a remarkable spike in usage of the term *circuit breaker* in April 2020 when it was adopted by the Singaporean government as the name for its strict quarantine measures (see Figure 7). Known to most people as a safety device that stops the flow of current in an electric circuit, *circuit breaker* is also familiar to those in finance as a regulatory instrument designed to prevent panic selling by temporarily stopping trading on an exchange. While it makes sense for a global business hub such as Singapore to have adapted a piece of finance slang in such a way, it is noteworthy that later in 2020, in September and October, *circuit breaker* also became a much-used term in British English, describing a short, fixed-term set of restrictions which scientists recommended the government should implement in order to stem another incoming tide of coronavirus infections (see Figure 8).



**Figure 7:** Frequency of *circuit breaker* in the Singapore component of the Oxford Monitor Corpus, March to October 2020.

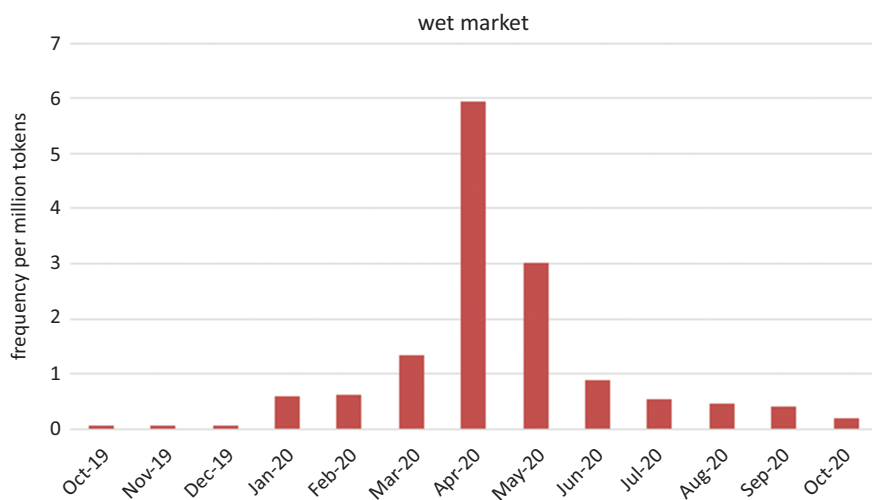


**Figure 8:** Frequency of *circuit breaker* in the UK and US components of the Oxford Monitor Corpus, March to October 2020.

Local responses to the coronavirus pandemic have also resulted in several neologisms in different varieties of English. In the Philippines, Filipinos from other regions stranded in a locked-down Manila are referred to as *LSIs*, short for *locally stranded individuals*; in Singapore, a person who needs to self-isolate is issued an *SHN* or *stay-home notice*; while in India those who wish to cross internal borders need to have an *e-pass*, an official government document authorizing a person's movement during

quarantine. Australians try to keep themselves safe from the virus through the regular use of *sanny* (hand sanitizer), while West Africans wash their hands using the *Veronica bucket* – a type of sanitation equipment composed of a covered bucket with a tap fixed at the bottom and a bowl fitted below it to collect wastewater, named after its Ghanaian inventor, Veronica Bekoe (Salazar 2020).

A Southeast Asian term added to the OED in 2016 suddenly gained global notoriety at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic: *wet market*. This term, first attested in 1978, was originally used only in Southeast Asian countries to refer to a market for the sale of fresh meat, fish, and produce, an essential part of the region's food supply chain. However, the identification of a Wuhan market as ground zero for the coronavirus outbreak led people outside of Southeast Asia to incorrectly conflate wet markets with illegal wildlife markets, subjecting wet markets to much public criticism (Lim 2020) and causing a considerable increase in the usage of the term in the early months of 2020 (see Figure 9).



**Figure 9:** Frequency of *wet market* in the Oxford Monitor Corpus, October 2019 to October 2020.

## 6 Languages other than English

The lexical monitoring carried out by Oxford Languages' lexicographers has informed the coverage of the pandemic lexicon not only in the OED, but also in other Oxford dictionaries of current English and even in Oxford dictionaries of other languages. Key terms related to Covid-19, such as the neologisms and newly prominent words mentioned throughout this article, were translated into 19 different languages by Oxford University Press editors and translators in Oxford and in its international offices

in China, India, East Africa, and South Africa so that new words and senses could be incorporated into its monolingual and bilingual dictionaries of these languages. These translations into Afrikaans, Arabic, Catalan, Chinese, Dutch, Filipino (Tagalog), French, German, Hindi, Italian, Northern Sotho, Portuguese, Setswana, Spanish, Swahili, Tamil, Telugu, Xhosa, and Zulu have also been made freely available as downloadable resources online.<sup>3</sup>

The translation of key coronavirus words into such diverse languages has also provided important insights into the impact of the pandemic on these languages. There are some commonalities with English: the emergence of new words and senses, the increased significance of medical and scientific terminology, and the prominence of expressions referring to government and individual actions aimed at containing the spread of the virus and mitigating its social and economic effects. There are also interesting differences. For example, the English word *lockdown* has been borrowed by several languages including Dutch, Filipino, German, Italian, and Telugu, while other languages prefer their equivalent forms for *confinement*, for example, *confinament* for Catalan, *confinement* for French, *confinamento* for Portuguese, and *confinamiento* for Spanish. Some languages use corresponding expressions conveying closure, for instance, إغلاق *‘iighlaq* for Arabic, 封锁 *fēngsuǒ* and 封闭 *fēngbì* for Chinese and *ukuvulwa thaqa kwezwe* for Zulu.

The Covid-19 translation project has also highlighted the influence of English, the principal language of global scientific communication, on the Covid-19 vocabulary of these languages. This influence can be seen in some notable lexical innovations. In Italian, for instance, the word *droplet* has come to refer not only to the very small airborne drops of secretions from the nose, throat, or lungs by which the coronavirus can be transmitted, but also to the distance one person must maintain from another to prevent such a transmission from happening.

## 7 Conclusion

The OED's efforts to document the lexical change brought to the English language by the coronavirus pandemic continued throughout 2020, culminating with the *Words of an Unprecedented Year* report, which was published at the end of the year in place of the usual selection of a single Word of the Year (Oxford Languages 2020). This expansive report on the words that defined 2020 features an entire section dedicated to the language of Covid-19.

However, the work did not end there. Further pandemic-related additions and revisions to the dictionary have been included in the OED's regular quarterly

---

<sup>3</sup> The translations can be downloaded from Oxford Languages' Covid-19 Language Hub: <https://languages.oup.com/covid-19-language-resources/#translations> (last access: 12 August 2021).

updates in 2021, with *face shield*, *essential worker*, *mask up*, and the aforementioned *bubble* being notable examples. Several more are scheduled to be published in upcoming updates. OED lexicographers will continue to monitor their in-house corpora and other language data to identify and document new words and senses associated with the pandemic that have had such an impact on our language and our lives.

## Bibliography

- Davies, Mark (2019–): The Coronavirus Corpus. [<https://www.english-corpora.org/corona/>; last access: 13 July 2020].
- Deang, Richard Karl/Salazar, Danica (2021): *Major health crises and the OED: language evolution and challenges in health communication*. Oxford. [<https://public.oed.com/blog/major-health-crises-and-the-oed/>; last access: 11 August 2021].
- Diamond, Graeme (2015): Making decisions about inclusion and exclusion. In: Durkin, Philip (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Lexicography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 532–545.
- Kilgariff, Adam (2009): Simple maths for keywords. In: Mahlberg, Michaela/González-Díaz, Victorina/Smith, Catherine (eds.): *Proceedings of the Corpus Linguistics Conference*. University of Liverpool (no page numbering).
- Lim, Lisa (2020): Why Asia's wet markets are being unfairly targeted in bad pandemic press. In: *South China Morning Post Magazine*, 25 April. [<https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/short-reads/article/3081363/why-asias-wet-markets-are-being-unfairly/>; last access: 12 August 2021].
- OED = *Oxford English Dictionary* (2000–). Third edition (in progress). Ed. John A. Simpson (2000–2013) and Michael Proffitt (2013–). Oxford: Oxford University Press. [<https://www.oed.com>; last access 15 August 2021].
- Oxford Languages (2020): *Words of an unprecedented year*. Oxford. [<https://pages.oup.com/ol/word-of-the-year-2020/>; last access: 12 August 2021].
- Paton, Bernadette (2020): *Social change and linguistic change: the language of Covid-19*. Oxford. [<https://public.oed.com/blog/the-language-of-covid-19/>; last access: 12 August 2021].
- Salazar, Danica (2020): *Circuit breakers, PPEs, and Veronica buckets: World Englishes and Covid-19*. Oxford. [<https://public.oed.com/blog/circuit-breakers-ppes-veronica-buckets-world-englishes-covid-19/>; last access: 12 August 2021].
- Stewart, Trish (2020): *July 2020 update: scientific terminology of Covid-19*. Oxford. [<https://public.oed.com/blog/july-2020-update-scientific-terminology-of-covid-19/>; last access: 11 August 2021].
- Wild, Kate (2020a): *Corpus analysis of the language of Covid-19*. Oxford. [<https://public.oed.com/blog/corpus-analysis-of-the-language-of-covid-19/>; last access 12 August 2021].
- Wild, Kate (2020b): *Using corpora to track the language of Covid-19: update 2*. Oxford. [<https://public.oed.com/blog/using-corpora-to-track-the-language-of-covid-19-update-2/>; last access 12 August 2021].
- World Health Organization (2015): *Best practices for the naming of new human infectious diseases*. [[https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/163636/WHO\\_HSE\\_FOS\\_15.1\\_eng.pdf](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/163636/WHO_HSE_FOS_15.1_eng.pdf); last access: 11 August 2021].