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More eyes on COVID-19: Perspectives from Linguistics

Pay attention to how people are talking about the pandemic in different languages

As linguists we claim that language underlies all human activities. Yet we have entered a cold new world with the freezing of the very interactions which must have given rise to language and which are in turn enhanced by it. Placing masks on mouths and noses is a masking of communication too. No linguistic or applied linguistic textbook quite prepares us for the shutdown of speech in an age of viruses. Here I highlight matters of language and communication that have come to the fore in these times.

We need to keep the lights and the technologies of communication on. Older humanities specialists have always been slightly suspicious of the instruments of technology, of their speed – which seems to overtake the thought processes of their users, coupled somehow with their built-in obsolescence. But COVID-19 has forced us to reconsider. *London Calling* to the faraway towns during the war of a century ago was an important, albeit one-way, means of radio communication for survival. The ubiquitous cellphone, computer and television networks of today have made possible a degree of transmission, discussion and action that would have been unthinkable in the age of radio. They have greatly facilitated modes of survival.

But in using them we miss the nuances of face-to-face interaction that they mask or only approximate in a mechanical fashion. It is the use of eye contact, gesture, facial cues, bodily posture and immediate feedback that makes our communication human. Even for more public and relatively one-way communication, we still require the insights of humanities specialists – as interpreters of official and unofficial stories. We have to be alert to poor arguments, as when politicians appear to put their parties and business interests above those of public safety, or when they disobey the fundamental rules they themselves put in place. Our own President has proven an able communicator and leader, showing the wisdom of humility during a global crisis. Critical language awareness helps us sort out the possible from the impossible, and the plausible from the patently false. At the same time, it is important to listen to the voices of those affected most: the weak and poor, the ones with least access to the technologies of independence, information and power.

In this regard, we need to pay attention to how ordinary people are talking about the pandemic in different languages. Communication of meaning does not rest with the scientists, health specialists or presidents alone. ‘Hydroxychloroquine’ is simply not usable as an everyday word: even a president tongue-tripped over this polysyllabic poser, and apparently not because he is an avid user of the drug. Applied linguists in southern Africa showed a decade ago how people responded in everyday discourse to the ravages of HIV/Aids, moving from silence, taboo and euphemism to circumlocution and paraphrase. This was a new lexicon of coping.

I will cite just a few examples from the present crisis. Unsurprisingly, words like *ikhorona* and *ikhovidi* (and close pronunciation variants) have entered the isiXhosa language at high speed. Zukile Jama (personal communication 2020 May 25) notes that people make links with past epidemics in some of the new terminology (e.g. *ubhubhane*, which links it to the word for the plague and/or Spanish flu of almost exactly a century ago). The word seems to resemble the English word *bubonic flu*, but this might be coincidence, as its root form is *-bhubha* ‘to perish, die’. The entry in Doke and Vilakazi’s *Zulu-English Dictionary* of 1972 for this verb now takes on a poignant reading: ‘to perish, die, be destroyed, become no more, suffer annihilation’. From the virus’s side (virus as subject) the causative form *-bhubhisa* is even more chilling: ‘to destroy, kill, wipe out, annihilate’. Add to this the noun suffix *-ane*, which marks prolonged activity and the full original force of the word *ubhubhane* can be felt. Thabo Ditsele explains a new term for ‘quarantine’ – *diagelo* – that he came across in Setswana social media in relation to the present crisis (personal communication 2020 May 22). The word has undergone an extension of meaning from its original use within the traditional African church for ‘spiritual cleansing by confinement in the home of a church elder’.

COVID-19 has shown us how fragile we humans really are and how presumptuous our use of language can be. Our once clever metaphors – like our airplanes – have been grounded. Can we ever speak lightly of having the travel bug again? Will we think twice before describing someone as a pest or when using the word ‘pestilence’? Or speaking of someone as having an infectious sense of humour? May we ever again describe some facile joke or observation on social media as ‘going viral’? The virus is silent and invisible, but ‘COVID’ and ‘Corona’ will enter the all-time human lexicon of suffering, ahead of ‘tsunami’, ‘AIDS’, ‘Holocaust’, ‘WWII’ and ‘the plague’. Language innovation serves to record our human hopes, but even more so our fragility in the face of bigger forces in the universe.