

detail, and from so many different perspectives. This, for scholars, is the silver lining in a very dark cloud.

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Changing times, changing contexts, changing meanings: language as a reflection of society

1. Introduction

Epidemics come and go, bringing fear, suspicion and death, and inevitably leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. In this respect, the SARS-COVID-19 pandemic is not quite as 'unprecedented' as popular opinion might insist. It does, however, have one peculiar feature which has been facilitated by another unprecedented situation: that of the 'information revolution' having come of age. During the pandemic, much of the world transferred its daily life online, and there are currently an estimated five billion Internet users worldwide¹.

While much of what is published daily on the web disappears into the ether almost as soon as it has been consumed, there are relatively stable reference points such as news providers and institutional websites such as those documenting the activities of governments, health services, charities, educational institutions and cultural associations. In pandemic mode, even these normally stable information websites were in continual flux, as national and pan-national government health guidelines evolved in an attempt to outpace the rapidly-spreading virus. Under normal circumstances most text like this would be relegated to the generic category of 'ephemera', and largely lost to the research community within a relatively short space of time. Indeed research into epidemics to date has had scant primary evidence to work with, typically just census records, official reports (usually annual), daily newspaper articles, and announcements such as births, deaths and marriages.² Not this time. Because digital text is easy to harvest and cheap to store, never before has it been possible to document a global issue so extensively, in so much

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¹ Source: Internet World Stats <https://www.internetworldstats.com>.

² T.E. EWING, *La Grippe or Russian Influenza: Mortality Statistics During the 1890 Epidemic in Indiana*, in «Influenza and Other Respiratory Viruses», XIII, 2019, pp. 279-287 (p. 279).

2. New words and new meanings

New circumstances give rise to new experiences and sensations, and these in turn lead to the use of new language. This includes entirely new coinings, such as *Covid* itself, but also applies to new meanings or subsenses conveyed by existing words (e.g. *bubble* – a support network allowing a single person to join with another household, UK only), and the resuscitation of words that had almost fallen out of use (e.g. *fur-lough*, a form of enforced leave for employees due to a lack of work available). It also involves new combinations of words or word parts that already exist in the language³ particularly in blends (e.g. *covidiot*) and compounds (e.g. *doom(-)scrolling*), but also in collocations (e.g. *social distancing*). And it includes new metaphorical frames, e.g. military metaphors – *front-line troops*, *warriors* – to refer to healthcare workers⁴.

One factor that is often overlooked – or at least underplayed – is the contribution that phraseological environments make to meanings. «Each word when used in a new context is a new word», as Firth⁵ used to say. New contexts can support new meanings for old words, and they can bring to the fore certain facets of meaning that were previously hidden or dormant or – in the case of a life-changing event such as a pandemic – never previously required. So rather than a study of new words per se, this is to be a study of new and unexplored contexts, using data from the *Coronavirus Corpus*⁶. This is one of a handful of very large monitor corpora⁷ which rely on web harvesting for their compilation, but unlike most it has a specific focus on one theme, as its name suggests. At the time of writing (May 2021), the corpus contains over 1000 million words

³ J. ALBERGO, *Where Do All the New Words Come from?*, in «American Speech» LV, n.4, 1980, pp. 264-277 (p. 272).

⁴ E. SEMINO, «Not Soldiers but Fire-Fighters»: *Metaphors and Covid-19*, in «Health Communication», XXXVI, n.1, 2021, pp. 50-58; see also the #ReframeCovid initiative <https://sites.google.com/view/reframecovid/initiative>.

⁵ J.R. FIRTH, *Modes of Meaning*, in *Papers in Linguistics 1934-1951*, Oxford University Press, London 1957, pp. 190-215 (p. 190).

⁶ M. DAVIES, *The Coronavirus Corpus*, 2019, <https://www.english-corpora.org/corona>.

⁷ J. SINCLAIR, *Corpus Concordance Collocation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1991 (pp. 24-26).

of running text, and is growing at a rate of approximately four million words a day.

Language corpora are designed to facilitate the analysis of words in context, and have in-built functions which compute collocates and other recurrent lexical items, particularly clusters and other «multi-word word-lists»⁸. The typical KWIC (key word in context) data visualisation (see Figures 1–4) is more suitable for non-automated analysis and allows the researcher to identify who is participating in the discourse, the relevant features of the situation and the relevant objects and non-verbal actions – in other words, to reconstruct the Firthian «context of situation»⁹. The multiple contexts that a corpus provides are each unique and yet similar, and can be schematised to draw a profile of the word in use; a close reading of the individual concordance line fleshes out this profile, as will be seen in the case study below (Section 3).

3. A word and its changing contexts: *vaccine*

A new virus requires a new vaccine which has to be developed, tested, then rolled out in as short a time as is safe. Importantly, it does not materialise instantaneously, and this makes *vaccine* an excellent candidate term for a time-phased linguistic analysis. Normal circumstances would suggest looking at a word's evolution over ten-year periods, if not longer; but a pandemic is not a normal circumstance and the language changes it causes can be traced even on a week-by-week basis, as the virus ebbs and flows, advances in technology bear fruit, and people's responses to the pandemic evolve. This case study illustrates how talk about a Covid vaccine has evolved over a relatively short space of time.

The sheer size of the Coronavirus corpus makes it impossible to extract all occurrences of a frequent word like *vaccine*: the server simply cannot handle the processing load. Reducing the search to a restricted time-frame, however, makes it possible to extract a manageable number of occurrences. Comparing several such time-delimited searches allows for a comparison of the 'same' word in different, evolving contexts. For

⁸ G. PHILIP, *Corpus Linguistics: Studying Language as Part of the Digital Humanities*, in *Routledge Handbook of English Language Studies*, a cura di P. Scargant, A. Hewings, S. Philaja, Routledge, London 2018, pp. 361–378 (p. 365).

⁹ J.R. FIRTH, *Personality and Language in Society*, in *Papers in Linguistics 1934–1951*, Oxford University Press, London 1957, pp. 177–189 (p.182).

this study, four temporal windows were selected, each corresponding to a different stage of the pandemic, i.e. the initial spread of the virus in spring 2020, the second wave in early autumn, a third wave after the festive season, and a fourth, very recent, tranche of data from early May 2021. The choice to focus on these periods was based on recent memory of events: at the start of the pandemic, there was no vaccine and insufficient epidemiological data available, although it was mooted that the flu vaccine or treatments for other coronaviruses might be effective. By the second wave, the first vaccines were being developed and were undergoing clinical trials. In the third wave, vaccines were being rolled out in many countries, and the first serious side-effects were coming to light. By May 2021, vaccine programmes were in full flow with a range of different proprietary brands competing for favour, and statistics reported in the press were more likely to refer to the number of doses administered to the adult population than to deaths caused «by or in the presence of» Covid.

This brief overview of events may seem to invalidate any need to investigate *vaccine* in any detail: the events are still fresh in our minds. Yet imagine a historian some fifty years hence wishing to reconstruct the time-scale of transmission and treatment of the virus, people's changing reactions and opinions, even the names of the drugs administered and concepts such as *vaccine nationalism* and *vaccine diplomacy* – the details of which are unlikely to linger in popular memory. This is one good reason. Another will emerge from the discussion of the data, namely that close study of language shows up patterns that we have already forgotten, if we ever noticed them in the first place.

	Period	Frequency
Wave 1	01-15 April 2020	8010
Wave 2	15-31 October 2020	16128
Wave 3	01-15 February 2021	55656
Wave 4	01-15 May 2021	50046

Table 1. Data selection parameters and frequency information

Data for the node word *vaccine* was retrieved for each wave in the time periods shown in Table 1. The frequency information demonstrates an exponential growth of the use of the word up to and including Wave 3, as exponentions (and hopes) of a vaccine increased, and a flattening of the curve in the first half of 2021 as proprietary names and actual doses became more commonplace. A random sample of 100 concordances of each of the four searches was extracted automatically and saved to text files for

processing using *AntConc*¹⁰. Two automated procedures were used: collocates, and clusters. Collocates were calculated both by log-likelihood to focus on frequent words used with statistically-significant frequency, and Mutual Information¹¹ to investigate the statistically-significant low-frequency words; the minimum threshold was set at 3 occurrences. Clusters of a minimum 2 words and maximum 5 words were also extracted, again with a minimum threshold of 3 occurrences. What follows is an account of the main features that emerge from these calculations.

3.1 *Vaccine – 1st wave*

At the start of the pandemic, in Wave 1, there was as yet *no vaccine* (6), so it should not come as a surprise that indefinite reference (*a vaccine* [39]) is vastly preferred over definite reference (*the vaccine* [12]). Hopes that one would soon come into being, however, are lexicalised in a range of clusters which share a future-oriented stance: *until a vaccine* (3), *vaccine will* (4), *vaccine candidate* (3), *new vaccine* (3), *vaccine development* (3). Even the most frequent cluster, *vaccine is* (11), which appears to be a stative present tense expression, is strongly associated with future orientation, as can be seen in Figure 1 with its abundance of time adverbials (*before* [1], *quickly* [1], *too far off* [1] *until* [3], *when* [1], *by then* [1]), adjectives (*available* [3], *ready* [1]), and verbs (*predicting* [1], *discovered* [1], *developed* [1], *produced* [1], *pray* [1]).

1	it is going to be a while before a vaccine	is broadly available. # The mechanism of
2	for a 63 antibodies induced by a vaccine	is the most important parameter in predicting
3	he says that the development of a vaccine	is the only long-term solution in
4	century ago. # Unless a cure or a vaccine	is discovered quickly, the crisis will persist
5	But the main problem is that a vaccine	is just too far off when our
6	measures may be required until a vaccine	is developed, which is between a year
7	this is likely to continue until a vaccine	is produced or “an effective treatment for
8	estimated 12 to 18 months to go until a vaccine	is available, the relaxing of social distancing
9	Tuesday that only when a COVID-19 vaccine	is available will a full return to
10	another 5-6 months. Better pray that vaccine	is ready by then. Otherwise, it is
11	the vaccine performs. # Testing the vaccine	is part of an international fight to

¹⁰ L. ANTHONY, *AntConc v. 3.4.8*, Waseda University, Tokyo 2019, <http://www.laurence-anthony.net/software/antconc>.

¹¹ K. CHURCH & P. HANKS, *Word Association Norms: Mutual Information and Lexicography*, «Computational Linguistics», XVI, n. 1, 1990, pp. 22-29.

Figure 1. KWIC concordances for «vaccine is», Wave 1

These words and others like them also appear in the collocates for *vaccine*: *new* (9), *until* (8), and *developed* (7) appear in the top 20 Log-likelihood collocates, where they stand out because lexical words tend to appear farther down the list. *Covid* (18) is of course less surprising, given the nature of the corpus and the node term under examination. The MI collocates, as anticipated, provide more lexical detail and allow for semantic preferences to be identified: evidence of incipient experimentation (*working* [3], *develop* [4], *tested* [3], *testing* [3], *candidate* [4], *produced* [3], *effective* [5]); illness-related lexis (*infectious* [3], *flu* [4] and *BGC* [4])¹²; and time expressions (*now* [4], *new* [9], *before* [5]).

Overall, in this data sample from the first wave of the pandemic, a vaccine is portrayed as essential if the medical crisis is to abate and if there is to be any loosening of the the strict social distancing measures that were in place during this phase of the pandemic. The future-oriented stance – evident not in the grammar but in the lexis – reinforces the fact that at this time vaccines did not exist in actuality but were invoked in what cognitive grammar refers to as «desire space»¹³, representing a hope to cling to in the darkest days of the pandemic.

3.2 *Vaccine – 2nd wave*

By the time of the second wave, in the autumn of 2020, a range of vaccines were under development around the world and some were undergoing clinical trials. In the data from 15-31 October 2020, the concrete reality of a vaccine actually existing overtakes the abstract possibility of one being developed as the clusters involving articles show: *the vaccine* (21) is now slightly more frequent than *a vaccine* (19). *Covid* (25) again appears in the top 20 log-likelihood collocates, in all but one instance as *Covid-19*, and is joined by *coronavirus* (11). Both collocates usually appear in contiguous collocations, i.e. as *Covid-19 vaccine* (18) and *coronavirus vaccine* (9), and the choice between the two appears to be that actual vaccines being developed and trialled are referred to as *Covid-19 vaccines*, while hypothetical cures are typically

¹² The BCG (*Bacillus Calmette-Guérin*) vaccine is used to offer protection against tuberculosis.

¹³ G. FAUCONNIER, *Mental Spaces: Aspects of Meaning Construction in Natural Language*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1985.

named *coronavirus vaccines*. Other log-likelihood collocates of note are *development* (7) *effective* (7), and *immunity* (5), which also appear in the top 20 MI collocates, together with *safe* (5), *testing* (4), and *stage* (3). Some of these collocates of *vaccine* also collocate with each other, notably *safe and effective*, which suggests a preoccupation with the quality of the vaccines being produced as articulated in the following extract: «The federal government has also inked a number of agreements with pharmaceutical companies to purchase millions of doses of their vaccine candidates if they prove safe and effective».

Illnesses other than Covid feature in the MI collocates, as they did for the first wave data: both *flu* (3) and *ebola* (3) appear in the data with reference to their respective vaccines, which are hypothesized as being potentially suitable or modifiable for Covid treatment or immunisation. Another similarity with the first wave data is the presence of a number of time references expressing future orientation (*once* [4], *until* [3], *become* [3] in the MI collocates; *vaccine will* [5] in the clusters), yet there is a subtle shift corresponding to the move from there being no vaccine in existence in Wave 1, to several vaccines existing but not yet ready for distribution. In Figure 1 (above), the time references tell of an indefinite wait in store, and the context features epistemic modality which reinforces the already-mentioned «desire space» which *vaccine is* in the Wave 2 2020. In Figure 2, showing the same cluster (*vaccine is*) in the Wave 2 data, it can be seen that the modality is now predominantly predictive future *will/shall*, and the one instance of *may* (line 3) is an expression of dynamic, not epistemic modality¹⁴, i.e. it is *in the nature of* «similar therapies being developed for COVID-19» to be *approvable*¹⁵.

¹⁴ R. FACCHINETTI, *Pragmatic and sociological constraints on the functions of may in contemporary British English*, in *Modality in contemporary English*, a cura di R. Facchinetti et al., Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin 2003, pp. 301-327 (pp. 303-304).

¹⁵ An example from the data is: «The FDA's approval is also a good sign for similar therapies being developed for COVID-19, that may be approved before any vaccine is developed».

1	use authorization in December. # Once a normal. Notably, even when an effective that may be approved before any that they will only reopen once a finding the cure for covid-19 and the we need to recognise that, vital as a the way scientists had hoped. The in the final testing stage. Once the and will do so until a safe, effective	vaccine vaccine vaccine vaccine vaccine vaccine vaccine vaccine vaccine	is approved, it still has to be distributed is developed, it could take many more is developed. Monoclonal antibody Ebola is found and that could be years. is in the final testing stage. Once is, it will be just one of the range of is made by the National Institutes of is out it shall require vials in large amounts is widely available sometime next year.
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Figure 2. *KWIC concordances for «vaccine is», Wave 2*

The overall picture that emerges from the collocates, clusters and additional reading of the related KWIC concordances, is that in Wave 2 the vaccine is perceived as an imminent reality. Worries about not having a vaccine are largely abated, with concerns now being raised over the time-scale of its final approval as well as the logistics of its production and distribution (see lines 1 and 8).

3.3 *Vaccine* — 3rd wave

Wave 3 occurred in the wake of the festive period, when large gatherings of friends and family at Christmas and New Year led to a spike in transmission of the virus. The lag-time is approximately two weeks from initial infection to manifestation of symptoms, thus the third wave straddled late January and February. For the purposes of this study, data is considered from February 1st-15th 2021 inclusive. By this time, vaccine rollout had begun, although it was mainly restricted to at-risk groups, medical staff, and the over 80s. The final days of the sample period witnessed the first serious side-effects of the Astrazeneca vaccine being reported.

The actual delivery of vaccination completes the transformation of the word *vaccine* from indefinite noun (in Wave 1) to definite noun, a shift that was clearly under way in Wave 2: the definite noun is strongly preferred (*the vaccine* [22], compared to *a vaccine* [8])¹⁶. *Covid* (16) remains in the top 20 log-likelihood collocates, but *coronavirus* (5) has slipped down to rank 48. Both appear proportionately fewer times than before, as proprietary brand names start to appear, as will be discussed shortly.

The tendency for *Covid-19 vaccine* (11) to refer to actual vaccines, and for *coronavirus vaccine* (4) to refer to the generic concept of a

¹⁶ There are also 7 occurrences of *vaccine* as a mass noun in the sample.

vaccine, has not consolidated, although a specific/generic distinction remains: the data shows that *Covid-19 vaccine* (10) collocates with *dose(s)* (6) or *shot* (1), while *coronavirus vaccine* (4) collocates with the proprietary brands *Astrazeneca* (3) and *Johnson&Johnson* (1), neither of which are actually available – the former having been temporarily withdrawn and the latter not yet rolled out. For the first time, some longer clusters appear: *vaccine developed by Pfizer* (3), *about 60,000 doses of the vaccine* (3). Such formulaic phrasing is indicative of more concrete concepts stabilising. The remaining shorter clusters are consistent with vaccine entering the public sphere of experience: *vaccine rollout* (5), *vaccine supply* (5), *vaccine doses* (5), *doses of (the) vaccine* (6), *Astrazeneca vaccine* (4) all refer concretely to what has been produced and/or delivered, while *vaccine hesitancy* (3) is a new concept tied to fears of serious side effects or even death as a result of vaccination.

Three pharmaceutical companies appear in the collocates: *Astrazeneca* (11), due to its news-worthiness, appears both top-20 collocates for both the log-likelihood and MI scores; *Pfizer* (6) appears in the top 20 MI collocates (and at rank 25 in log-likelihood); *Biontech* (5) is just outside the top 20 MI collocates (at rank 21) and is ranked 35 in log-likelihood. Some others are mentioned in the overall sample of 100 concordance lines, but are not statistically significant.

Time reference is no longer future-oriented and modality has yielded to evidentiality with tensed verbs indicating present reality. The MI collocates include perfective and progressive aspect verbs indicating recent past events (*developed* [6], *arrived* [3]) and present prospectives (*receiving* [3]), which combine with the only explicit time reference to appear in the collocates listing: *week* (9), four of which occur as *last week*, and four as *this week*. Noun collocates predominate. These can be grouped into two broad categories: the logistics of drug delivery (*distribution* [4], *supply* [5], *available* [4], and *State* [8]); and informing the public of health risks and benefits (*information* [4] and *source* [3], which collocate together, plus *approval* [3], and the adjective *complex* [4]).

1	crime and local politics. # A	vaccine	is administered at the vaccination clinic at the
2	U.K., Brazil and South Africa.	vaccine	is scarce. # We have known from the beginning of
3	coronavirus illnesses. The	vaccine	is proving to be 95 percent effective, as promised.
4	District homepage: # “This	vaccine	is much more complex than any vaccine we have
5	more information on where	vaccine	is available in Michigan in the near future.” said

Figure 3. *KWIC concordances for «vaccine is», Wave 3*

Vaccine is (5) still appears as a cluster, but with diminishing frequency compared to Waves 2 and 3. The KWIC concordances in Figure 3 illustrate that the present tense verb now does refer to the here-and-now, and there is no modality present. *Vaccine* – even when indefinite, as in line 1 – always refers to concrete, real instances and not to a mere idea. Just as it has materialised in the real world, the ways in which *vaccine* is talked about have become more definite and factual, and details start to consolidate around the major issues that it links to, particularly supply and demand, and side effects.

3.4 *Vaccine* – 4th wave

A fourth tranche of data completes this study; although for convenience it is labelled ‘Wave 4’, the period it relates to (1st-15th May 2021) comes just before the Delta variant began to spread in the UK and elsewhere, particularly in regions of reduced vaccine uptake¹⁷.

In the previous three tranches of data, we have seen a gradual progression from indefinite to definite noun, which continues and has now reversed the April 2020 status quo: now *the vaccine* (31) is six times more frequent than *a vaccine* (5). We have also seen that *Covid* (27) has been a constant presence in the top 20 log-likelihood collocates (mainly appearing as *covid-19 vaccine* [22]), while *coronavirus* has gradually bowed out and indeed no longer features on the 90-word strong log-likelihood collocates list (it only occurs twice in the data set extracted, where it collocates with the plural *vaccines*)¹⁸.

Other collocates appearing on the top 20 (log-likelihood) refer to the vaccine being administered: *dose* (10)/ *doses* (16), *rollout* (5); *two* (8) refers to the two doses required for full immunity to be conferred. Another number, *million* (10), also refers to the number of doses delivered nationwide (*million vaccine* [3] appears in the clusters), but not exclusively, since it also quantifies money invested in immunisation programmes, as well as the death toll. The MI collocates reiterate these and add *supply* (3), as well as *adults* (5), in reference to the fact that at this point in time, it is only the adult population that is being vaccinated. The recurrent clusters also highlight the prominence of the immunisation

¹⁷ The choice was rendered necessary by the publication schedule for this volume; essentially it includes the most up-to-date period available at the time of writing.

¹⁸ This is consistent with the scientific reality which sees Covid-19 as a specific type within the general ‘family’ of coronaviruses.

programs: *vaccine doses* (6), *vaccine rollout* (4). A final cluster, *vaccine candidate* (4), can be grouped with the collocates *development* (3) and *developed* (5), present in the top 20 of both collocates lists, indicating that medical research is ongoing.

Compared to the previous waves, there are more pharmaceutical companies and proprietary brandnames of Covid-19 vaccines appearing in the collocates. *Sinovac* (3), *Covishield* (3), *Moderna* (4), and *TDaP* (3) all appear in the top 20 MI collocates; *Sputnik* (3) appears at rank 24, *Pfizer* (3) at rank 27, and *Astrazeneca* (4) at rank 46. The reason why the more familiar names appear lower down on the list is precisely because they are more familiar. They are more frequent overall in the data (*Sputnik* [5], *Pfizer* [4], *Astrazeneca* [7]) and do not collocate exclusively with *vaccine*, hence the lower statistical score. *Sputnik V vaccine* (3) is recorded as a recurrent cluster.

As in the other data sets, time reference is worth mentioning since the meanings expressed in context are not what might be expected. Two time adverbials are present in the top-20 MI collocates, *now* (3), and *after* (7). *Now* does not refer to static moments in present time but is instead retrospective, focusing on present states resulting from recent past events¹⁹. And independently of whether it appears with past or future reference, *after* is also resultative, never sequential. Rather than time, therefore, these adverbs signal cause-effect processes.

The contiguous collocation *vaccine is* does not appear at all in the Wave 4 data. The final set of KWIC concordances (Figure 4) therefore shows *vaccine are* (2), plus *vaccine has* (2) and *vaccine have* (2), i.e. the present perfect auxiliary verbs, to allow for a full comparison with the previous waves' data.

1	trials of HDT Bio's COVID-19 vaccine	are expected to begin this year in the US and
2	doses from a U.S. supply of that vaccine	are ongoing. # There are no shipments of J&J
3	this year. # The two-dose Sputnik V vaccine	has been found to be 91.6 per cent effective
4	1,922,913 doses of COVID-19 vaccine	have been administered in Ireland: #
5	said 264 million doses of the vaccine	have been administered in the United States
6	hurdles. Currently, no COVID-19 vaccine	has been released for emergency use for

Figure 4. KWIC concordances for «vaccine are/has/have», Wave 4

¹⁹ One of the examples is the following, here reproduced in its extended context: «Also, see this 4/29/21 Washington Post story by Mary Claire Molloy, Lenny Bernstein, Frances Stead Sellers and Nick Anderson about people who want the Johnson & Johnson “one-and-done” COVID-19 vaccine, not the two-shot COVID-19 vaccine, now that the U.S. government has lifted a 10-day J&J COVID-19 vaccine pause over concerns about extremely rare blood clots».

The two occurrences of *vaccine are* mark a shift from *vaccine as* a mass noun (substance) to a count noun (object), which was already suggested by the presence of *dose(s)* in the collocates and clusters. In fact, by May 2021, the vaccine was present in people's daily lives in the form of particular drug formulations injected in specific quantities to real people existing in time and space. The KWIC concordances in Figure 4 reinforce this: quantified numbers (*millions*) of *doses* already *administered* or *released* or ready as *shipments*, with reference to real places (e.g. *United States, Ireland*). Additionally, in line with the observations made about time reference indicating cause/effect rather than deictic time, it appears clear that the present perfect is now preferred over the present simple because of prevalent talk of results and achievements with respect to immunizing the population.

4. Conclusions

The title to this contribution suggests that society is mirrored in its use of language, and that when there are changes in society, they should be reflected in a corresponding change in language. What follows is a brief commentary to tie together the different part of the study on *vaccine* to highlight the main changes in its meaning during the course of the pandemic.

Vaccine started off as a generic indefinite noun (*a vaccine*) existing only in «desire space». Over time, the noun has become more definite as pharmaceutical companies produced actual compounds for trial and subsequent release for use in the population at large. A distinction has therefore emerged between the mere concept of *a vaccine* and the reality of a medical drug now in existence (*the vaccine*). Vaccination rollout over the first half of 2021 increased people's familiarity with *vaccine* in the concrete format of *dose(s)*, which has favoured its (now predominant) use as a count noun.

There is a well-established cognitive linguistic explanation for such a shift, which essentially holds that a substance is conceptually more abstract than an object, so the more concrete something is and the more relevant it is to our experience, the more likely it is to be expressed in quantifiable terms, i.e. singular/plural²⁰. Grammatical reference may

²⁰ R.W. LANGACKER, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar, vol. II, Descriptive Application*, Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 1991.

not seem an exciting place to start when delineating meanings, but it allows us to recognise the three main meanings of *vaccine* currently in circulation: generic substance, specific substance, and quantity administered.

Wave 1 collocates primarily indicate hopes that a *vaccine* would, in as short and safe a time as possible, be *developed* and *produced*, and be *effective*; some labs were *working* on *candidate* drugs. This is often couched in modality, specifically epistemic possibility, reinforced by time expressions referring to possible future resultative states rather than present reality. The indeterminate, generic *vaccine* is not real – it is nothing but an idealised concept which resists co-occurrence (real and lexical) with actual actions and results: all that it can do is express desire.

In Wave 2, talk was split 50/50 about *vaccine* as an indeterminate entity and *vaccine* as a specific drug, i.e. a shift from concept to (incipient) reality, as three pharmaceutical companies (*Astrazeneca*, *Pfizer* and *Biotech*) announced trials and became household names. *Testing* was at an advanced *stage* and it was predicted (*will/shall/going to*) that at least one specific *vaccine* would soon be confirmed as *effective* and *safe*. The increased certainty brought about by real drug formulations existing and trial results being made public confer on *vaccine* a new identity, more definite and concrete than before.

The roll-out of proprietary vaccines in Wave 3 is echoed in the preference for definite reference (*the vaccine*), combined with defined quantities (*dose, shot*), definite time reference (*this week, last week*), and information about the drugs themselves. Such detail is consistent with the overall cognitive linguistic interpretation of linguistically presenting a substance (*vaccine*) as a thing (*dose*), i.e. that it becomes delimited (by brand-name), hence countable, and the heterogeneity of its internal composition starts to fragment²¹. This process reaches maturity in Wave 4. The increased presence of collocates emphasising *vaccine*'s numerability (*doses* and numbers) and unique features (*Sinovac, Covishield, Moderna, TDAP, Sputnik-V, Pfizer, Astrazeneca* varieties) further sharpens the individuation of detail (granularity) characteristic of a progression from substance to thing.

What this case study aims to prove is that when we use the word *vaccine* this week, we are using it with a very different meaning to the one we ascribed to it just one year ago. The changes we have lived through together are fixed in our memory, and since we remember the events,

²¹ G. RADDEN, R. DIRVEN, *Cognitive English Grammar*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam 2007.

we believe that we also remember how we spoke about them. Yet our memory for language is selective at the best of times. We will doubtless remember the new words – *doomscrolling*, *anti-masks*, *infodemic* – but we are very unlikely to remember any of the less eye-catching changes that have occurred to words and their meanings over the past year. It is precisely for this reason that a resource like the *Coronavirus corpus* is so valuable, both while we are still *in medias res*, and in the future when memories have faded and little else remains of how we actually talked about our experiences of life during the pandemic.

PAROLE CHE NON C'ERANO

LA LINGUA E LE LINGUE
NEL CONTESTO
DELLA PANDEMIA

A CURA DI
**SIMONA POLLICINO
E IRENE ZANOT**

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