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Axiology of COVID-19 as a Linguistic Phenomenon in English Mass Media Discourse

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the study of axiology of Covid-19 as a linguistic phenomenon on the material of The Economist Issues (March-May 2020). A comprehensive linguistic analysis of the research material was used, which includes the method of complex analysis, classification and description of the material and semantic method. The chosen method of linguistic analysis made it possible to establish that this lexeme in the mass media discourse acquires additional connotations and serves to form an informational picture of the world that reflects the national-cultural characteristics of worldview and the system of axiological relations. The processes of language development are invariably intensified in the period of social disruption. We draw a conclusion that Covid-19 pandemic can be seen as such a disruption, which made a considerable contribution to English vocabulary.

Keywords

COVID-19, Mass-Media Texts, Connotation, Structure, Metaphor

1. Introduction

The article examines the linguistic phenomenon of Covid-19 on the material of English mass media texts, as we believe that mass-media discourse is the one who creates, reproduces and transmits axiological values. Current advancement of information and communication technologies has led to the considerable expansion of general corpus containing mass-media texts. People's perception of what is happening in different parts of the world is mainly due to the images and interpretations which are believed to serve as a basis of the formation of informational worldview reflecting national and cultural peculiarities of the world-perception and system of axiological relationships (Pantina, 2018).

The influence of mass-media on the public awareness, evaluation, opinion and people's behavior is actively studied by the researchers in various fields (Pantina, 2018). According to Teun A. van Dijk, people are affected by the news they read or watch, if for no other reason than they acquire and renew their knowledge of the world (Dejk, 2013). We agree that the study of the problem of recipient's linguistic personality is considered to be of special importance, as the authors of mass-media texts orientate towards audience's supposed values and background assumptions choosing certain material and expressions (Grechihin, 2008).

Mass-media discourse is susceptible to the context of actual social being denoted by a social fact as well as to the context of present ideology. It is aimed directly at the public awareness and formation of current public opinion. Mass-media discourse is characterized by specific audience and as a result of that by averaged and simplified language code functioning in the state of cognitive-axiological implications, that is, notional, metaphoric, figurative and symbolic and axiological implications. Mass-media words reflect not only personal and semantic attitude of an individual to reality but also social and semantic one. The mass-media word is aimed at evaluative nomination as a fight for basic values and metaphor is a main mental operation, a way of perception, structuring and explanation of the world (Chudinov, 2004). The language of mass-media is referred to as one of the main forms of linguistic existence nowadays. The mass-media text analysis allows to draw conclusion regarding the linguistic competence of speakers and the formal language development tendencies seen in the current period (Volodina et al., 2011). This kind of discourse makes choice, so that out of millions of events only hundreds of them may be presented. This choice should be based on the particular axiological filtres (Pochepcov, 2003). It depends on certain interpretation presented by mass-media, whether certain information would be in the focus of public attention and acquire a social status or not. The character of the selection and presentation of material is defined by the social position of mass-media and specific character of the audience (Kozhemyakin, 2010). Taking everything into account, we aim at studying the ways in which Covid-19 pandemic is verbalized in mass media texts and therefore determining how mass media affects the individual's interpretation of the world.

2. Materials and Methods

The data were collected from The Economist issues (March-May 2020) (official website of the magazine www.economist.com (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020). The Economist is a popular international weekly newspaper that presents news and opinions on current affairs, politics, etc. The material was analysed using the following methods: the method of complex analysis, classification and description of the material; semantic method which is based on the study of lexeme semantics and the detection of their individual connotations. We are focused on the articles of various topics in which the lexemes "covid-19", "coronavirus", etc. occur.

3. Results

In the eight issues of The Economist (March-May 2020) consisting of 84 pages on the average the word "covid-19" is used 1216 times. Following lexemes are used as synonyms: "coronavirus" (288 times) and "virus" (794 times) (it should be taken into account that "covid-19" is a viral respiratory infection and "coronavirus" is its agent), "disease" (436 times), "corona" (83 times) and "covid" (100 times), these two are new lexemes created due to the process of clipping. These lexemes retain their denotational meaning only in the articles related to medicine, in other contexts they acquire a great deal of additional connotative meanings.

3.1. Word Combinations

"Coronavirus" and "covid-19" lexemes (as well as their clipped analogues) are frequently used in the word combinations of the "noun-noun" type with such lexemes as "outbreak, shock, crisis, pandemic, cases, hit":

Unfortunately, like their models, the experts have not seen a covid out-break before, which calls the value of their experience into at least a little doubt (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

Governments scramble to mitigate the covid-19 shock to already weak economies (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

Economists cannot revise down their forecasts of gdp growth for the effects of the coronavirus pandemic fast enough (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

Some word-groups are based on causal relations, e.g. "the coronavirus recession", "the coronavirus shutdown", "the covid catastrophe", "covid-19 lockdown", "covid-19 calamity", "covid-19 deaths", "covid-19 restrictions", "corona holiday":

It also happens to be a good description for the government's approach to bringing the economy back from the coronavirus shutdown (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

The third time, it was sars-cov-2, now responsible for 225,000 covid-19 deaths (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

In some phrases the lexemes are used in the genitive case, e.g. "covid-19's obliteration of demand", "covid-19's spread":

Even a cut of 15 m barrels a day—around ten times what the Saudis sought in March—would be dwarfed by covid-19's obliteration of demand, of as much as 20 m barrels a day in April (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

Such word combinations as "the coronavirus situation", "virus factories", "a covid-19 hospital", "covid-19 wards", "covid-19 data", "covid-19 news", "a covid-19 committee", "a virus outlier", "covid-19 patients", "covid-19 task-force", "covid-19 hotspot", "coronavirus law" denote brand-new realities:

But the government is confident enough to have closed its last covid-19 hospital—and to promote flying (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

In the word-groups of the "noun-noun" type the lexemes are most frequently used with the adjectives "new" and "novel" denoting the novelty of the fact. The lexemes also occur in the same context with the Present Participle of the verbs "to rampage" (that is, to behave in an uncontrolled way, especially when this involves damaging or destroying property over a wide area (OneLook Dictionary Search, 2020) and "to rage" (that is, to continue with a lot of force, violence, or angry arguments (OneLook Dictionary Search, 2020). Both denote a violent, destructive action.

As a subject of the sentence, the lexemes "coronavirus" and "covid-19" (as well as their clipped analogues) are most frequently used with the following verbs: "to rage" (covid-19 rages), "to strike" (Since the virus struck), "to attack" (the virus […] has attacked Europe's oldest population), "to destroy" (The virus has destroyed $23 trn in global market value), "to sweep" (With coronavirus sweeping the country), "to hurt" (Covid-19 hurts emerging economies in at least three ways). All the verbs imply a violent, disruptive action (to rage—to continue with a lot of force, violence; to strike—if something unpleasant or dangerous strikes, or if it strikes someone or something, it happens suddenly and unexpectedly and causes harm or damage to them; to attack—to cause damage or disease in something; to destroy—to damage something so severely that it no longer exists or can never return to its normal state; to sweep—to move or spread quickly through an area; to hurt—to cause damage or problems (OneLook Dictionary Search, 2020).

3.2. Neologisms

The lexemes "coronavirus" and "covid-19" are productive stems for the word-formation.

Among new words the following nouns can be distinguished: coronanomics—a special economic system during the pandemics; corohara (short for coronavirus harassment)—an act of harassment of people returning home from abroad or those coughing in public places; covideo—videogames which help not to be bored during the pandemics; coronopticon—apps to track the contacts of users; corona-speak—a skill of presenting news regarding the pandemics; corona-chief—a leader administrating handling of coronavirus:

MrSöder's elevation to Germany's de facto corona-chief has surprised many, including his own supporters (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

So-called coronabonds would allow struggling eurozone states to fund themselves with debt guaranteed by the bloc as a whole (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

The lexemes mentioned above serve as a part of new compound adjectives, such as "virus-fighting" (firms), "covid-infected" (markets), "virus-imposed"

(distance learning), "virus-related" (stoppages), "virus-induced" (slump), "covid-related" (data), "virus-control" (work), "second-most-covid-afflicted" (state), "coronavirus-proof", "covid-striken" (firms), "coronavirus-fuelled" (exodus), "covid-battered" (places).

Some adjectives built from the given lexemes with the help of prefixes "pre-" and "post-" imply the division of the world and time into 2 parts, that is "before" and "after": "pre-coronavirus", "pre-covid", "pre-virus" and "post-covid", "post-coronavirus", "post-virus":

A rare holdout from the pre-covid era is "Big Brother Brazil" (bbb), a venerable reality show that confines 20 attractive young people in a house together (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

Yet even as they walk through the valley of the shadow of death, chief executives and corporate strategists are beginning to look to the post-covid world to come (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

3.3. Collocations

The lexeme "covid-19" is also used in some collocations and idioms, such as "letting the virus out of the bag", "Covid dries up a cash cow", "the ill wind of covid-19", "the sting of covid-19":

Others may see it as a reason to put off the risks associated with letting the virus out of the bag for as long as possible (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

Some comparisons like "covid-19 spreads like wildfire", "dismisses covid-19 as just "a sniffle" were singled out:

One reason the state's role has changed so rapidly is that covid-19 spreads like wildfire (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

The lexeme "covid-19" obtains a negative connotation, and it is considered metaphorically as a killer or threat: "a killer", "a known enemy", "a nasty blast", "a natural disaster", "a major threat", "a punishment", "an unmitigated calamity", "a health emergency".

3.4. Contexts

The lexemes "Covid-19" and "coronavirus" are used in the context of war or war-like activities. For instance, in the following expressions the contextual meaning is "to fight": "intended to combat SARS-cov-2", "varying intensities of measures to battle their covid-19 epidemics", "coming together to fight a common enemy". In these word combinations the defeat is meant: "itching to declare victory over the novel coronavirus", "remain intent on treating the virus as something that can be conquered", "the new coronavirus will be defeated inside borders". The war is occasionally expressed explicitly: Emmanuel Macron declared that the country is "at war" with the coronavirus (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

Winning the war against covid-19 will require the world to mobilise all its resources (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

The image of war can be constructed due to the use of the mentioned lexemes and warlike realities in the same context: "a frontline", "a campaign", "a weapon", "battlefield conditions", "wartime-like emergency measures".

The influence of covid-19 on various areas of life is distinguished most frequently. As a rule, the negative influence is implied. It can be expressed explicitly with the combination like "noun-preposition-noun", the first elements of which possess a common seme of result, e.g. "the effects of coronavirus on business", "the economic impact of the virus in real time", "the blow from the virus on the public services", "the costs of covid", "the scars of covid-19", "the geopolitical consequences of covid-19", "the outcome of covid-19 for the climate". The lexemes can also be used with the prepositions presenting the following noun as a reason, that is, prepositions "as a result of", "because of", "caused by", "thanks to", "from". The impression of influence is sometimes conveyed due to the use of passive constructions, where "covid-19" is presented as the doer of the action:

The aviation industry is being battered by the covid-19 outbreak (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

Now it sees America crippled by the coronavirus (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

"Covid-19" and its synonyms often perform the role of the subject of a sentence in the same context, which results in the personification of the phenomena:

Last weekend the virus reduced cinema ticket receipts by 20% (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

Thus, a tangible image of the "creature" covid-19 is created. It interferes with all the areas of human life and affects them, that is, changes, destroys etc. However, the opposition "positive-negative influence" is established in the same sentence sometimes:

The coronavirus is bringing Americans together locally even as it exposes their divisions (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

The pandemic will have many losers, but it already has one clear winner (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

The presentation of the image of covid-19 is frequently followed by the expressions the meaning of which implies danger, fear or risk, e.g. "two real financial dangers that the pandemic has inflamed", "the threat posed by covid-19", "time of peril", "virus hysteria", "the virus scare of 2020 does create financial risks", "the second challenge is an economic downturn". The global character of the phenomena is often specified due to the use of the given lexemes and lexemes "world", "global" in the same context:

The mutation of covid-19 from a Chinese crisis into a global one came to a three-pronged strategy to cushion the blow from the virus on the public services,

on households and on businesses (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

Governments around the world took extraordinary measures to curb the novel coronavirus and alleviate its economic consequences (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

Covid-19 is also presented as an "examination" of existing rules and beliefs: "faces a stern test from the covid-19 virus", "covid-19 is a challenge to the generation of politicians who have taken power since the financial crisis", "both countries are treating covid-19 as a trial of strength between competing political systems".Covid-19 has become a "filter" which has demonstrated the existing global problems. It is expressed in the combination with the verb "to expose":

Covid-19's spread may further expose this racial health gap (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

Even so, the virus has exposed the weakness of a patronage system with Mr. Trump at its apex (The Economist—World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance, 2020).

Thus, we can clearly identify that covid-19 is widely represented in the mass media texts in various ways, including new words and word combinations. The aforementioned lexemes acquire additional connotations in different contexts. We can conclude that covid-19 pandemic has affected the culture and language (informational worldview) greatly, and these changes are mainly presented in the mass media discourse.

4. Discussion

The language is supplemented by new words throughout its existence, it is a regular and historically contingent phenomenon. In the periods of social stability language development processes run gradually and steadily, whereas linguistic changes affect only particular parts of the system. But in the periods of social disruption language development processes run faster, giving the impression of chaos and unsteadiness. Psychological patterns of the crowd are changing in accordance with the peculiarities of social situation (Sen'ko, 2007). It should be noted that researchers pay a special attention to neologisms in the mass-media texts as the word in this sphere is believed to carry expressiveness and to draw the public's attention. Thus, special lexical units which can perform certain communicative task are constructed. Moreover, mass-media actively distribute the neologism and make it popular (Katermina, 2017). The language of modern mass-media is characterized by relative stabilization. In the mass-media communication linguists detect such tendencies as reinforcement of personality, so-called stylistic dynamism, enhancement in innovation and expression, aspiration for freedom and the usage of precedent phenomena (Zamal'dinov, 2017).

According to the study of the notion "evaluation" in linguistics, it is possible to assume that lexical units reflect the processes of human cognitive categorization. Particularly, it refers to the words assigning the attitude of the individual

involved in cognitive activity to the reality being learnt as well as the results of human cognitive activity. Thus, connotative element serves as an obligatory semantic element in the meaning of a word (Katermina, 2016). The metaphor performs the role of a prism through which an individual perceives the world, as the metaphor is manifested in all the spheres of language functioning as well as in mythologemes, archetypes, etc. in the specific national and cultural way (Teliya, 1988). Making an appeal to intuition, the metaphor makes creative interpretation possible for the recipient. Metaphoric expressions of various structural types and contexts of various length serve as the main tool of metaphor materialization. The context is the key factor in the realization of literal word meaning as well as its metaphoric, or figurative meaning (Turanina, 1997). The metaphor is inherently anthropometric. Creating new notion, it compares different substances with their passing through a human and commensuration with the human scale of knowledge and ideas as well as a system of national and cultural values. The metaphor reflects fundamental cultural values, as it is based on national and cultural outlook (Maslova, 2001).

We agree that the mass-media discourse can be defined as a cognitive-pragmatic substance actualized due to the creation and distribution of evaluation and ideologemes among the wide audience, as well as nomination and metaphorical interpretation of the social facts (Klushina, 2008). Thus, it is no doubt that a lexeme in the mass media discourse requires peculiar attention.

5. Conclusion

The modern mass-media discourse proves to be an important subject of the current linguistic studies. We agree with the statement that we live in an information-driven world, where those who possess, interpret and distribute the information wield power […]. Mass-media ultimately affects the formation of the outlook, ideas, world perception, sense and behavior of the society members (Kormilicyna, 2012). The specific nature of the mass-media text involves the formation of the mass audience's worldview by journalists.

We also want to highlight the fact that global changes in the socio-economic life result in certain changes in the language structure. Being an instrument of verbal communication, the language is an important part of the culture, so all the peculiar properties of the language structure and its functioning are considered the manifestations of the linguistic community's culture. Vocabulary is known to be the linguistic field in which various changes occurring in the society's or ethnicity's culture are established in the most evident and direct way. An individual represents the objects of the actual world with the help of naming units. In the lexical units some specific knowledge of reality is preserved, which is sufficient to identify real or ideal substances denoted by words. We examined the process of language development in the period of Covid-19 pandemic, which is believed to be a considerable social calamity. It has affected English culture and, consequently, English vocabulary adding new words and combinations to it,

as well as new connotations to already existing lexemes. The main "distributor" of them is mass media discourse, as mass media texts influence public awareness, opinion, etc.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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