NEWSPEAK AS CORONASPEAK 2020

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Abstract: A virus called Corona, in 2020, created a situation which had not existed since the 2nd World War. Everybody was in danger (this time of being infected), and people had to stay at home to avoid being 'bombed' (this time by a virus). This situation brought about the creation of several new words and the use of phrases which described the danger and the measures taken against it in a clear, but some of them also in a metaphorical way. News papers used the situation by making fun of the language used, but also by describing the linguistic phenomena which the situation originated. In one Austrian newspaper, a journalist (George Renne in the *Kleine Zeitung*) called the language used by the government "Newspeak" – echoing George Orwell's novel *1984*. In this article, the most interesting word-creations will be discussed, as well as the various ways in which an unexpected situation (in the whole world) has an effect on the use of language.

Key-words: Coronaspeak; Metaphoric newspeak; Conspiracy theories; Home-office; Covidiots.

Resumo: Em 2020 um virus chamado corona criou uma situação que não se via desde a Segunda Guerra Mundial. Todo mundo estava em perigo (agora de ser infectado); as pessoas tinham que ficar em casa a fim de evitar ser atingidas pelos bombardeios (agora por um vírus). Essa situação deu lugar ao surgimento de diversas palavras novas e ao uso de frases que descrevem o perigo e as medidas tomadas contra ele de modo direto e às vezes de forma metafórica. Os jornais se valeram da situação considerando a linguagem usada, mas também descrevendo os fenômenos linguísticos originados na situação. Em um jornal austríaco (*Kleine Zeitung* 'pequeno jornal'), o jornalista George Renne chamou a linguagem usada pelo governo de "novilíngua" (*newspeak*), ecoando o romance *1984* de George Orwell. No presente artigo, as criações verbais mais interessantes serão discutidas, além dos vários modos pelos quais uma situação inesperada (em todo o mundo) tem afetado o uso da língua.

Palavras-chave: Coronalíngua; novilíngua metafórica; teorias da conspiração; covidiotas de *home-office*.

Introduction

In the novel *1984* by George Orwell, which was written in 1948, the government decides that the normal language should be adapted so that everyone could use it. The purpose of introducing such a language, however, was to restrict people's freedom of thought and to make them faithful subjects of the government of Oceania. For instance, the word 'thought crime' was introduced to prevent people from having thoughts different from those imposed by the government. Every kind of rebellion was to be made impossible by forbidding any words connected with rebellion. Orwell's idea was obviously that forbidding a word has the result of making the thing or action meant by it impossible. Speech planning was the most important measure introduced by the totalitarian state of 'Big Brother' (see Young, 1991).

For instance, instead of English Socialism 'Ingsoc' should be used, and instead of "Ministry of Truth" simply "mini-truth" – a word which ironically fits very well, since in Newspeak, as the new language was called, 2 + 2 would equal 5. This Newspeak had a continually diminishing vocabulary with many contractions (like the ones just discussed).

In the situation of Covid-19 in 2020, the governments of the different states had the task to prevent the 'pandemic' as it began to be called, from having more and more victims. In this situation, the governments also used a specific language; this language – one could call it 'Coronaspeak' – of course did not serve to distort truth, but rather (1) to make the measures of the government plausible to the population, and (2) to make them appear as mild as possible. One could even speak of euphemisms which were used to make people see that the measures were not as strict as they seemed to be at first sight. Thus, the idea was not to have a diminishing vocabulary, but rather to increase the vocabulary, so that the different restrictions could be named appropriately.

New 'household phrases'

One of the first words which became 'household phrases' was 'home-office', which meant that people were not allowed to work in their normal office, but had to work at home – connected with their firms by skype or other digital devices. Schools were closed, and pupils were subjected to 'home-teaching' in order to attain 'home-learning'. The fact that the pupils did not 'have to go to school' was called 'Corona-holidays'. 'Social distancing' was one of the next favourites, meaning keeping adequate distance from people not living in the same flat; the adequate distance was said to be one meter, or the size of a baby elephant. Many jokes and caricatures were made concerning

this baby elephant. It was also a bit curious how the evaluations 'negative' and 'positive' were used – of course quite in keeping with medical jargon: 'positive' was used for people who carry the virus and have thus fallen ill – whereas 'negative' meant people who did not carry it and were therefore healthy. In other words, 'negative' is the POSITIVE term and being negative is desirable, while being positive is 'negative'.

At the end of April, 2020, the word 'contact tracing' began to be used, meaning a method of finding out where someone had been infected with the virus. 'Screening' began to be used for investigating whether someone was already infected. When entering a shop, everyone had to wear a mask, which was briefly called MNP-mask (for: mouth and nose protection mask). The word 'flipped classroom' described the fact that pupils no longer did their 'homework' at home, but were taught at home and sent their homework to the teacher by the computer. The word 'cluster' was used to describe a group of people who were together too closely, i.e. without keeping the prescribed distance of one or two meters. At roughly the same time, the phrase 'factor of replication' found its way into the corona vocabulary. This factor described the number of people that were infected by one infected person. The number was originally two to three, and when it sank to lower than one, this was welcomed very much and led to a lowering of the restrictions 'pace by pace'. However, everyone was afraid that the lowering of the 'shutdown' would lead to a 'second wave', i.e. a sudden rise of the number of infections, or even to 'exponential growth', which would mean that infecting three people would soon lead to those three also infecting three, and the nine infected people would in their turn infect 27 etc. This exponential growth was to be avoided at all cost.

Metaphoric Newspeak

Some of the Coronaspeak phrases were metaphors, in which the corona-situation was compared to the time of the year in which the crisis was at its peak. This was the case around Easter, which in 2020 was in the middle of April. The 12th of April was Easter Sunday – a day on which no visits of relatives were allowed, but (in Austria) it was already possible to make trips into the surrounding landscape. Thus people were talking about the Resurrection not only of Jesus Christ, but metaphorically also of public and private life.

Another metaphor had to do with the speed with which everyday life would return to normality. This, it was claimed, would take a marathon, not a sprint, meaning a long time with everybody being very tired at the end.

Originally it was assumed that the virus had been introduced into human bodies from people in a part of China (Wuhan) by eating animals, particularly bats. From May, 2020, onwards, more and more so-called 'conspiracy theories' arose, meaning theories assuming that a group of people or even a certain person had created the virus for some selfish reason. One such theory said that a group of scientists had created the virus by trying to find a medicine to be used against influenza (or against AIDS). Another conspiracy theory said that a certain very rich tycoon had distributed the virus in order to diminish the population of certain countries.

The word 'quarantine' also became one of the most frequently used words. It was used for the isolation of endangered and endangering people. Although etymologically the word means 40 days (ital: quaranta), the quarantine imposed on people in danger of infection was usually two weeks, i.e. 14 days.

The reaction of the press

In several newspapers, Coronaspeak was discussed, in one of them (*Kleine Zeitung*, Graz) even with the title 'Neusprech' (borrowed from George Orwell). It was also striking that several newspapers took the opportunity to make fun of the language used by politicians. Words like 'covidiots' and 'home-officers' were created to make fun of this language. The word 'covidiot' was intended to describe people who did not accept the measures introduced and celebrated so-called 'corona-parties'. 'Home-officers' were people who had to work at home, who, however, saw this as a possibility to have more power over their colleagues. Other words introduced by journalists were, for instance, 'balconists' for people who spent most of their time on the balcony, and 'crowd immunity' for the possibility to make the whole population immune against the infection. So-called 'hoarding purchases' were carried out by people who were afraid that the shops would be closed for a long time. The media very ironically reported again and again that the hoarding of toilet paper was one of the most frequent actions of this kind. Some papers also listed the words which were used in certain dialects, for instance for the masks everyone was obliged to carry. These words were different in the various German dialects, ranging from the dialect word for 'curtain' to *mouthbag* and even *mugbag*.

"Nothing will be as it was before" – a phrase which was used again and again. The phrase was actually a quotation, or rather the repetition of what was said during previous crises, e.g. the

terrorist attack on New York's World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001, or the nuclear catastrophe of Tchernobyl in April, 1986.

Topics shoved into the background (e.g. climate change)

Because of the Corona-crisis other important societal topics were shoved into the background, particularly the topic of the climate change, which for the previous years had been in all the media and had led to several international meetings - in which for instance the young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg had taken part. However, this topic was not totally forgotten, and it also led to new word creations. One of them was 'bioneers', which was used to name the agricultural 'pioneers' who had chosen to do biological agriculture. Another topic which had been pushed into the background was the situation of the many refugees who had come from Syria, Afghanistan and other countries to Greece. The question which was now in the centre of attention was whether these refugees were in danger of being infected with the Corona virus. Many of them probably were, but since there was no way of testing them, the number of those infected remained unknown.

A situation which was very frequently compared with the Corona-crisis was the situation in Europe during (or at the end of) the Second World War, when many people did not have anything to eat, when many cities were in ruins and everyone was afraid of bombing attacks. The comparison, however, was not valid, because the dangers in the World War were human made, whereas the pandemic was very probably (see above!) nature-made. It was a curious coincidence that the corona-crisis occurred almost exactly 75 years after the end of the Second World War, a 'jubilee' which was intended to be celebrated – a celebration which, however, had to take place in a very restricted way. Some politicians were sorry that this topic could not be put into the front row of political activity.

Conclusion

Coronaspeak is a use of language, which was introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic for various reasons. First, the measures taken had to be named somehow, and this occurred frequently with new words or with old ones used metaphorically. The second reason was to make people aware of the danger of being infected, but also to prevent them from falling into a state of panic. Some of the expressions were also euphemisms which made the measures appear less strict than they really were. Interestingly, the language used was made fun of by the media, and a certain linguistic creativity arose as a consequence of the measures taken by the government. On the whole, it can

be said that the language used contributed to keeping the cases of infection and the mortality rate comparatively low – at least in Austria.

The term 'Newspeak' used in a newspaper for the Corona-language does not fit very well, because in George Orwell's novel *1984* Newspeak is used by the government to hold the citizens in check and to prevent any kind of rebellion against Big Brother. In spite of this, I have used the term in my title in order to show that Covid-19 had brought about a new situation which made it necessary to use some specific words and phrases for the reasons given above.

It is to be hoped that Coronaspeak will not have to continue for a longer period, but that it will be something to be looked upon as historical, which people may remember but will not need until the end of their lives.

Reference

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