

## Corpus Linguistic Analysis of Fear-Factor Lexemes of Selected Online Newspaper Headlines on Coronavirus Pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

As the world expanded, so too did the spread of diseases and their vocabulary. The spread of the corona virus disease has altered the lives of billions of people, and has equally ushered in a new vocabulary to the general populace encompassing specialist terms from the fields of epidemiology and medicine. The aim of the study was to identify those lexemes that relate to corona virus (Covid-19) and which have dominated the language discourse of Nigerians. It has been observed that most of such lexemes project fear and death of human and economic resources. The researcher randomly collected data from online Nigerian newspaper headlines that were centred on corona virus related issues, and analyzed such data using the theoretical framework of corpus linguistics. The researcher identified those linguistic terms which are associated with Covid-19 as they have overwhelmingly dominated global discourse. The study revealed that so many lexemes that relate to Covid-19 project fear, disaster, confusion, restlessness, panic and death. The researcher was able to spot new words and senses associated with the pandemic and assessed the frequency of their usage. She concluded by reiterating that the lexical wealth of every language is not limited, but rather, there are lots of various lexical units created by different professions and epidemiology and medicine are not exceptions.

Keywords: Lexeme, Covid-19, Language, Fear, Medical Register, Corpus Linguistics

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### INTRODUCTION

Language plays a very pivotal role in every human society. Without language, there will be chaos and anarchy in the society because through language, human beings understand one another. Communication is a two-way process that involves the interactants or interlocutors. Feedback is given either by words, gestures or gesticulations. Recently, in human history, the world has and is witnessing the 'ravaging storm' of corona virus infection and this has given rise to the use of lexical items that inject fear, disaster, confusion and death into human minds. In fact, due to global crisis, there is now an exponential rise in usage of words in a very short period of time, to refer to corona virus disease and such words have come to overwhelmingly dominate the global discourse. Covid-19 is an acronym for corona virus disease 2019. As the spread of the disease has altered the lives of billions of people, it

has correspondingly ushered in a new vocabulary to the general populace encompassing specialist terms from the fields of epidemiology and medicine.

This paper therefore was aimed at exploring those lexemes that relate to corona virus disease and which project fear and death of human and economic resources. The researcher reviewed online newspaper headlines that were centred on corona virus. The newspapers used were randomly selected from Nigeria so as to identify those linguistic items that signal fear, panic, and death in order to find out the impact of such linguistic terms on the society. The researcher adopts the theoretical framework of corpus linguistic analysis to achieve the objectives of the study.

#### **Problem of the Study**

The current global crisis has seen the appearance of genuinely new words, phrases, combinations, and abbreviations

which were not necessarily coined for the corona virus epidemic, but which have seen far wider usage since it began. Also, many lexical items that tend to instill fear on the Nigerian populace have been in use since the corona virus outbreak. The present researcher has observed that 'fear' has crept into the world especially, in Nigeria since the disease has been termed pandemic.

### **Objective of the Study**

According to [1], some of the terms with which we have become so familiar over the past few weeks through the news, social media, and government briefings and edicts have been around for years (many date from the nineteenth century), but they have achieved new and much wider usage to describe the situation in which we currently find ourselves. The aim of the study was to identify those lexemes that relate to Covid-19 and which now appear in Nigerian newspapers and everyday discourse so as to find out such new occurring lexemes and the extent to which they appear to be harbingers of fear to the masses. Thus, the study of this nature is deemed relevant in the present dispensation. M. Abdiev opines that:

the systematic construction of every sphere and general linguistics assigns paradigmatic relations of a definite word or

### **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION**

#### **Lexemes**

The term "lexeme" was introduced by Benjamin Whorf in the 1930s and used subsequently by Morris Swadesh and Harold Conklin and others. It was brought into neurocognitive linguistics under the influence of Conklin. According to Spencer, the notion of "lexeme" is central to realizational theories of morphology and to the notion of "morphology by itself". It is generally assumed that "inherent" inflections such as Plural or Past Tense impart a meaning to the inflected word.

According to M. Abdiev, 'the word 'lexeme' being one of the notions of general and special lexicology has not found its definite scientific interpretation yet (1299). To some early linguists, the meaning of lexeme is shrouded in

term within one sphere and literary speech levels and reveals dialectal relations of the word and term; a lexeme used as a general consumed unit has a specialized terminological meaning in a given sphere (1301).

The study of the lexemes relating to covid-19 was imperative as an addition to linguistic studies on the epidemiological and medical register.

### **Scope and Delimitations of the Study**

The study was limited to lexemes (linguistic items) that relate to Covid-19 and which are imbued with fear and which appear on the headlines of online Nigerian newspapers. These form the scope of the study, and data collected was analyzed using the theoretical framework of corpus linguistics.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are those fear-factor lexemes that relate to Covid-19?
2. To what extent do they project fear and death of human and economic resources?
3. To what extent do such linguistic items enrich the medical register?
4. What do such lexemes denote/connote in the face of Covid-19 pandemic?

obscurity. No wonder, [2] confessed that he:

avoided the term lexeme (instead of word) for personal reasons and used the term 'morpheme. In the American structuralist sense, which means that a morpheme is phonological substance and cannot be simply a unit of meaning (55)?

Lexeme is a unit of lexical meaning that underlies a set of words that are related through inflection. It is a basic abstract unit of meaning, a unit of morphological analysis in linguistics that roughly corresponds to a set of forms taken by a single root word. . In neurocognitive linguistics, a lexeme or lexicalitem is understood not as a unit but as a subnetwork, within the linguistic information system. In the words of [3],

a lexeme is a theoretical construct that stands for the unitary meaning and shared syntactic properties of a group of word forms. A lexeme is stripped of any inflectional endings. Thus *play*, *plays*, *played*, and *playing* are all inflected forms of the lexeme *play*. In a similar vein, *cat* and *cats* are inflected forms of the same lexeme, i.e., *cat*. Although inflection creates forms of the same lexeme, derivation creates new lexemes (42).

The lexemes chosen in the pandemic era of corona virus have been seen to play on the psyche of individuals. This is the rationale behind the choice of the lexical item 'lexeme' in the exploration of the work.

The meaning of lexeme in the present work is anchored on M. Lynne Murphy's perspective of the term. According to him, 'a linguistic form (i.e. a bit of speech and/or writing) represents a lexeme if that form is conventionally associated with a non-compositional meaning. Lexemes, and the information about them in the lexicon, are conventional - that is, these form-meaning pairings are common knowledge among the speakers of the language, and we have had to learn these particular associations of form and meaning from other members of the language community'.

#### **Corona virus (COVID-19)**

The name "corona virus" comes from the crown-like projections on their surfaces. "Corona" in Latin means "halo" or "crown." Corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is defined as illness caused by a novel corona virus now called severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; formerly called 2019-nCoV), which was first identified amid an outbreak of respiratory illness cases in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. It was initially reported to the WHO on December 31, 2019. On January 30, 2020, the WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global health emergency. On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic.

Most people infected with the COVID-19 virus will experience mild to moderate

respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness. The best way to prevent and slow down transmission is to be well informed about the COVID-19 virus, the disease it causes and how it spreads. One protects oneself and others from infection by washing one's hands or using an alcohol based rub frequently and not touching one's face. The COVID-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes, so it's important that one also practices respiratory etiquette. Presently, there are no specific vaccines or treatments for COVID-19. (<https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab1>).

According to an online source, in 2019, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) started monitoring the outbreak of a new corona virus, SARS-CoV-2, which causes the respiratory illness now known as COVID-19. Information on the virus is scarce at present. In the past, respiratory conditions that develop from corona viruses, such as SARS and MERS, have spread through close contacts. On February 17, 2020, the Director-General of the WHO presented at a media briefing the following updates on how often the symptoms of COVID-19 are severe or fatal, using data from 44,000 people with a confirmed diagnosis: Symptoms vary from person-to-person with COVID-19. It may produce few or no symptoms. However, it can also lead to severe illness and may be fatal. Common symptoms include: fever, breathlessness, cough and potential loss of taste or smell.

#### **Pandemic**

The term pandemic relates to geographic spread and is used to describe a disease that affects a whole country or the entire world. A pandemic is the worldwide spread of a new disease. Pandemic is an epidemic of disease that has spread across a large region, for instance multiple continents, or worldwide. The corona virus is pandemic. (Wikipedia).

### **Medical Register**

Every profession has its technical term. The medical profession is imbued with medical jargons that are used at one point or the other. In the era of Covid-19, certain linguistic terms have been used to

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### **Corpus Linguistics**

The theoretical framework for the present study is corpus linguistics. According to [4], corpus linguistics is an area which focuses upon a set of procedures, or methods, for studying language... focuses upon a group of methods for studying language. This is an important observation, but needs to be qualified. Corpus linguistics is not a monolithic, consensually agreed set of methods and procedures for the exploration of language. While some generalizations can be made that characterize much of what is called 'corpus linguistics', it is very important to realize that corpus linguistics is a heterogeneous field. Differences exist within corpus linguistics which separate out and subcategorize varying approaches to the use of corpus data (20). Corpus linguistics is the study and analysis of data obtained from a corpus. The main task of the corpus linguist is not only to find the data but to analyze it.

#### **Denotative and Connotative meaning**

[5] speaks about the 'centrality of meaning to virtually all linguistic concerns'. In his view:

Meaning is what language is all about, the analyst who ignores it to concentrate solely on matters of form severely impoverishes the natural and necessary subject matter of the discipline and ultimately distorts the character of the phenomena described (12).

According to [6], the notion of meaning in linguistics, concerns that which is expressed by sentences, utterances and their components. Meaning is the content conveyed in communication by language, the message or thought in the mind of a speaker or writer encoded in language and sent to a hearer or reader who decodes it (129). The denotative meaning of a word is the ordinary meaning of that

portray the extent to which the disease has spread and also to explain the measures that have been put in place to curb the spread of the virus and also to express what should be done or not to be done.

word. It is indeed the literal, explicit of factual meaning. On the other hand, connotative meaning is implied or hidden meaning of a word. Knowledge of these terms become imperative here since they will also be employed in the analysis of the data collected for the present research.

#### **Corona virus and Its spread in our Contemporary Society**

Coronavirus was first identified the virus in Wuhan, China. Since then, the virus has spread to other countries, both in and outside Asia, leading the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare this as a pandemic. As of March 23, more than 340,000 people have contracted the virus worldwide, causing over 14,000 deaths. In the U.S., the virus has affected over 35,000 people, resulting in more than 450 deaths. The first people with COVID-19 had links to an animal and seafood market. This fact suggested that animals initially transmitted the virus to humans. However, people with a more recent diagnosis had no connections with or exposure to the market, confirming that humans can pass the virus to each other. According to an online source, researchers first isolated a corona virus in 1937. They found a corona virus responsible for an infectious bronchitis virus in birds that had the ability to devastate poultry stocks. Scientists first found evidence of human corona viruses (HCoV) in the 1960s in the noses of people with the common cold. Among humans, corona virus infections most often occur during the winter months and early spring. People regularly become ill with a cold due to a corona virus and may catch the same one about 4 months later. This is because corona virus antibodies do not last for a long time. Also, the antibodies for one strain of corona virus may be ineffective against another one. (<https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/256521>).

**Presentation of Data on Fear-Factor Lexemes in Newspaper Headlines**

S/N	Lexemes	Denotation cum connotation	Frequency of Occurrence	Degree of fear: High (H+), Mid (M+), Low (L)
1.	Pandemic	Global	82.5%	H+
2.	Lockdown	Social distancing strategy	77%	H+
3.	Confirmed cases	Relating to the virus	80%	M
4.	Total rises	Increase in number of cases	52.5%	H+
5.	Diseases	In relation to other flu infections (e.g. SARS)	16.2%	L
6.	Contract tracing	To determine new cases	10%	L
7.	Dangerous pathogen	Relates to the virus	1%	H+
8.	Discharged	After treatment	66%	L
9.	Spread	Contagious	92.2%	H
10.	Coronavirus outbreak	Pandemic, not endemic	75%	H+
11.	Symptoms	Visible signs on carrier	57.1%	M
12.	Treatment Centre	Improvised clinics	35%	H
13.	Plunges World Economy Into Brutal Recession	Effect on Economy	55%	H+
14.	No mask, no movement	To curb spread	21%	H+
15.	Palliatives	Measure	5%	M
16.	Coronavirus test	For confirmation	66.2%	M
17.	Covid-19 Complication	Severity of cases	20%	H+
18.	Traditional medicine	Relating to use of herbs	2.1%	L
19.	Stay at home order	Social distancing	78%	M
20.	Centre for disease control	Body in charge	35%	L
21.	Survivor	Ex-patient	5%	L
22.	Infectious disease	Contagious	76%	H+
23.	Social gathering directive	6 feet apart	68%	M
24.	Second death	Loss of a patient	22%	H+
25.	Tally hit (232)	Increase in number of cases	27%	H+
26.	New cases recorded	After coronavirus test (test result)	40%	H+
27.	Stronger immunity	Boost of immune system	32%	L
28.	No reinfection	Reoccurrence of the disease	43%	L
29.	Evacuation	Move		
30.	Isolation centres	Improvised	67%	H

31	FG reduces 2020 budget over coronavirus	Consequence of the outbreak	2%	L
32	Orders production of face masks	Consequence of the outbreak	33%	H+
33	Test negative	After coronavirus test (test result)	78%	M
34	Test positive	After coronavirus test (test result)	65%	H+
35	Killed	Terminal	48%	H+
36	Self-isolating	Form of distancing	55.4%	H+
37	Self-quarantining	Form of distancing	38%	H+
38	Vaccine	Possible treatment	10%	L
39	Ventilator	Form of assistance to patient	13%	L
40	Covid-19	Disease	95%	H+

(Where Degree of Fear =High (H+), Mid (M+), Low (L))

### Analysis and Findings

A total of 37 linguistic items were randomly selected for the study. The table above shows the lexemes that relate Covid-19 and the frequency of occurrence of the lexical items as used in the Nigerian newspaper headlines. The percentage rate of the occurrence is equally specified for each lexeme. The column that bears the degree of the fear factor and this is designated high plus, high, mid, and low. The analysis above reveals that Covid-19 carries an aura of fear, dread, and confusion. This is evident in the choice of linguistic items/lexemes in the Nigerian newspapers. For instance, terms like social distancing, and lock down are fearful but stringent ways of avoidance of the virus. Nigerians live in fear of the dreaded virus. Covid-19 was described as an 'infectious disease', quite contagious (lexical item 22). Some of the words were consistently used. For instance, in Punch newspaper, we were told that:

the president of the academic Staff union of Universities, .Prof. Biodun Ogunnyemi on Thursday, asked both the federal and state governments to make basic needs available for the masses during the **lockdown** period (2<sup>nd</sup>April, 2020).

Covid-19 has also become a regular term. The headline of independent newspaper says '**Covid-19: ASUU donates protective items to Anambra Government** (9 April,

2020). The predominant use of the lexeme 'Covid-19' in so many headlines of Nigerian newspapers is explicated below:

- i. '**Covid-19 Lockdown:** Akeredolu makes U-Turn, cancels Easter Services in Ondo'
- ii. **Covid-19:** Easter Panic Buying, Extended Lockdown Hits Deltans over **First death**
- iii. **Covid-19:** Details of Buhari's meeting with Osibanjo on Friday
- iv. **Covid-19:** Obasa continues Food Support Programmes in Lagos Communities
- v. Panic as Policemen prevent suspected **Covid-19** patient from visiting isolation centre in Lagos
- vi. **Covid-19** patient dies in Lagos hospital
- vii. **Covid-19:** FG may extend **lockdown** as **cases rise** to 305.
- viii. **Covid-19:** Ondo Govt makes u-turn on Easter services after meeting with CAN
- ix. How Warri Pastor died of **Covid-19** -Messy details of why Okowa did not mention his name
- x. **Covid-19:** Pastor Kumuyi Breaks Silence
- xi. **Covid-19:** GTBank has put smiles on the Faces of Their Customers in These Trying Times

- xii. **Covid-19:** Nnamdi Kanu Delivers Trailer Full of Rice to South East
- xiii. **Covid-19:** FG releases names of 13 Nigerian who died abroad

- xiv. Federal Government concluded plans to extend the **lockdown** curfew imposed on Nigerians.
- xv. Onu to unveil first Nigerian-made **ventilator** today

### FINDINGS

The study conducted revealed that 'fear' has become a serious dehumanizing factor that the populace is experiencing. The use of the lexeme 'second death' relates to mortality rate (in this case, the death of the patient). However, the lexeme has a biblical allusion which is also second death. The fear of second death is equally high as recorded on lexical item 24. 'Tally hit 232' explicated on linguistic item 25 depicts the anxiety and restlessness evident in the country at the time of the virus. The recommendation to resort to 'traditional medicine' portrays the confusion Covid-19 has generated, although not by the generality of the populace with a frequency of 2.1%. The lexeme 'Covi-19 is predominantly used in Nigerian newspapers.

It was discovered that the intensity of the fear factor did not tally with the percentage use of the lexeme. Again, the rate at which the lexeme occurs in the newspaper in most cases, differ significantly from the result or impact of such lexemes on the individuals on the people. For instance, lexeme number 25 tagged 'Tally hit' at the rate of 27%, while the degree of fear and fear related issues is still high. Thus, a lexeme which is consistently used in communication may have a low impact on an individual. The rate at which the populace reacts to the use of certain lexemes depends greatly on the denotation or connotative meanings of such linguistic items rather than on the frequency of use of such lexical items.

In addition, the study also revealed that there are so many lexemes that denote fear, disaster, confusion, restlessness. Such terms also depict the extent to which Covid-19 endangers both life and economy of a nation. Words like: pandemic, infectious, contagious signify

'quick spread'. The word 'survivor' which refers to 'ex-patient' connotes 'won battle'. That is to say that the nation is involved in a battle; the individual who survives it is termed a 'survivor' becomes he/she has won the battle.

The researcher equally found out that lexical units of professionals can also be used by those who have no connection with their profession. In fact, most of the people who are now using epidemiological and medical linguistic words and lexemes do not have any connection with such profession. This is indeed a boost to linguistic knowledge.

### CONCLUSION

Words are indeed at the core of every human communication. The words we use embody a lot of meanings. As noted earlier, the people involved in any communication process react either positively or negatively depending on the chosen lexemes or linguistic items and also on the situation at hand. The lexical items used in relation to the Covid-19 are harbingers of fear, confusion, loss, death (both human and economic), suspense, anxiety, restlessness etc. The use of words like social distancing, palliatives, traditional medicines are measures that could provide solace to the mind. Thus, while some lexical items can trigger off fear and anxiety, some can be comforting. In fact, the outbreak of Covid-19 has ushered in new lexemes which have come overwhelmingly to dominate global discourse, even to the exclusion of most other societal issues. We must conclude by categorically stating that the lexical wealth of every language is not limited; but there are lots of various lexical units created by different professions and epidemiology and medicine are not exceptions.

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