

ANTHROPONYMIC IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 AND THE UNDERLYING CORONAVIRUS

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***Abstract:** The article highlights linguistic and anthroponymic implications entailed by the spread of SARS-CoV-2 as a result of mediatization. On the one hand, the authors analyse the coinage of personal names which are lexically and semantically related to the Covid-19 pandemic. On the other, the association of certain pre-existing onymic units with this health crisis is explained as well. The approach is interdisciplinary, merging the perspectives of onomastics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and linguistic anthropology. The examples are selected from online sources and consist mainly of first names in English and Romanian.*

***Keywords:** anthroponym, Covid-19, first name, meaning, mediatization*

1. Introduction: theoretical outline

In an age in which globalisation has permeated every field, the spread of the coronavirus has also had linguistic and onomastic implications, as this article will show. The mass media has overwhelmed individuals every day with information about the coronavirus, and people's lives have suffered dramatic changes due to the pandemic. Repercussions can be seen even in the way people relate to personal names and their bearers implicitly. Without aiming to achieve a comprehensive analysis, this article will point out some of the consequences of the impact of Covid-19 and the corresponding coronavirus on anthroponymy from the viewpoint of onomastics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and linguistic anthropology. The examples discussed here were collected from online mass media outlets. While the names investigated are mainly English and Romanian, onymic units from other languages have also been used to illustrate certain social, psychological, and linguistic aspects.

The existence of names derived from the reality of the 2020-2022 pandemic and the association of certain personal and place names with this health crisis can be linked to the theory of unconventional names. Within the general framework of proper names, unconventional names have been enjoying increased attention in the past years, and have been the subject of theoretical and practical studies in diverse publications and languages. Among these, one can mention Bergien (2013), D. Felecan (2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2019), O. Felecan (2014a, 2014b), Gafton and Chirilă (2019), Harvalík (2012) and Oltean (2013, 2014).

Until recently, appellatives that became names with negative connotations pertained to the class of unconventional names, functioning as nicknames, for instance. Nowadays, such occurrences are onymised officially and are recorded in civil registries. The theory advanced here distinguishes between two types of

name-giving: official, conventional naming – recorded in civil documents – and (Christian) church registries. It corresponds to an individual’s “initial baptism” – or “baptismal event” (Agha 2007: 66) – and endows the named entity with a socially appropriate name (one that would not cause embarrassment to the name bearer once s/he grows older, i.e., a name that cannot be used as an insult by other members of the community). Therefore, the “convention” is tacit and refers to the common sense of the name giver, who chooses an anthroponym that would agree with the bearer, once s/he becomes aware of the name.

From this perspective, one could invoke the claim of the lack of lexical meaning of proper names, and the discussion up to this point would become nonsensical. The statement would hold if there did not exist old or recent examples of *antonomasia* by means of which former appellatives with negative connotations in a community were turned into proper names. According to the theory of name-giving to which the authors of this article adhere, the aforementioned instances are included in the category of unconventional, unofficial names, resulting from the second type of name-giving. This onomastic category includes nicknames, bynames, user names and other names likely to convey a “cluster of definite descriptions” (Kripke 2001: 57, 61). The new onymic reality undermines traditional name-giving habits, as it includes within the framework of individual names former designations of phenomena in the immediate reality. From the viewpoint of conventional naming, feminine first names such as *Pandemia* (Romanian feminine noun, literally ‘the pandemic’) or *Carantina* (Romanian feminine noun, literally ‘the quarantine’) could be viewed with ambivalence by the name bearers. The third level of language, the discursive level (of sense) in Eugen Coșeriu’s taxonomy, moves towards and intersects with the first, general level (of designation, of referring to “reality”, “things”, “states of things”) (see Coșeriu 1994: 135-136). Meaning interferes with designation. In other words, unconventional names (which do not result from their registration in marital documents or religious records) migrate towards the status of nonspecifying names. The opposite instance may also occur: nonspecifying names become unconventional in use due to their reinterpretation in the specific context of the pandemic, and develop new associative meanings. At the same time, situations of onomastic homonymy can be identified: *Covid* is both the name of the virus and the name of a human denotatum.

2. Coronavirus: a medical-linguistic perspective

At the end of the year 2019, there was some confusion in the mass media and implicitly among the wide audience as regards the name of the virus and corresponding disease (see De Stefani 2021: 68-72; Felecan, O. 2021: 42-44; Prieto-Ramos et al. 2020: 643). Thus, the World Health Organisation (WHO) felt it needed to clarify the situation: “Official names have been announced for the virus responsible for COVID-19 (previously known as ‘2019 novel coronavirus’) and the disease it causes. The official names are: Disease – coronavirus disease (COVID-19); Virus – severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)” (WHO 2020). The explanation is grounded in the fact that

(...) there are different processes, and purposes, for naming viruses and diseases. Viruses are named based on their genetic structure to facilitate the development of diagnostic tests, vaccines and medicines. Virologists and the wider scientific

community do this work, so viruses are named by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV). Diseases are named to enable discussion on disease prevention, spread, transmissibility, severity and treatment. Human disease preparedness and response is WHO's role, so diseases are officially named by WHO in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). (WHO 2020)

Lexically, both names are abbreviations created by means of acronymy. The figures attached to the acronyms are significant as well: 19, in *COVID-19*, refers to the year in which the disease appeared (2019), whereas 2, in *SARS-CoV-2*, identifies the second generation of one and the same virus (SARS) (see Shereen et al. 2020).

The clarification made by ICTV and WHO was necessary not only medically, for specialists in the field, but also socio- and psycholinguistically. This was because there existed the danger for the potentially stigmatising names *China/Chinese flu* and *China/Chinese virus*, *New China virus*, *China coronavirus* and *Wuhan virus/flu* to become instilled in connection with the place of origin of the new disease (the city of Wuhan, China) or the Chinese people (see Craig 2020; De Stefani 2021: 72-73; Rogers et al. 2021; Vasquez 2020). In this context, the names would have followed the model applied for the designation of the Russian flu (1889-1890), Spanish flu (1918-1919, whose first outbreak was actually recorded in the USA; see Porrás-Gallo and Davis 2014: 6), Asian flu (H2N2, 1956-1958), Hong Kong flu (H3N2, 1968-1969) or Mexican flu (A(H1N1), 2009) (De Stefani 2021: 72).

Nosonyms and pathogonyms with eponymic bases may develop derogatory connotations – see, for instance, names of diseases containing “tainted eponyms” (Abel 2014: 81), e.g., the diseases called *Reiter's syndrome* and *Wegener's granulomatosis*, named after doctors Hans Reiter and Friedrich Wegener respectively, both known for having “willingly participated in Nazi eugenics and euthanasia programs” (ibid.). Similarly, the use of ethnonyms or toponyms in names of diseases can cause severe economic, financial and image damage, with major effects on transport and tourism. This determined the WHO to issue, in 2015, the “best practices for naming new human infectious diseases” (WHO 2015). It tallied with the fact that many organisations denounced such onomastic tendencies and demanded the ban of corresponding misnomers in public space. To avoid the employment of an ethnonym or the name of the place of origin of a new virus (e.g., the coxsackievirus, discovered in 1948, linked to Coxsackie, New York; the Marburg virus, Germany, 1967, named after the German town), an operation which could lead to the stigmatisation of the respective people or community, a hydronym was sometimes used instead, as in the case of Ebola, the closest river to Yambuku, the village where the virus had surfaced. “One obvious option would have been the Congo River, which is the deepest river in the world and flows through the country and its rainforest. But there was a problem – another virus with a similar name already existed. That virus was the Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever virus. (...) And so Ebola joined the list of viruses named after rivers. Other members include the mosquito-borne Ross river virus, which causes a debilitating infection and is named after a river in northern Queensland in Australia, and the Machupo virus, which causes Bolivian hemorrhagic fever, or ‘black typhus’, and is named after a Bolivian river” (Gholipour 2014).

However, as nosonyms and pathogonyms with ethnonymic or toponymic elements are still used officially, despite the recommendations made by the WHO

in 2015 (De Stefani 2021: 83), one can assume that the “(in)appropriateness of a name lies in the eye of the beholder. Stigma is not a property of names per se, but rather is established interactionally” (idem: 72), i.e., discursively. In other words, the structure and lexical configuration of names of diseases and viruses do not make the names “‘stigmatising’ and therefore morally debatable” (idem: 70) or “‘tainted’ and consequently discardable (Abel 2014: 81) *a priori*. They are gauged as pejorative due to the connotations they develop as a result of “the way in which individuals and communities use and/or perceive specific names” (De Stefani 2021: 70). Such an example is the employment of the metaphorical framework of WAR to refer to the Covid-19 pandemic, which may promote antisocial, aggressive (Doquin de Saint Preux and Masid Blanco 2021: 38-39), and even antiethnic or racist behaviours. The stigma is often extended upon anthroponyms either derived from the name of the virus or the lexicon pertaining to the pandemic (on this topic see Klekot 2021 and Protopopescu 2022), or circumstantially associated with the above-mentioned.

3. *Corona* in anthroponymy: a diachronic overview

As a proper name, the noun *Corona* has been recorded since the Antiquity in anthroponymy. Latin literature mentions *Coroneus* (Greek *Kopώνευς*), a king in Phocis, father of *Corone*, who was changed into a crow (Ovid 1958: 49), and *Coronis*, *-idis* (< *Kopωνίς*), daughter of the Thessalian Philegyas, mother of *Aesculapius* (i.e., Latin *Coronides*/Greek *Kopωνείδης*) by Apollo (idem: 48, 445; Lewis and Short 1879: s.v.). In *Metamorphoses* (1958: 375), the Latin poet Ovid also mentions the anthroponym *Corona* (pl. *Coronae*) for the first time, as borne by the two daughters of the Theban *Orion* (Lewis and Short 1879: s.v.).

In the Latin onomasticon, the noun *Corona* “is also a cognomen (of Etruscan origin?)”. As an appellative it became widespread in Romance languages (Romanian *coroană*, *cunună*; Italian, Provençal, Catalan, Spanish *corona*; French *couronne*; Portuguese *coróia*, cf. Meyer-Lübke 1935: s.v.). It was even borrowed in German (*Krone*), Albanian (*kunors*) and Celtic (Irish *corann*, *coroin*; Gaelic *coryn*) (cf. Ernout and Meillet 1959: 144). According to *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine. Histoire des mots*, the same lexical family includes the verb *corono*, *-are* and the noun *corollarium* “little crown (given to actors as additional gratification), extended to the language of mathematicians, ‘corollaire’ [‘corollary’], additional consequence of a demonstration” (ibid., originally in French).

4. Coronavirus: an anthroponymic perspective in synchrony

A positive aspect of the coronavirus pandemic and home isolation has been the proliferation of humour under its most diverse shapes. Despite the social distancing imposed by the authorities in numerous countries, individuals remained connected by means of e-mail and various social networking apps, which have been the vehicle for the dissemination of thousands of (dark humour) jokes (see Felecan and Felecan 2020, 2021) aimed at making people’s lives easier.

Sometimes, humorous discourse referring to the Covid-19 pandemic may become the grounds for the reinforcement of various stereotypes, and therefore they may be perceived as offensive. From the viewpoint of anthroponymy, a certain ethnic joke stands out (see Figure 1) for two reasons: 1) it mirrors one of the

stereotypes about the Roma ethnic minority in Romania, i.e., that of Roma families having many children; 2) it is illustrative of a name-giving tendency characteristic of this ethnic group, i.e., the use of *antonomasia* (see Felecan, O. 2014a: 510).



Figure 1. Anthroponymic ethnic joke related to the coronavirus pandemic.
Source: Bădăluță (2020: 5).

The central character of the cartoon is a Roma woman, who is asked by a reporter: “How have you spent your time during isolation?”. Her answer does not need further comments, as it is accompanied by the images of three children: “Well, I’ve had Covid, Isolation Stretcher, and Pandemic!” In this context, *antonomasia* can be connected with what Nuessel (2008: 29) calls “*ethnophaulisms*”: “*Ethnophaulisms* are pejorative names or designations for people who belong to an ethnic group and they are usually based on several observable phenomena including skin colour, clothing customs, culturally-determined eating and drinking practices, and other aspects commonly associated with a particular group” (idem: 29-30; see also Koopman 2016: 260-261; Nuessel 2019: 185-186). The derogatory use of the names is not explicit, as the humorous setting is intended to tone down this employment. In Romanian, the three appellatives have been converted into proper names by means of analogy with first names which exist in the national onomasticon and to which they are formally similar: *Covid* – *Ovid* (an onymic variant obtained by means of back-formation from the Latin-origin name *Ovidiu*), *Izoleta* (‘isolation stretcher’) – *Nicoleta* (a modern western borrowing, the feminine form of the first name *Nicolae*) and *Pandemia* (‘pandemic’) – *Maria* (the most important Christian feminine first name, formed with the suffix *-ia* from radical **mar*).

First names like *Ambulanța* (‘ambulance’), *Ambasador* (‘ambassador’), *Bogatu* (‘the rich man’), *Dolar* (‘dollar’), *Facultatea* (‘faculty’), *Inspector* (‘inspector’), *Judecător* (‘judge’), *Ministru* (‘minister’), *Paracetamol*, *Poliția* (‘police’), *Prefectura* (‘prefecture’) are frequently found among the Roma. These onyms reflect the Roma’s ‘taste for extravagance’ in matters of name choice, with *antonomasia* being a specific means of name-giving (see Felecan, O. 2014a: 510). In relation to standard first names, the anthroponymised appellatives can be considered uncommon names, deviations from established norms that are motivated sociologically and affectively. Thus, from the Roma’s viewpoint, some of the reasons underlying the giving of such first names have to do with traditional

beliefs and superstitions: the use of appellatives as first names is thought to protect bearers against the supernatural. On the other hand, “From a psycholinguistic perspective, the subjective factor (parents’ onomastic options) intertwines with objective reasons, which refer to day-to-day life or to the sociocultural peculiarities (...). Choosing forenames that are uncanny, uncommon for the majority, reveals multiple kinds of interconditioning: the obsessions of the Roma, unforgettable incidents in their lives or their position within the society, (...) various nuances of thoughts, experiences, feelings, occurring in particular circumstances of life” (Felecan, O. 2014a: 510).

Another example suggestive of the influence that the pandemic has had on anthroponymy consists of an article headline from India, which captured the attention of the public opinion worldwide in early April 2020: “Corona and Covid: Raipur Couple Names Newborn Twins Born during Lockdown” (Press Trust of India 2020). According to the above-mentioned source, “the pandemic caused by a new virus may have brought the world to its knees, but that has not deterred a couple in Chhattisgarh to name their newborn twins as ‘Corona’ and ‘Covid’. The two words may evoke fear and devastation in the minds of others, but for the Raipur-based couple, they symbolise triumph over hardships. The twins – a boy and a girl – were born during the ongoing novel coronavirus-enforced nationwide lockdown”. The explanation for the choice of these first names reveals the parents’ reasoning, which is completely different from what most people on the planet, affected by the pandemic, might think: “The names, they said, would remind them about all the hardships they conquered amid the lockdown, ahead of a successful delivery on the intervening night of March 26-27 at a government hospital in Raipur. (...) ‘Indeed the virus is dangerous and life-threatening but its outbreak made people focus on sanitation, hygiene and inculcate other good habits. Thus, we thought about these names’”. Nevertheless, upon leaving the hospital, the parents reconsidered their onomastic choices, as they did not “want their kids to be named after a disease” (Press Trust of India 2020).

The fact that the pandemic has affected people’s psyche as regards the means of naming newborns is underpinned by another report from southeast Asia (the Philippines and India), where several children received the names *Corona*, *Covid*, *Lockdown* (AFP 2020) and *Sanitiser* (Fry 2020), or *Covid Rose* and *Coviduvidapdap* (NZ Herald 2020). In the online environment, parents have proposed other first names inspired by the virus: e.g., *Demi* < *pandemic*, *Rhona* < *coronavirus* (slang), *Tina* < *quarantine* (Fry 2020). The parents’ explanations – “I wanted her name to remind us that COVID did not only bring us suffering. Despite all of this, a blessing came to us”; “We named him Lockdown remembering all the problems we had to face during this tough time” – reveal a specific psycholinguistic mechanism, as a result of the people “sharing a cultural framework” (Bramwell 2016: 265); “A society which defines its segments in terms of high and low, sky and land, day and night, can incorporate social or moral attitudes, such as conciliation and aggression, peace and war, justice and policing, good and bad, order and disorder, etc., into the same structure opposition” (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 170).

With many peoples analysed by the French anthropologist and ethnologist, proper names are related to clan names and names of totems (plants, animals). Such designations refer “to a partial aspect of the animal or plant entity” (idem: 175), “to technical or economic activities, to peace and war, to natural phenomena and celestial bodies” (idem: 178), “to the behaviour or character of one or other of the

parents” (idem: 179), being indicative of the name givers’ personality traits: “through naming, people say something about who they are, who they are not, and what their aspirations for their children are” (Bailey and Lie 2013: 22). Thus, names can also be evocative of negative aspects such as death, disease, pain or poverty. The giving of such names is connected with the sociocultural context. On the one hand, names with negative connotations are either a way of “avoiding the evil eye and envy by not naming a baby positively” (Akinnaso 1981: 51) or a sample of the fact that, in certain cultures, “All negatively valued home contexts are raised to positively valued status for the purpose of personal name construction” (ibid.; see also Obeng 1998: 168-170). On the other, one cannot overlook the increased permissiveness of the legal-onomastic system in certain geographical areas with respect to playful and aesthetic phenomena involved in the coinage of anthroponyms. The proliferation of such first names in the Asian space investigated, as opposed to Western states, can be accounted for by the absence/existence of onomastic prohibitions (be they legal or societal).

The potentially negative connotations that first names like *Covid* or *Corona* could trigger have led language users to exploit them in memes or humorous Tweets (see Fry 2020, NZ Herald 2020). The same semantic associations determined some parents-to-be to change their anthroponymic choices. Thus, first names seen as closely linked to the pandemic vocabulary orthographically and/or phonetically were considered undesirable, according to surveys conducted by ChannelMum and Nameberry in the spring of 2020. These were first names reminiscent of the words *corona* and *virus*: *Corina*, *Coren*, *Ronan*, *Viola*, *Violet*, *Lochlan*, a first name which reminded respondents of the word *lockdown* (Harvey-Jenner 2021).

At the same time, there are first names considered “positive odes to such a historical period” (Fry 2020), which is why they are preferred by the parents. These names are not novel coinages and are bound to trigger positive associations even beyond the pandemic setting. Thus, their contextualisation is visible only to the name giver and to the potential name bearer with whom the former might share the narrative underlying the onomastic choice (Aldrin 2014: 394). Such names can be grouped according to their main positive semantic association (Harvey-Jenner 2021):

- [+heroism]: *Avery*, *Bravery*, *Florence* (“a nod to the temporary NHS Nightingale hospital in London, which is named after the famous nurse Florence Nightingale”, according to Fry 2020), *Maverick*, *Hero*, *Wix/Wicks* (after Joe Wicks, a British fitness coach, whose series *PE with Joe* aired during the UK lockdown);
- [+virtue]: *Hope*, *Faith*, *Charity*, *True*, *Constance*, *Patience*, *Promise*;
- [+happiness]: *Bliss*, *Blythe* (‘carefree’), *Felicity*, *Joy*, *Solomon/Sol* (‘peace, peaceful’), *Pax* (Latin ‘peace’);
- [+safety]: *Harbour*, *Haven*;
- [+positivity]: *Iris*, *Indigo*, *Blue*, *Red* (so-called *rainbow names*, related to children’s rainbow paintings which were often displayed in the windows).

First names like *Corona*, *Covid*, and *Lockdown* have appeared in an exceptional context. Therefore, they have acquired an unconventional status from their very first uses. The proof lies in the publicity they received throughout the world, if we consider that ordinary events/names do not normally attract the

media's attention. Nevertheless, the first name *Corona* did not convey negative connotations, until the spread of the virus in 2019-2020. The conventional character of this proper name has been lost. Due to its association with the disease, *Corona* shifted to the class of unconventional names, as testified once again by the mass media. Eight-year-old Corona De Vries, from the Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia, wrote a letter to Tom Hanks, when the actor and his wife were in self-isolation in Australia. The boy complained that while he loved his name, he was being bullied at school because of it, as he was being called "the coronavirus" (Locker 2020). The Hollywood star replied: "You are the only person I've ever known to have the name Corona – like the ring around the sun, a crown" (ibid.). He also sent the boy a Corona-brand typewriter, which he had used during his quarantine.

The mediatisation of this correspondence between a great actor and a child draws one's attention to the loss of the conventional character of a rare first name, with (potentially) mythological origin (see section 3 above). Although its connotation is positive (cf. English *Basil*, French *Basile* < Greek *Βασιλεύς*, *Βασιλειος* 'king'), it was "contaminated" by the new coronavirus and became a potential "pariah" among current first names. In English, the etymology may be opaque to common language users, as opposed to the situation in certain Romance languages, in which the etymology is clear: Italian, Spanish *corona* (cf. Meyer-Lübke 1935: s.v.) or Romanian *coroană*. The choice of atypical, rare first names can be seen as a means of liberation from the rigidity of classical, secular or religious first names or of avoiding the commonality of excessively used first names. This kind of names mirrors the "parents' choice and denotes their subjectivity and personality. A first name is characteristic of the name giver, rather than of the named individual, who can, however, be affected by the parents' (un)inspired option" (Felecan, O. 2014b: 134). At the same time, rare first names can become a burden for their bearers, especially when they draw negative reactions from those with whom they interact (see Guéguen 2008: 91).

Nowadays, *Corona* is found as a first and family name in several states in the world (almost 27,900 occurrences), the top seven countries being the USA (21,900), Italy (3,300), Mexico (1,130), Spain (340), Argentina (300), France (230) and Brazil (180) (Locate My Name, 2020). Starting from the Latin phrase *Nomen est omen*, illustrating the ancient belief according to which names influence destiny (see also Felecan 2019: 45), as an irony of fate or as fuel to speculation, three of the above-mentioned states were at the top of the list of countries that were heavily affected by the pandemic as regards the number of cases and deaths caused by Covid-19 during the first year of the pandemic. Maps that prove the spread of the family name *Corona* in Italy (Italy Surname Map) and Spain (Spain Surname Map) can reinforce the faith of those who seek to find connections between the name a person bears, the place where they live and the fate they have, as Lombardy (Italy) and the regions of Madrid and Barcelona (Spain) had the highest number of name occurrences and the biggest rate of deaths caused by the coronavirus in 2020.

5. Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic "has highlighted key themes such as the geographies of disease and differential death rates between and within countries; the relationship between disease, death and existing inequalities, including intersectional poverty, poor housing, and co-morbidities in relation to ethnicity and

race, as well as age and health risk. It has also brought attention to the classed and gendered politics of labour, including essential services, paid work, domestic work, and childcare/home schooling; uneven access to healthcare, locally and internationally; xenophobia and nationalism; and mutual aid and volunteering” (Ho and Maddrell 2021: 3). The spread of the new coronavirus has compelled people to reassess what they uphold as values in the above-mentioned fields and beyond. It has even led to the establishment of new frameworks for the perception and use of language, in general, and names, in particular.

As regards anthroponyms, it is easy to notice a shift towards a fluid, unconventional employment of names, due to the negative or positive connotations with which they have been associated in the context of the pandemic. Either way, this illustrates that “Choosing a certain name then, or choosing to act in a certain way during the process of naming, implies choosing which social attributes, values, groups and positions one wishes to be associated with and which ones one wishes to be dissociated from” (Aldrin 2014: 395). Some of these names are new coinages (see the example of first names like *Covid* and *Lockdown*), others are established onyms which have run the risk of becoming taboo because of their inaccurate, unjust association with the new coronavirus (e.g., the first name *Corona*). Nonetheless, all these names have received significant attention from the mass media, as the connotations with which they are laden essentially reveal the individuals’ social and psychological mechanisms of coping with exceptional circumstances, i.e., the Covid-19 pandemic.

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