

Why the pandemic introduces language that is 'hard to explain'

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Andrea Beltrama is a linguist with mindCORE, Penn's hub for the integrative study of the mind. Credit: University of Pennsylvania

New words and phrases like "flatten the curve," "social distancing," and "stop the spread" have entered our pandemic lexicon at a dramatic rate. To make sense of the changes, Penn Today spoke with linguist Andrea

Beltrama, a postdoctoral fellow within MindCORE, an interdisciplinary center for the study of the mind in the School of Arts & Sciences. Beltrama studies the way in which language encodes meaning. Speakers are constantly conveying social information as a subtext, he says, and the power of words often lies in emotion, not accuracy.

What types of words have you seen gain popularity during the pandemic?

Just like this pandemic had a massive impact on every aspect of our everyday lives, it had a massive impact on language. Something that caught my attention was the expression 'flatten the curve,' which started out being this highly technical, highly scientific epidemiological term that makes reference to a very particular way of conceptualizing the epidemic. In no time, I noticed bars and cafés having the sign there that said, 'Help us flatten the curve.' And it was interesting, because you could see how it underwent this very sudden expansion of the domain of use, from being this technical term to being something people use in everyday life.

Impressionistically, it seems to me that the meaning of 'flatten the curve' has gone beyond the specific, technical use in epidemiology. It has become this nice, attractive, elegant synonym for saying, Let's slow down the contagion; let's just adopt any sort of possible precaution against this disease; let's be responsible. It's interesting how it went from a phrase that few people probably encountered before to becoming a very common word.

Any sort of version of 'distancing' is another common one. There seems to be a strong penetration of scientific jargon into everyday conversations. It might have to do with the difference between seriousness and scientific approach and the need for reassurance, but the

more I look around, the more we just see people talking about these things that only epidemiologists talked about before.

Another thing we are seeing—in my native Italian, for example—is a fair amount of English borrowing. Anything that has to do with 'spread,' and 'flatten the curve,' all sorts of technical terms. Scientific literature is mostly published in English, so that's really the most accessible language. The pandemic has accelerated this borrowing phenomenon because we needed a new lexicon. None of us could ever remember a situation like this. It's not surprising that the [scientific literature](#) has been able to provide a lot of words for this new time.

I don't think all these terms will be retained. A lot of it is just a response to the emergency and to the fact that we have such an unprecedented situation that have to find a particularly effective and unique way of talking about it. I suspect that when things will go back to normal, a lot of these borrowings will either go away or decrease in terms of use, but some of them will remain and will be highly symbolic and iconic of this moment, that will continue to be seen as the shibboleth of this very particular era.

Have phrases like 'flatten the curve' become popular because the general public can use that phrase to imbue their words with an added layer of scientific gravitas?

When you start to pinpoint why a word becomes trendy, it's a combination of different aspects, but the type of gravitas you alluded to is precisely part of the story. What type of social baggage do these words come with? What story do they tell? These words are coming with an added constellation of extra meaning. In this case, the added meaning is serious; it's about science, and having a very mathy approach to this

problem. It's not something we stop and think about, but these meanings are really part of how we perceive language and how we react.

In a sense it's similar to 'totally'. We can think of totally as being this word we add to sentences to express our certainty or commitment about doing something, like when we say, 'We're totally going to be there tonight.' But totally also says a lot of things about what type of person we are or want to be, just when we say 'flatten the curve' It's just that 'totally' has a very different type of connotation of, 'Let's be laid back; let's be relaxed; let's be hip and young.' We 'say' these things when we use this word even though we might not always realize it.

You can see how words carry much more than they technically mean and how this is important when we think about why people pick up particular words and why words become much more powerful in particular moments.

How do words catch on and how do they become popular?

Oftentimes, there's no particular reason, other than the fact this word became particularly likable or particularly cool and people started using it. If you think of it, it's probably similar to what happens in fashion. There's just so many things we can't really compute or predict. It's an emotive reaction to something that happens, and people start adjusting their behavior accordingly.

In this case, given this particular moment, with the need for reassurance, the need for collective organization. I think a highly scientific phrase like 'flatten the curve' is exactly what we needed in this moment. Words that carry something that goes beyond their actual meaning help people to perform a particular type of identity.

Do words go in and come out of favor?

Words and speaking exchanges are kind of linear. Language keeps evolving. But you do see cycles. You do see words that come back at some point.

A particularly interesting category is the category of intensifiers like 'totally,' even a word like [so](#), for example, which became the defining intensifier of Generation X. These words seem to go through very fast cycles, where they become trendy and then go out of use. I'm thinking about things like 'super,' or even 'very,' which had a spike and now does kind of seem a little outdated and old and formal. But I wouldn't be surprised if in 20, 30 years it comes back to this cycle, it becomes new and novel, and all of a sudden it is trendy again, especially among young people. There's a sense in which language, just like in fashion, things can come back and become trendy again, in a slightly different way.

What about the word 'unprecedented,' and how we are using it to describe an event that in fact is preceded by the Spanish flu and numerous other epidemics before our time?

There's a discrepancy between the usage of 'unprecedented' and the literal meaning of 'unprecedented,' which means it's never happened before. That seems kind of fishy, right? These things did happen before. We're technically not being very accurate. But I think it is compensated by the fact that, as you suggested, 'unprecedented' does come with a similar gravitas to what 'flatten the curve' might have. It's a strong word; it's a very intense word; it's a word that gives an idea of how special and how transformative this particular moment is and how historic it's going to be.

It makes sense that people are using it because emotionally and socially it does a very good job of conveying the fact that we're going something right now that is absolutely exceptional. In a sense, who cares that things like this happened before?

A lot of things happen that way in language. There's this trade-off between how precise we're going to be, how accurate we want to be, and how involving and emotional we want to be when we talk. Oftentimes it's OK to sacrifice a little bit of accuracy, especially if you can gain a lot in terms of conveying the sense of the exceptional moment that we're going through.

If you look around, we're exaggerating all the time. Language has more to do with social relations that we're emphasizing in the moment, as opposed to just giving a scientific description of how things happen. Whenever we're talking, there are multiple dimensions at once. Being descriptively accurate is one of them, but it's not the main thing at stake here.

Do you see language shifting because of the new ways we're communicating during the pandemic? Are we going to start seeing fewer regional differences because we're having more video calls and fewer in-person interactions?

I don't know that this will necessarily lead to a leveling of differences and a trend toward a more unmarked and universal way of speaking. It's been shown that when there was a dramatic shift in the demographics of a group, that didn't always lead to losing local distinctions. In fact, oftentimes it exacerbated them.

I wouldn't be surprised in a situation where there's less opportunity to be

exposed to people in our geographical proximity, this will lead some groups to hold on to particular linguistic features even more strongly, as a way of retaining identity and signaling that, in this changing landscape, we still want to retain this particular aspect of who we are. We can do that through language and because of that, we'll keep talking the way we talk, precisely to resist this potential pressure. It's hard to predict and it wouldn't surprise me to see if we can really both things happening. In certain contexts, we may have this kind of leveling trend that you alluded to, but at the same time, it could make regional differences even stronger.

What happens with words is hard to explain rationally because it's mostly emotional, oftentimes based on feelings that are hard to put into words.

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