




# **Etymological Semiotic Changes Unfolding in the Digital World - Transforming the English Language in the Apocalyptic Times – The Transformation of Language from the Corona Virus to Present-Day AI Infiltration into the Educational Domain**

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## Abstract

The world has changed and will never be the same again after the pandemic made a worldwide sweep. It all seems like a surreal dream; one day we were in our classrooms teaching and lecturing to our students in concrete structures called universities and colleges and the next we knew we are sitting locked down in our homes meeting our students online. What a sudden drastic change from the temporal classroom in the real world to the virtual world of smartphones and laptops. And still, with the revolution called AI, we English professionals are still in a state of suspension of disbelief or are we waking up to the reality of the future where the world is without barriers and communication has become the byword of success. Is this truly a boon or the sword of Damocles suspended in mid-air waiting to crumble the world and everything once held dear?

This article focuses on how it has always been the trait and the intrinsic nature of humankind to endure, adapt, and evolve. Language being the main domain of expression of a human being is a major game changer that evolves and develops most speedily in pressing times like these. The English language undoubtedly belongs to that exclusive club, of not only being one of the languages that spent the best part of a millennium cheerfully adopting new terms and ideas but also of being a dynamic language that is genuinely international, whose history has become part of the history of countless places, people and movements.

These are truly Apocalyptic Times; if we have eyes, we will see the signs around us. We need to adapt ourselves to the rapid changes of digitalization. Once upon a time, it was globalization and new technology that accelerated both the speed and the scale of linguistic evolution but now the Coronavirus Pandemic that erupted mysteriously has made all boundaries blurred and has men and women enslaved to a virtual world from which there is no reprieve. However, the greatest difference between digital and pre-digital times is that the future of communication lies onscreen in a virtual world. These screens are transforming not only how we communicate but we mean and think too. Disconnected from human faces and voices new conventions and registers are developing to express the emotional nature of language.

Keywords: Digital, Linguistics, AI, Etymology, Communication, English Language, Pandemic,

Virtual, Semiotics, Transformation, Lexicography, Lexicographer, Artificial Intelligence

Separated from written pages with pens and paper to unwritten etiquette typed on screens, the English language has travelled far. English Language academicians and custodians of conventions sound the death knell of the English language with the onslaught of the internet but contrary to their predictions English language has evolved etymologically and adapted itself to become the major lingua franca of the virtual world. Communication as such is multi-layered as language itself relies on complicated systems of signification. Roland Barthes the French theorist whose work discusses the sociology of signs, symbols, and collective representations writes in his very popular and well-acclaimed treatise *Myth on the semiotic commentary of popular cultural objects and unearthing the symbolic value of these objects about their claims of universality*. Now, the global pandemic has given rise to a whole plethora of new etymologies. This is why Barthes (1957) resolved to call the cultural power of these objects 'myths'. From this pattern of symbolic representations which people the linguistic domain, it could be very well seen that in the hyper-textual arena of the English language in the twenty-first century caught up in the thralls of a pandemic words under the grid-like Covid 19, Coronavirus, pandemic, plague, lock down all hold the attention of people all over the world. The field of semiotics which can be defined as a method of inquiry into the implicit signs present in the mental element of interaction in a global society. In which the Semiological emphasis and analysis can be said to be the study of meanings that are present in our day-to-day system of communication and signification.

As stated earlier in this article the Twenty-first century is a hyper-textual arena in varied aspects. These Digitalized words are connected by active links to day-to-day language which was unimaginable some years ago. They have transformed the use of language beginning from casual registers to the most intellectually prudent interpretations and expositions. New ways of thinking incessantly need new means of expression. The Semioticians build models of receptions of meaning and such relations are often internalized outside our logo-centric rationality, otherwise known as our casual use of language. In these times of uncertainty technological developments have transformed the way we express ourselves and the words we use to convey meaning. We find that the field of computer programming has brought with it entirely new terminologies in language, a form of written and spoken expression whose terms unravel not only the meanings but also the whole arena of human interaction. These new stories of our language reveal to us that etymological linguistic transformation is not just a completed tale but an ongoing negotiation that reflects the restless texture of the Digital world.

In his book *Netymology*, the British author Tom Chatfield (2013) writes about the burning power in a name. Shakespeare wrote what's in a name but when it comes to the twentieth century Tom Chatfield writes a brand may live up to its name and send the old order in smoke. The word Kindle comes from the Old Norse 'Kynda' which means to light

or set fire. We are in this age and times in the era of digitally empowered natives we are letting our imagination run wild and coining words that mean a certain way to people living in the day and age. Amazon was just a river now it is a name synonymous with online marketing. Yahoo was the sounds the gnomes made in the fairy tale books we read as children but now it is a search engine, the same holds good with Google, it's not just a magical word that fell out of space, and it could have been a word transported from literature to denote a fairy world or some other airy sprite. We attempt in this treatise to bring out the fact that all these words that have come to the fore in this time and era are creating new myths. Myths we find are interconnected with the social, cultural, historical, and economic factors that influence the times most often and words are becoming legends, in the pressing times like in a pandemic. These new words are proof that literature has all the attributes of science. The French psychologist Roland Barthes states in his treatise *The rustle of language* (1986) that at one specific moment in time every scientific matter was treated by universal literature. We know that human language has many layers and language relies on complicated systems of signification; for example, uttering a given statement using specific terminology might indicate the ideological tendencies of the speaker. Popular cultural objects given in a specific time and place unearth the symbolic value of objects in relation to their claim of universality.

In the April of 2020, it was seen that the Oxford English Dictionary has released special updates to accommodate new words born during the pandemic. Words like lockdown, social distancing, COVID-19, Coronavirus, and more are making lexicographers witness unique changes in words that dominate a global discourse. Semioticians and lexicographers alike are baffled at this sudden surge of new words into the communication mode of the general populace. As the spread of the virus has altered and affected the lives of billions of people- it has correspondingly ushered in a new vocabulary for the global population to encompass and embrace. These terms are from medicine and epidemiology and these words have fabricated acronyms to describe the experience of imposed isolation and distancing. Roland Barthes has revealed in his treatise *The Rustle of Language* that great social change will bring about a great linguistic transformation and we who live in these apocalyptic times are given the unique attribute to witness it. We see the documentation of the impact of this pandemic on the English Language.

The Covid 19 has in its wake conjured a wealth of new linguistic coinages which are taking the status of myths. In his book *Mythologies* (1957) Roland Barthes, the French theorist and philosopher undertakes a semiotic commentary on how popular cultural objects and terms are invested with cultural power and become 'myths'. The study of myth as understood by Barthes can be defined as a method of inquiry into implicit signs present in the mental element of interaction with nature, within a community. And so, we have words that are popular in our cultural scenario taking center stage and becoming a myth.

Semiological analysis can be said to be a study of meanings that are present in our day-to-day systems of communication and signification. These significations are internalized outside our logo-centric rationality, it is outside our purview of the casual use of language. The power of such signification is that it shapes the aspects of our perception and changes the way we think and gives a new meaning to the words that we use to suggest this transformation.

This transformation of words and etymological evolution that is unfolding around us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a worldwide phenomenon. We need to grasp the relations between language and power. These transformations are initiated by what is powerful and trending in the world at this time. It is digital technology and the coronavirus. The digital culture is here to fill a very prominent place in our lives and artificial intelligence is the direction in which the world is moving in leaps and bounds. The Virus has wrought this change and made us participants in a digitally enthused world. Now, the term Artificial intelligence has gradually taken center stage and English is in the fore of it. The words Alexa and Google have become household names and suddenly we find ourselves giving commands and instructions in a car or home to an invisible companion called Alexa and she takes charge driving us around and we just blindly give in to these artificially constructed beings and use words to correlate and exist in this new hypertextual world. Here it is refreshing to realize that English is still a major language of communication in this world of hypertextuality and digitally enthused communication.

Being a lexicographer at a time like this and witnessing such evolutions and transformations of the English language is a most exciting prospect. New words are being conjured up dime to a dozen every day. The linguistic coinages comprise the words covidot, covidivorce, coronacoma, coronials, corona speck, and even coinages like coronavirus fat these and many more words evolve. According to Christine Ro in her BBC article (2018), we have created these new words as a coping mechanism to cope with the unpredictable times of a global pandemic. The turbulent times of this pandemic has led to the creation of a new language. Robert Lawson, a socio-linguist at Birmingham City University attributes to this evolution of new language to multiple factors. First of all, he states (2016) the hurtling pace at which the virus has spread, it's taking the centre stage in the media in a time of when social media contact has become a Global phenomenon, all these and more he states contributed to this new genesis of words in the English language.

In recent times Artificial Intelligence technology has made a colossal change in the field of education and Research. It has impacted the writing skills and has provided the chance for language learners to enhance their English Linguistic competence. It enables students to comprehend English better because of the infiltration of AI students get access to a wide variety of helpful apps that are built on AI technology. These newly founded technologies like chatbot, ChatGPT, Duolingo, English Able, and many others boost practical abilities like writing. It increases the student's language proficiency and

maximizes the impact of teaching English. We have to wait and see if it's a boon or bane for using these technological tools whether it enhances learning skills or merely duplicates it. The true essence of reading and learning and exploring and building the skills of a language is short-circuited by these AI tools that stand in and do the work that the cognitive abilities of a student or researcher should perform. It inhibits cognitive abilities and this is the greatest fear humankind has of being replaced by machines in the future.

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