



Paul Warren

Professor of linguistics at Victoria University of Wellington

Towards the year's end, dictionary publishers reveal their word of the year. Most of 2020's words will raise few eyebrows in surprise. For Collins, Merriam-Webster and Dictionary.com it was *pandemic*. Oxford University Press, however, ran a different Word of the Year campaign from usual. Acknowledging that 2020 has required rapid change and adaptation, in language as well as in other aspects of our lives, Oxford's lexicographers prepared a 38-page report called "Words of an Unprecedented Year".

Based on data from the Oxford English Corpus (a collection of texts including novels, newspapers, blogs and social media), they selected the most frequently used words and phrases. These escort us through 2020, reminding us of pre-Covid *bushfires* and highlighting momentous social and political experiences of the year with *conspiracy theory*, *cancel culture*, and *Black Lives Matter*.

Half of the 16 words or phrases relate to the pandemic (though, interestingly, these do not include the word *pandemic* itself), including *mail-in* and *superspreader*, both of which also relate to US politics and events around the presidential election.



The word *bubble* now means something different from what it did only a year ago. GETTY IMAGES

what they might mean now: *bubble*, *flatten the curve*, *lockdown*, *furlough*, *frontline*.

A further form of change is the creation of new words and phrases that become commonplace, such as *managed isolation* and *isolation voucher*, *you're on mute* and *unmute yourself*. One of my favourite types of linguistic creativity is blending, where two words or phrases are squished together to form a new one.

Consider examples such as *covidiot*, *coronials* (a blend of *coronavirus* and *millennials* to denote babies born during Covid) and *anthropause* (from *anthropology* and *pause*, referring to the slowing down in travel and other forms of human activity during 2020). Or *Blursday*, for when your remote working means you no longer know what day it is, and *workcation*, when work and vacation time become less easy to keep apart. An interesting case is *mask-shaming* (presumably by analogy with *body-shaming*), because it has been attested with opposite meanings, with a shift as the pandemic spread – shaming someone for wearing or for not wearing a mask.

Closer to home, the Australian National Dictionary Centre picked *iso* as their word of the year, an abbreviated form of *isolation*, used in phrases such as *in iso*, *iso baking*, *iso cut* (for home haircuts carried out during lockdown). Now, let me just squirt some *hand-sanitiser* and brew another *iso latte*.

Paul Warren teaches and researches in the psychology of language, phonetics and New Zealand English, and is the author of Uptalk (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Year of the covidiot

Language Matters

Recently ascending in the popularity stakes is *moonshot* (the UK Government's mass Covid testing programme).

Statistics on language use reflect patterns of societal adaptations and also of how these differ from group to group, or country to country. They provide a useful window on what occupies us. So we see that, as the year progressed, the label *Covid-19* was replaced by *coronavirus*, and more recently by *Covid* (without the 19).

The Oxford report points out that the most popular words that followed the word *remote* in 2019 were *village*, *island*,

control, *location* and *monitoring*. While *monitoring* remains on the list for 2020, the others have been replaced by *learning*, *working*, *workforce*, and *instruction*. In 2019, *zoom* typically co-occurred with words relating to photography. In 2020, the list of *zoom*-related words includes *via*, *meetings* and *conferencing*.

These lists provide plenty of fascinating material for those interested in language. Many of the examples listed above involve changes in the frequency with which words or word combinations are used. Another form of linguistic innovation is the repurposing of existing words – think of what, if anything, the following meant to you a year ago, and

The Philadelphia Inquirer Data issues raise transparency doubts

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

Pennsylvania's Department of Corrections is apparently doing such an effective job in its coronavirus response that it's bringing people back to life. On December 21, its Covid-19 dashboard showed the number of people incarcerated who died of Covid in Pennsylvania's state prisons was 65. The next day, that number went down to 58.

But it wasn't a Christmas miracle. It was just the latest and most egregious example of data errors and lack of transparency by the DOC on the coronavirus behind prison walls. On the same date that seven fatalities disappeared from the data, so did nearly 25,000 tests, 11,000 of which were

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positive. According to a DOC spokesperson, a "system glitch" on the 21st led to an erroneous report of cases and deaths. Other tests were removed because in cases when there was both a positive rapid test and lab test for the same person, for example, the dashboard reported two positives.

Tracking trends is key. From mid-March to mid-October, 11 people incarcerated died of Covid in prison. In the months since, another 51 died. If the DOC can't be accurate and transparent about its data, it sheds doubt on its ability to be transparent about how it's handling Covid-19. Behind every number is a life, and far too many are being lost in prison during this pandemic.