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Corona-Ninjas and Corona-Hyenas

COVID-19 Rhetoric in Poland

Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life…

Mikhail Bakhtin (1981:293)

Different words and phrases have been invented during the coronavirus pandemic to impose order on the reality that is novel, chaotic, and unpredictable. The vocabulary people deploy in different local, national, and transnational contexts has changed every time the pandemic entered a new phase. In Poland at first, the quarantine was framed like a holiday by many people, but as various kinds of vulnerabilities – structural, material, psychological, and social – have become more apparent, the language also changed as the calling for social solidarity became more frequent. It is worthwhile reflecting on the language used to describe the disease, tame the unknown, control fears, distance oneself from the catastrophe, and normalize the altered world. Recording the COVID-19 rhetoric as it appears in different contexts is a good starting point for a comparative work, as well as it enables us to register the "emic" vocabulary reflecting the passage of covid-time and the accompanying emotions.

Internationally, the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses called the virus "severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)" on 11 February 2020. This name was chosen because the virus is genetically related to the coronavirus responsible for the 2003 SARS outbreak. The name of the disease associated with this virus is COVID-19, an abbreviation for **Co**rona + **Vi**rus + **D**isease + 20**19**. Rishi Desai, a pediatric infectious disease physician, who spent two years at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as Epidemic Intelligence

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Service Officer explained how the pathogen got its name. Under a microscope, a spiky crown (Latin: corona) is visible on its surface. The "crown" is easy to visualize and can be clearly represented as an image or even a meme. People often use a crown emoji while texting or posting messages on social media. The crown icon lightens the content of the messages and aims to reduce anxieties.

In Polish itself, unsurprisingly, the name for the disease is "**Koronawirus,**" a portmanteau that links two words: *korona* (English crown) and *wirus* (English virus). As medical anthropologists we have become intrigued by the ways this portmanteau has been modified by people over time in order to communicate different reactions to and experiences of the pandemic. What other words has *korona* been linked with?

"Corona-Holiday"

In March 2020, Anna wrote the following in her field journal:

In Poland, schools closed on 11 March and homeschooling began. Things were very chaotic at first as schools were scrambling to figure how to implement distance learning. In order to keep my two children, ages 7 and 9, occupied, I searched for interesting and fun educational materials online. Very fast, online educational sites became ubiquitous and I found myself in an economy of abundance, roaming through numerous resources and having difficulty making choices. With a gentle smile on my face, I created a folder, which I somewhat automatically, titled ***koronaferie*** *(corona-break), a phrase indicating a break from school caused by the virus. As time went on, the school became better organized and set up a google drive where assignments were posted. My children's folders on the google drive were labeled with their first and last names. We deleted the koronaferie folder from our home computer but left the bookmark folder intact to keep track of films I wanted to see or books I meant to read during the koronaferie.*

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Children's playtime during koronaferie. Copyright: The Children's Pandemic Archive at the University of Warsaw, reproduced with permission.

In late March, I noticed that when I clicked on the bookmarked tab, I felt eerie. The initial joy of having more time as a family and slowing down has been replaced by uncertainty and anxiety. My brother lost his post, his partner couldn't afford to pay for her medical examinations necessary to start a new job. Social inequalities have become very palpable. I decided to rename my bookmarked films and books. The electronic traces of the initial holiday mood proved short-lived. I felt I had moved to another phase of the pandemic.

Anna's experiences have been borne out by social science research. In an article for the Polish weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Grzegorz Całek points out that words such

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as **koronaferie**, **koronaurlop** or **koronawakacje**, used to describe time away from school and work, were deployed during the initial phase of the pandemic, when social isolation signified a holiday, a time of slowing down, focusing on things we had no time for during our busy lives. There were not many deaths yet and the restrictions bearable. However, the author foresaw that the holiday mood would leave us relatively soon. New, tougher restrictions were on their way.

Anna continued in her journal:

I soon realized that the sense of security has many gradients. It depends on our socio-economic standing and physical and mental health before the outbreak. Therefore, the holiday feeling differed from person to person and did not depend exclusively on the imposed restrictions of movement.

The language used during the pandemic changed depending on people's social and moral positions.

„Corona-ninjas" vs. „Corona-hyenas"

On 21 March 2020, a Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* published an article entitled *Epidemia koronawirusa. Po mieście jeździ czarny ford i zbiera maseczki dla szpitala. Przyjedzie nawet po pięć sztuk* ("The Coronavirus epidemic. A black ford is riding through the town collecting face masks for the hospitals. It will come to fetch 5 pieces"). The article describes a very popular local initiative involving sewing face masks for hospitals in Cracow. Anna Ledwoń-Blacha coordinates the initiative she aptly named **Corona Ninjas.** The initiative's website has a cute logo. The name and the logo bring about an association with ninjas, covert agents and mercenaries in feudal Japan and cartoon characters in contemporary popular culture. Perhaps the name, light and playful, stems from the fact that ninjas wear masks. The name emphasizes virtues such as courage and wisdom. It gives hope and conveys the spirit

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of a collective fight for the right cause.

Logo of Corona Ninjas. Copyright: Corona Ninjas, reproduced with permission.

Anna Ledwoń-Blacha stated “We are looking for equipment and necessary resources from producers and distributors who are not corona-hyenas... we will connect hospitals with honest firms.” She used another portmanteau – **korona-hiena (corona-hyena)** – to juxtapose corona-ninjas with hyenas, which in many languages and cultures connote ruthless men preying on the misfortunes of others. The animals are frightening, worthy of contempt. Corona-ninjas and corona-hyenas are on the opposite end of the morality spectrum in the time of the pandemic. Both terms highlight the distinction between good and evil during unstable times. Social and mass media often use morally loaded language when commenting on (ir)responsible behaviors and actions of individuals and institutions during

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pandemics.

Corona-panic, corona-mania and non-corona-news

Similarly to other countries, Polish mass media have been extensively covering the COVID-19 pandemic. Google search for *koronawirus* brought 130 million hits on 28 April 2020. Special sections devoted to the pandemic were created in on-line versions of the Polish dailies and weeklies like Gazeta Wyborcza, Rzeczpospolita, and Polityka.

Izabella who is currently in Washington, D.C. as a Fulbright scholar follows Polish and US news as well as developments in Germany and Spain, where members of her extended family reside. She was also trying to stay abreast of different approaches to the pandemic in the United Kingdom, Sweden, and China. She searched the Internet for advice about social distancing, safe shopping, do it yourself face masks, and ways to deal with stress, anxiety, and boredom. Starting and ending her days with news about the pandemic, she wondered if she was experiencing **koronamania** or **koronapanika**. It soon turned out that these terms and concepts were already circulating.

A recent study by the Political Cognition Lab at the Polish Academy of Science from showed that the majority of Poles (59%) spend 1-2 hours daily following corona-news. Twenty-six percent spend three to five hours a day following COVID-19 coverage daily and seven percent spend up to eight hours a day following COVID-19 news. Two percent ignore the news, while six percent spend more than nine hours in front of their computer, TV or with a smartphone. Psychologists advise to limit reading corona-news, as they tend to increase anxiety and stress. According to mental health experts, the intensity of corona-news reading feeds panic.

Adela Nasuto, a psychotherapist, used the term corona-panic in an interview

published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* under the title "Coronavirus. Experience emotions and let them out." She advised how to manage corona-panic with physical exercise, meditation, prayer, acceptance of the current situation, mindfulness, and sensitivity. She also blamed the media for intensifying anxiety.

Konrad Niewolski, a Polish filmmaker, used the word **koronapanika** commenting on the current situation on his Facebook page. He made a reference to the panic caused by the 1938 radio adaptation of H.G. Well's novel *The War of the Worlds*. Interestingly, *The Hill*, an American news website based in Washington, D.C., cited *The War of the Worlds* when offering "6 ways to combat corona mania." He wrote:

"*In the Herbert George Wells classic novel and its science fiction movie versions, The War of the Worlds, those invading aliens who are ravaging planet Earth are finally done in not by guns, tanks, the combined armies of all the countries of the world, or even nuclear bombs. Instead the savior was a microscopic infectious virus for which the mighty aliens have no immunity. One of the smallest organisms in the world saved us.*"

We can notice how the virus plays as an unequivocal character in the narratives that people build in the current situation – once it shows up as a savior, another time as an invader.

It is obvious that people have different ways to distance themselves from corona-mania and corona-panic and so does the press. On 24 March 2020, *Gazeta Wyborcza* published an editorial stating: "During the plague, the Earth is still revolving, not just around the epidemic. At Gazeta.pl we try to show the news which disappeared under the avalanche of pandemic-related news, since in the background a lot is still happening. That is why we created a section **ONLY non-corona-NEWS**. On 24 March 2020, the readers could find stories about the Kościuszko Uprising that started on 24 March 1794. This story was followed by the news about the death of Albert Uderzo, the illustrator, together with René Goscinny, of Astérix and Obelix comics. Then came the news on the anniversary of Radio Maryja, a conservative Catholic radio

station, being protected by the army and police, as well as information about the comet Atlas approaching the Earth. The selection of "**niekoronaNEWSY**" was very diverse: from trivial items to politically important and tragic information. We read it as an effort to show that some parts of our world are still intact and we should not lose sight of it.

Perspectives: The expanding corona-dictionary

The above list is by no means exhaustive. As we write this blog, new words appear daily in mass media, in cyberspace, and in everyday interactions. Corona-related terms are used in numerous hashtags to reach wider audiences even when the content has nothing to do with the virus, to mobilize people to help others, to share ideas (e.g. #coronavirus, #coronaczas, #coronapolska, #coronapomoc). Many expressions convey a critical commentary on the reality. **Koronadomino** is used to invoke the speed with which the virus moves in hospital setting. **Koronatunel** marks the passage of time from the initial holiday-like phase to the collective realization of the magnitude and spread of the outbreak. Corona-language helps people domesticate the new, unpredictable reality, interpret it, build the new vocabulary describing unprecedented individual and collective experience. The emic (i.e. the insider's) vocabulary will also help researchers describe, categorize, and compare the culturally diverse social life evolving during the pandemic.

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#Witnessing Corona

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