

Coronavirus rhyming slang

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Some jottings on the words spawned by the pandemic

Most people are remarkably calm. I was in my local last night and the mood was, “if I get it, I get it”. The most heated thing said about covid19 was whether to call it the Miley or the Billy Ray! (Twitter user from Manchester, March 14, 2020)

Introduction

This paper discusses the emergence of new rhyming slang (henceforth RS) for the concepts surrounding the coronavirus pandemic. Given that RS is not currently at its most productive (see Thorne, 2014: x–xi; Green, 2017: 1; Burrige & Manns, 2022), it may be surprising to learn that a new set of words has been created to refer to a new reality of pandemic life. In this respect, it is worth noting that RS serves one of the main purposes of slang in general (see Partridge, 1970: 6) which is to function as a coping strategy for the primal fears of disease and death. The coping function of slang (see Benczes & Burrige, 2019: 75–76; Burrige & Manns, 2020) is indeed one of the major reasons for the proliferation of light-hearted slangisms over the past couple of years (Thorne, 2020), including a host of blends (Roig–Marín, 2021a, 2021b)– upwards of 40 per cent of all new coronavirus-related words (Moldovan, 2020)– and a whole glut of synonyms for COVID–19, the latter a subject I have dealt with elsewhere (Lillo, 2020).

Purpose and method

In this paper, I provide a snapshot of the coronavirus-related RS that was forged in the period from late January 2020, some six weeks before the virus outbreak officially became a pandemic, to the time of writing in late February 2022. Even though these words may prove ephemeral, they are worth recording both for their value in

capturing a tiny corner of today’s lexical zeitgeist and as part of the ongoing story of RS.

The study relies on data extracted from Twitter, the most widely used microblog site and one of the most popular social media platforms in the world for news, debate, gossip and banter (see Murthy, 2018). Despite Twitter’s massive size¹, the evidence obtained for this study is limited to 288 tweets posted between January 2020 and February 2022. Coronavirus RS is a quantitatively insignificant part of slang, a speck of dust in the universe of language.

The method of collecting citations was exploratory and involved following different approaches to locate examples of RS. I often searched in places where RS is most likely to be found, such as tweets and threads from people who are fond of using slang and wordplay, such as Irvine Welsh (@IrvineWelsh) and David Astle (@dontattempt). Sometimes, in order to identify new rhymes,



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I looked for keywords such as (*rhyming*) *slang* and *corona* or *booster* and their collocations. I also searched for word sequences such as (*get a*) *dose of* and *first *jab*. The method worked well enough, but was far from perfect. For example, tweets containing words that appeared without context have been excluded from the study. One such example is *Desdemona*, a supposed synonym for *corona* which I have only found in lists.

Although we know that anyone can make up their own RS (see Ayto, 2002: xi–xii), as noted by Wheeler and Broadhead (1985) and more recently Evans (2018), I have thought it appropriate to exclude from this snapshot any individual attempts at lexical tomfoolery, instead examining only those lexemes which occur in at least three tweets by three different users. This way we can be nearly certain that these items have gained at least some slight traction and are not mere nonce formations.² Each of the words and variants mentioned below will be illustrated with just one quotation, followed by the date of the posting and a geographical label that identifies the dialect of the author. The quotations have been selected on the basis of their illustrative value and do not necessarily represent the earliest appearance of the words on Twitter. The geographical label is based on the linguistic features of the text, the permanent location information in the author's profile and the content of his or her feed.

On the nature of coronavirus RS

RS tends to be associated with Cockney and popular London English, but it is also relatively common in other urban dialects in Britain, Ireland and Australia (see Seal, 2009; Lillo, 2010, 2012, 2013). We all know how it works. Take any word in the English language, *face*, for instance, and replace it with another word or, more commonly, a multiword expression with which it rhymes, like the phrase *boat race*. Although there is many an RS term that is invariably used in its full form, many can also be abbreviated and more than a few are never used in full. A person's face can be their *boat race* or *boat*. Their ears are their *King Lear*s, not their **kings*.³

The pandemic RS lexicon works on the same principle as other thematic subsets of this slang. A *face mask*, for example, can be referred to as a *coffee and flask*. I have found no evidence that this phrase can be shortened. Perhaps it never will be, the abbreviation of RS terms being unrelated to frequency of use or familiarity (Green, 2014: 210).

- (1) Can't go into a shop now without your **coffee and flask** on. (July 22, 2020; UK)

Unlike most RS, which is more often than not a product of the spoken medium, coronavirus RS has been mainly coined and popularised in online written form. But this is true of the bulk of the informal lexis created during these times, when lockdowns and social distancing spurred us to turn to social media more than ever. This RS is well documented on Twitter and its users, hardly a sociolectally homogeneous bunch, mostly hail from Britain, Ireland and Australia. This may suggest at least some of these terms are likely to lead an offline life too (see Eisenstein et al., 2014).

Down with the Miley: The bug in RS

It is a truism to say that all RS expressions are motivated by rhyme. If *postman's knock* (Puxley, 1992) is used as an equivalent of *clock*, it is simply because of the rhyme the two words share. The same can be said of *Kerry Katona*, rhyming with *corona*, after the one-time Atomic Kitten singer, and *Virgil and Ovid* (or *Virgil* for short), rhyming perfectly or imperfectly with *Covid*.⁴

- (2) I want to see Garcia get chinned more than I want a vaccine for the **Kerry Katona**. (July 1, 2020; UK)
- (3) A cockney salute to @michaelrosenyes for his superb captain cook (have a butcher's!) about nearly being brown bread from the old **Virgil and Ovid**. (August 28, 2021; UK)
- (4) A touch o' the **Virgil**? (Virgil and Ovid, COVID!) (August 21, 2021; AUSTRALIA)

But some RS terms are less arbitrary, and thus easier to decode, than others. In the wider realm of traditional RS, the link between *dickory dock* and the sense 'a clock' (Gray, 1934: 34) was triggered by the opening lines of the nursery rhyme we all know so well – hence also the cabbies' *hickory* for a taximeter (Munro, 2005: 187). Sometimes, indeed, a word's rhyming associations are not just a matter of linguistic happenstance; they may be based in part on shared knowledge. As early as March 2020, many people started to use *Come on Eileen* as RS for COVID-19. To understand why they chose that particular phrase, rather than, say, *Dancing Queen* or *Torvill and Dean*, we need to know that in those early, heady days of the pandemic it was near enough impossible for anyone living in the Anglosphere to escape the catchy strains of any of the numerous coronavirus-themed parodies sung to the tune of

the 1982 hit by Dexys Midnight Runners: ‘Covid–19, / You’re scary and mean. / Gotta self-quarantine, / Cancel everything’. The same is true of *My Sharona* and *My Sharona virus*⁵, which soon caught on thanks to the popularity of parodies of the Knack’s ‘My Sharona’ (1979): ‘Ooh, my little deadly one, / My deadly one, / Symptoms don’t show up for some time, Corona. / [. . .] m m m My Corona’.

- (5) While you’re in hospital recovering from **come on eileen**, I’m going to break in and steal your toilet paper stash. (March 7, 2020; UK)
- (6) No one else better get the **my sharona** in the next 3 weeks so we can go back to normal. (March 23, 2020; UK)
- (7) I like to call it the “**my sharona**” virus. (January 25, 2020; IRELAND)

Kerry Katona, Virgil and Ovid, My Sharona and *Come on Eileen* have something else in common besides their reference to the disease: they are brand-new additions to the RS lexicon. There are other words whose novelty lies not in their form, but in the meaning that is attached to them. And when we look at them more closely, we can see that even their meaning is not that new after all. Two prime specimens are *Miley Cyrus* and *Billy Ray Cyrus*, courtesy of the famous American singers. It may be argued that the use of these names to refer to the coronavirus disease was almost inevitable, for both had earlier been deployed to refer to a virus of one kind or another (see Lillo & Victor, 2017). Unlike all the other RS terms for the bug, these two often occur in elliptical form (*Miley, Billy Ray*), sometimes with an *-s* tacked on the end (*Mileys, Billy Rays*) on the analogy of other names of diseases and illnesses.

- (8) So Arteta has got a dose of the old **Miley Cyrus**. Probably time the authorities called a halt to all football really. Health comes first. (March 13, 2020; UK)
- (9) It was really peaceful while she had the **Billy Ray Cyrus**. (April 28, 2020; IRELAND)
- (10) I work in a care home, have asthma and my age, are all factors contributing to a good chance I may get the **miley**. (March 13, 2020; UK)
- (11) Apparently getting your blood:alcohol concentration to 60% will kill the **Billy Ray**. (March 12, 2020; UK)
- (12) Think I’ve got a dose of the **Mileys** after delivering this today. (March 6, 2020; UK)

- (13) That cough doesn’t sound good Gus. Haven’t got a dose of the **Billy Ray’s**, have you? (March 20, 2020; AUSTRALIA)

It seems likely that the new life of *Miley Cyrus*, by far the better known of the two, started as a joke. Its first recorded use was in a March 4, 2020 spoof article on *NewsBiscuit* with the title ‘Cockneys announce “Miley Cyrus” as official rhyming slang for coronavirus’.

- (14) After handing out market flyers for a 50% off sale of ‘Cor Blimey’ trousers and dustman’s hats, it was solemnly announced that the term “**Miley Cyrus**” would be used for Coronavirus [. . .] so it will be something like, “Oi, love, wash yer brass bands, we don’t want a dose of that **Miley**”. (*NewsBiscuit*, 2020)

Jocularly is in the DNA of RS. Because of that, the effect this or any other tongue-in-cheek coinage may have on the growth of our coronavirus vocabulary should not be underestimated. One cannot help but wonder, for example, if *Scott Styris* is used to refer to the disease because the name of the former Kiwi cricketer rhymes with *coronavirus* or rather because, besides the rhyme, there is a covert pun that links that name to Miley and her country singer dad. During his playing days Styris was known as ‘Styris the Virus’ or the ‘Virus’ (nothing unpredictable there). In some quarters at least, he also went by the nicknames ‘Miley’ and ‘Billy Ray’.⁶

- (15) He won’t admit he caught the **Scott Styris**. (February 5, 2021; UK)

Getting Jeremy Paxxed: The vaccines and vaccination in RS

The words mentioned above reveal a major feature of slang in general, namely the proliferation of synonyms for certain key referents and concepts, a phenomenon known as ‘overlexicalisation’ (Halliday, 1976: 571) or ‘hypersynonymy’ (Wescott, 1977: 117). They are at the same time testimony to the abundance or rather overabundance of names in modern RS (Ashley, 1977; Ayto, 2002: xi). The coinages relating to the COVID–19 vaccines and vaccination are in no way different. The Pfizer vaccine, now marketed as Comirnaty (itself a blend of *COVID–19 + mRNA + immunity*, with a play on *community*) is variously known as *Appletiser*, *apple* (after a branded fruit juice), *dear Liza* (from the children’s song ‘There’s a Hole in My Bucket’), *can of Tizer* and *Fizzy Tizer* (based on a popular soft drink).

- (16) Second **Appletiser** was really easy. (June 10, 2021; UK)
- (17) Had both **apples** done myself. (May 15, 2021; UK)
- (18) Wife had the old **dear Liza**, no side effects at all so far. (February 26, 2021; IRELAND)
- (19) I got the Pfizer, the ol' **can of Tizer**[.] (December 3, 2021; UK)
- (20) Overheard at school... "What jab did they have?" "Asda-Vinegar or **Fizzy-Tizer**?" (May 10, 2021; UK)

Alternatively, it can be called *Michelle Pfizer* or *Michelle Pfeiffer* (after the American actress), two simple puns which might look like RS when reduced to *Michelle*.

- (21) Was getting my second jab of **Michelle Pfizer** today, on the Eve before Hallow's Eve, a bad idea? (October 29, 2021; SOUTH AFRICA)
- (22) Finally got a dose of **Michelle Pfeiffer**, rather anti-climatic!! (August 6, 2021; AUSTRALIA)
- (23) I got a dose of **Michelle** yesterday! (June 3, 2021; UK)

Moderna, now branded Spikevax, is known as *Anthea Turner*, *Anthea* (based on a well-known British TV presenter) or *Tina Turner* (after the American-born Swiss singer).

- (24) I'm off to get my second dose of **Anthea Turner**. (June 30, 2021; UK)
- (25) He's had an '**Anthea**' for those keeping score! (May 18, 2021; UK)
- (26) All boosted up with the old **Tina Turner**. (December 17, 2021; UK)

As we know, Pfizer and Moderna use messenger RNA (mRNA), a technology that teaches our cells how to produce the coronavirus's spike protein, while the AstraZeneca vaccine uses a harmless virus to deliver genetic material into our cells. The difference is not only technical, though. All the rhymes for *AstraZeneca* are either slightly imperfect, like *Gary Lineker*, sometimes shortened to *Gary* (from the former England footballer-turned-pundit), or groaningly forced, like *Asda Vinegar* and *Extra Vinegar*.

- (27) I got my second **Gary Lineker** today. (May 15, 2021; UK)
- (28) I see like me you have the "**Gary**". (June 2, 2021; UK)
- (29) I had the **Asda Vinegar** jab 4 weeks ago, no issues at all and like your partner, never felt it. (March 6, 2021; UK)

- (30) Getting the **Extra Vinegar** jab tomorrow. (July 22, 2021; AUSTRALIA)

A booster shot is a *Bernd Schuster* (after the famous German football player and manager), a *Bertie Wooster* or *Bertie* (after the fictional idle toff created by P.G. Wodehouse), a *Jeeves and Wooster* (from the 1990s British TV series *Jeeves and Wooster*) or a *Rhian Brewster* (after a British footballer).

- (31) [J]ust got the ol' **bernd schuster** (Covid booster). (December 16, 2021; UK)
- (32) Just booked my **Bertie Wooster** jab for a week tomorrow - huzzah! (November 18, 2021; UK)
- (33) You been for your **Bertie** yet, Davie. (November 30, 2021; UK)
- (34) I got the booster, the ol' **Jeeves and Wooster** [.] (December 3, 2021; UK)
- (35) Just had my **Rhian Brewster** jab. (January 7, 2022; UK)

If you got *Brazilian waxxed* or *Jeremy Paxed* (from *Jeremy Pax*, the popular name of British broadcaster Jeremy Paxman), that means you got waxxed.

- (36) Governor Newsom says Masks are now a MUST, as the Majority of Omicron Variant cases are ALL Double **Brazilian WAXXED**. It's official, it's a Pandemic of the Brazilian WAXXED. (December 17, 2021; AUSTRALIA)
- (37) – Had my second AZ vaccination on Wednesday and I've never felt so unwell. – I hope u feel better soon!! – [Animated GIF of a toddler lying face down and being dragged by a merry-go-round] – But my gal **JEREMY PAXXED** (rhyming slang for waxxed). (May 28, 2021; UK)

If you want to get a little extra protection, you can get *Bertie Woostered*, that is, boosted.

- (38) Getting **Bertie Woostered** is the single most idiotic thing you can do. (December 21, 2021; UK)

And if you are eligible to get vaccinated, but refuse, you may be branded a *Basement Jaxxer* (from Basement Jaxx, the British dance duo), that is, an anti-vaxxer.

- (39) I really don't get the thinking of **basement jaxxers**. (February 4, 2021; UK)

Some final remarks

Some diseases have traditionally been a fecund breeding ground for RS. These include AIDS (*lovely maids, ace of spades, hand grenades*, etc.), sexually transmitted diseases (*handicap*, via the rhyme on *the clap, jack in the box*, rhyming with *the pox*, etc.) and cancer (*tap dancer, Mario Lanza*, etc.), among others. Interestingly enough, no epidemic or previous pandemic has had any significant effect on RS. The unprecedented impact the current crisis has had on this slang is both a result of the tsunami of new words that the pandemic itself has brought and a reflection of the essential role of linguistic creativity as a coping mechanism in times of hardship and limited in-person interaction.

It is likely that many, if not most, of the words I have examined here were born in cyberspace, but that, of course, does not make them any less authentic. The internet has brought about a genuine paradigm shift in the way we communicate, and it would be astonishing if this were not reflected in the way new RS words are minted and gain currency. As I am writing these final paragraphs, chances are some of these coinages have started to spread in the offline world too. *Miley* and *Billy Ray* already did at the outset of this calamity. Little did we know then that two years later the words, like the virus, would linger.

Notes

- 1 As of October 2021, Britain, by far the most fertile hotbed of RS, had a staggering 19.05 million Twitter users, according to figures from Statista (2021).
- 2 I say ‘nearly certain’ because a nonce word can be created independently by more than one individual. This probably happens more often than we can imagine.
- 3 Here are some examples: ‘Must admit that CFCI Geezer put a smile on me boat race sataday’ (*Daily Star*, July 19, 2021, 37); ‘He’s got a double-cute smile on his boat’ (Connolly, 2001: 199); ‘Rattling, shunting engines, thundering in your King Lear’s’ (Brody, 2019).
- 4 The pronunciation of *Covid* with the same vowel as in *cod* is uncommon, but not rare (see Lindsey, 2020). For those speakers who pronounce it that way, *Virgil* and *Ovid* rhymes perfectly with *Covid*.
- 5 In fact, *My Sharona virus* started doing the rounds on Twitter as far back as late January 2020, thus slightly predating the World Health Organization’s official declaration of the pandemic.
- 6 ‘He has some unusual nicknames like the PigDog, Miley, Billy Ray, etc.’ (Chowdhury, 2015).

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