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## COVID-19, the beer flu; or, the disease of many names

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**Abstract:** Since the coronavirus outbreak began to spread worldwide in the early months of 2020, English speakers have been coming up with new names for the disease at a rate of knots. The myriad unofficial synonyms for *COVID-19* that we currently have at our disposal provide an extreme example of overlexicalisation, and it is not so much the number that is impressive as the sheer speed at which they have been coined. This study is based on a personally compiled corpus of tweets covering the period from late January to late May 2020 and aims to work out what mechanisms underpin the creation and use of some two hundred and seventy synonyms, paying particular attention to the role of slang, wordplay, verbal humour, bigotry and xenophobia. The author identifies and discusses a set of categories that help to better understand the attitudes behind these words, some of which bespeak a desire to confront the grim reality of disease, while others – the majority, in fact – seek to denigrate and stigmatise its “ideal victims” (the baby boomers) or its “evil perpetrators” (the Chinese). In a different context, this study might be deemed just a celebration of the creative levity and wit of English speakers when faced with adversity. In these dark times, it is also a sad testimony to how some of our primitive fears have come to be reflected in our pandemic lexicon.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, disease names, English word-formation, overlexicalisation, xenophobia

Guys these names i'm seeing for this disease. The Rona, Coronareezy, The Corone, Corones, The coros. (Twitter user from Johannesburg, 5th March 2020)

Boomer Remover. Senior Deleter. Geriatric Dispatcher. These names: the only things thriving in this economy. (Twitter user from Texas, 15th March 2020)

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# 1 Introduction

With the outbreak of the coronavirus in late December 2019 and the ensuing pandemic in early March 2020, a whole host of scientific terms and formal and semantic innovations have become part of our everyday conversations.<sup>1</sup> These include not only existing specialist terms from the fields of medicine, epidemiology and sociology, such as *PCR test*, *community spread* and *flatten the curve*, but also new words and phrases like *covidiot*, an epithet for someone who behaves with blatant disregard for the safety of others, *infit*, a clever coinage for the outfit we wear during lockdown (see Thorne 2020), and *squash the sombrero*, Boris Johnson's spur-of-the-moment riff on *flatten the curve*. Added to that, a flurry of informal synonyms for *COVID-19*, itself a reduced version of *coronavirus disease 2019*, have sprung up. All this comes as no surprise to the student of slang. In times of crisis, creating words is “a ‘sick’ (in the good sense) way of pulling through” (Burrige/Manns 2020), and slang, wordplay and verbal humour are the best coping mechanisms for the fear and anxiety we all feel, as has been demonstrated in the context of war, the crisis par excellence (see Dickson 2011; Doyle/Walker 2012; Dalzell 2014). Besides helping to take the edge off reality, ingenious lexical innovations also serve to build a sense of bonding in the midst of adversity.

From a linguistic viewpoint, the COVID-19 pandemic would be no different from any other crisis were it not for the fact that, at least during the lockdown period, much of our daily communication has taken place online, often via social media. Partly because of its dazzling speed, partly because of its anonymous or semi-anonymous nature, social media interaction fuels creativity and speeds up the birth of new words and phrases. Although the toxic effects of online disinhibition are not to be overlooked (see Lapidot-Lefler/Barak 2012; Rösner/Krämer 2016), there is no doubt that the anonymity of social networks is a boon to slang lexicologists and lexicographers. It enables people to communicate freely and openly, thus allowing the researcher to observe what they do when they feel they cannot be identified. One of the things they do more often than we think is to create new words and new meanings for old ones. And words reflect our concerns. In the global village we live in, where what we say on these media can reach half the world's population within seconds, our main concerns and topics of conversation tend to be the same almost everywhere. This somewhat inevitably

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<sup>1</sup> The outbreak was first reported on 31st December 2019 in Wuhan, a major city in central China. The World Health Organization declared it a global emergency on 30th January 2020 and a pandemic on 11th March 2020.

leads to the proliferation and accretion of synonyms and near-synonyms in those areas that are of particular interest to us, a phenomenon that is sometimes termed “overlexicalisation” (Halliday 1976:571; cf. Davie 2019:69–70).

The coronavirus is, as of this writing (28th June 2020), the hottest topic on social media and the Internet at large: with the world in the throes of the pandemic,<sup>2</sup> an English-only Google search today nets 17,290 million hits for *COVID-19* and 5,800 million for *coronavirus* (cf. OED team 2020). According to a report by social media management platform Sprinklr (Brandon 2020), exactly four months ago today, the latter was mentioned by 6.7 million people in just one day, the bulk of these mentions being on Twitter.

Coronavirus talk has taken over conversations on- and offline like a storm, thereby unleashing a veritable avalanche of slang monikers for the disease. As Paton (2020) has aptly put it, “it is a rare experience for lexicographers to observe an exponential rise in usage of a single word in a very short period of time, and for that word to come overwhelmingly to dominate global discourse, even to the exclusion of most other topics”. Likewise, I should add, it is a rare, so far unique experience for linguists in general and slang scholars in particular to observe such an extreme example of overlexicalisation occurring in a matter of weeks.

## 2 A note on purpose and methodology

In what follows, I will examine the lexical creativity triggered by the two standard terms for the coronavirus disease, *COVID-19* and *coronavirus*, the latter being used as a synonym of the former via a cause for effect metonymy. By narrowing down my analysis to this particular set of noun synonyms, I intend to gain insight into the relationship between the way we understand or imagine the disease and the words we use to name it. That most of these words will be short-lived is neither surprising nor relevant. They are noteworthy as examples of lexical creativity and as cultural artifacts that reflect our fears, prejudices and unquestioned assumptions.

Because my focus is on lexis, not discourse, I will exclude from this study any figurative words and expressions whose interpretation is context-bound and, therefore, can only be arrived at through co-reference. One such is *the invisible enemy*, a phrase latterly used by Donald Trump, as in this tweet from 10th April:

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<sup>2</sup> According to data compiled by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University (Coronavirus Resource Center, JHU 2020), there have now been over ten million confirmed cases around the world and the global death toll passes 500,300.

“The Invisible Enemy will soon be in full retreat!” (note the personifying capitals).<sup>3</sup> Besides being the title of a popular book on the history of viruses (Crawford 2000), *the invisible enemy* has been a pet phrase among political leaders around the world since the start of the pandemic (see Nerlich 2020; Spadaro 2020:317). However, the metaphor has been applied to so many different things, from noise (Striganov 1969) to carbon monoxide (Medeiros 1973), that its coronaviral reference should be regarded as rhetorical and accidental rather than lexical and essential.

My analysis draws exclusively on data collected manually from the micro-blogging platform Twitter (<twitter.com>) in the period from late January 2020, shortly before the World Health Organization declared the outbreak a global emergency on the 30th of that month, to late May 2020. Most of the citational evidence, it will be noticed, dates from March and April 2020. The choice of this data source is anything but arbitrary. As noted above, Twitter is one of those places where much of our conversation has taken place during the pandemic. According to company sources, as reported by the *Investor’s Business Daily* (Los Angeles) of 28th April 2020, Twitter’s daily active user base grew to 166 million in the first quarter of 2020; during that period, the platform gained 14 million daily active users, the largest growth in the company’s history. Therefore, coronavirus-related coinages, especially those used in non-standard, unedited English, are far more likely to occur there than elsewhere, including large, professionally constructed corpora such as the specialised Coronavirus Corpus (Davies 2020) and the Covid-19 Corpus (Sketch Engine team 2020).<sup>4</sup> The vast amount of real-time data available on Twitter not only comes from a substantial sample of English speakers from around the world, but also contains a high proportion of casual language, which is ideal for research on the creation of new words in informal lects (see Zimmer 2011). This is not to suggest that Twitterese, with its two hundred and eighty character-per-tweet limit, is a good proxy for spontaneous discourse.<sup>5</sup> As far as lexis is concerned, however, it is likely the closest we can get.

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3 Trump first used *invisible enemy* with reference to the coronavirus in a 16th March press conference: “No matter where you look, this is something – it’s an invisible enemy” (see Shafer 2020). The metaphor of “fighting” a disease as if it were an enemy that has to be subdued goes back a long way, a seminal work on the topic being Sontag (1978; see also Bleakley 2017:60–63).

4 The continually growing Coronavirus Corpus (about 404 million words at the time writing) consists of texts from online newspapers and magazines published in twenty English-speaking countries since January 2020; the Covid-19 Corpus (about 280 million words) comprises scholarly articles from the COVID-19 Open Research Dataset (CORD-19).

5 For one thing, that limit forces us to shorten words more than we normally would.

To support and enhance my account of this vocabulary, the main text in the following sections is buttressed by quotations showing the words in use. For reasons of space, each of the synonyms for *COVID-19* is substantiated with only one dated quotation, although that is but one of several or many – and not necessarily the earliest – that could be adduced from a database of 4,481 tweets.<sup>6</sup> Each of these synonyms has been recorded at least three times and used by at least three twitterers. While I am aware this cannot be the most reliable gauge of a word's currency (not even on a single website), it does help to sort the wheat from the chaff, as it were. The geographic labels accompanying the quotations are based on Twitter metadata (geolocation tags and account locations), supplemented by Twitter bios and follower structure, and are just meant to provide information about the location and dialect of the authors. Thus, the label *US* marks a quotation whose author is American or based in America; it does not mean, at least not necessarily, that the synonym in that quotation is confined to American usage.

Since a subsidiary aim of this article is to serve as a lexicographic inventory of synonyms, the quotations in each section are not arranged chronologically by posting date, but according to the alphabetical order of the relevant synonym, which is highlighted in bold for ease of reference. The complete word-list, containing well over two hundred synonyms listed in strict alpha order, is given in the Appendix.

### 3 Some humorously irreverent or disparaging synonyms

Coronaviruses are a large and diverse family of viruses that infect many animal species, including humans, and cause a number of illnesses ranging from the common cold to serious respiratory diseases such as MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome), SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) and COVID-19. They have a crown-like appearance when viewed under an electron microscope, as reflected in their name's derivation from the Latin *corona*, meaning 'crown, wreath'.

As we are only too aware at the moment, one of the linguistic outcomes of this pandemic is that, in its transition from specialist to mainstream usage, the word *coronavirus* has undergone two major semantic changes: it has narrowed its meaning to refer just to the "novel" strain known in scientific parlance as *SARS-CoV-2*, a

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<sup>6</sup> Additional citations are included only if they illustrate variant spellings.

shortening of *Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2* (see Wu et al. 2020),<sup>7</sup> and, as with its hypernym *virus*, it has come to denote metonymically the disease it causes. When used in this latter sense, *coronavirus* is often reduced to its first element, hence the synonymic equation *COVID-19* = *coronavirus* = *corona*.

How many have died of **corona** without being diagnosed with it? (29th January; us)

The term *COVID-19* itself, having been coined specifically to denote the disease, has not been subject to any change in meaning. However, probably because any combination of letters and numbers is too obscure or scientific-sounding to fit comfortably in everyday conversation, it is often cut down to *COVID*, commonly lowercased or with just an initial cap even in edited text.

What about Met Police looking into his flagrant breach of the law in going back to work after suspecting his wife of having **Covid**? (29th May; UK)

The reasons for forging alternative, non-scientific or jocular synonyms for the official name of an illness are many and sundry. Some of them reveal a desire to confront the grim reality of disease by acknowledging it with a smile. This is indeed what happens when we alter, adorn or embellish the base lexemes *COVID-19*, *coronavirus* or their shortened versions *covid* and *corona*. And we usually do this in four relatively well-defined ways: (i) by adding a suffix or suffix-like ending to *covid* or *corona*, (ii) by shortening *COVID-19*, *coronavirus*, *covid*, *corona* or *virus*, (iii) by adding a decorative suffix to a clipping of *covid*, *coronavirus* or *corona* and (iv) through playful alterations, rhymes and puns. Let us now look at each of these in turn.

(i) TERMS FORMED BY ADDING A SUFFIX OR SUFFIX-LIKE ENDING TO *COVID* OR *CORONA*.

Jocularly can be attained by the simple mechanism of tacking one of the suffixes *-y*, *-o*, *-sky*, *-s/-z* onto *covid*, or the suffix-like ending *-reezy* onto *corona*.

The first case of #coronavirus has been confirmed in SA. – the **coronareezy**. (5th March; SOUTH AFRICA) | [P]eople who were unemployed before the **coviddo** took hold[.] (26th March; AUSTRALIA) | [J]ust tell us who's got the **coviddy**. (13th March; UK) | I'm about to get the **covids** without ever going outside. (18th March; CANADA) | [T]hey might have **covidsky**. (16th March; AUSTRALIA) | Me acting surprised when you niggas who keep going out get the **Covidz**. (28th March; us)

(ii) TERMS FORMED BY SHORTENING *COVID-19*, *CORONAVIRUS*, *COVID*, *CORONA* OR *VIRUS*. Shortening is also an effective strategy, or rather set of strategies, for creating the

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<sup>7</sup> This is the name the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) gave it on 11th February 2020. Until then it was known as *2019-nCoV*, a shortening of *2019 novel coronavirus*.

special effects associated with slang, whether it be sheer economy and efficiency or euphemism. Besides clippings like *rona* (also spelled *roner* by speakers of rhotic dialects), *rus*, *vid*, *19* (pronounced and often spelled *one-nine*), *coro*, *co*, *cove*, *cov*, *vi*, *rona virus*, *rona rus* and *rona vi*, we also find coded forms like the (pseudo-)initialisms *C-19*, *CV-19*, *CV/see-vee*, *C-virus* and *the C*. As might be expected, some of these are also used in compounds. Examples are *the big 19* (pronounced and often spelled *the big nineteen*), *the big Coro*, *the big C*, *the C disease*, *the C-word* and *the C-word disease* (cf. § 4.2 below).

[S]he's finna feel really stupid when she gets the **Big C** from her husband if he gets it. (4th April; US) | My boss had the **big Coro**. (12th May; UK) | I hope its not the **big 19**. (19th March; UK) | Unless you're scared of catching the **big nineteen**. (28th May; US) | [I]t is mostly just old geezers getting the **C**. (19th April; US) | I realise that the **C disease** is all consuming[.] (25th March; UK) | And, to date, the death rate of **C-19** in the UK is 0%. (25th February; UK) | Things changed fast when they caught the "**Co**". (3rd April; JAMAICA) | Arteta's got the **Coro**. (12th March; UK) | Ex caught the **corone**. (24th March; US) | That's why Cummings got the **cov**. (31st March; UK) | I don't want anybody to catch the **Cove**. (19th March; US) | The best documentary about **CV** made by SBS Australia. (27th February; AUSTRALIA) | [F]olk are in fear of the spread of the **C-virus**. (12th February; UK) | I wish her great luck in tackling the **CV-19**. (18th February; US) | And as doggos can't get the **C word**, I remain hopeful that I can still have my Wednesday Smilo walkies. (18th March; UK) | What have you got coming up that you're afraid will be cancelled because of the **c word disease**? (12th March; UK) | It's not the **19**, but this headache is something you would not wanna have. (7th April; US) | Dies of the **one-nine**; Survived Wars and the 1918 Pandemic. (2nd April; US) | I swear I had **rona** last month. (20th March; US) | [T]hought I had the '**rona rus**' for a second. (23rd March; US) | So much truck sitting since the '**rona vi**' showed up. (2nd April; US) | Day three of work from home quarantine. No signs of '**rona virus**'. (13th March; US) | I'm like oh shit I have the **rone!!!** (7th March; AUSTRALIA) | [G]oing to the doctor to make a game plan for my asthma if I get the **roner**[.] (12th March; US) | All y'all hoes got the **rus**. (16th March; US) | Seattle has the most **see-vee** deaths. (10th March; US) | Isn't that 10-18% of the elderly that happen to get the **vi**? (17th March; US) | [H]e's caught the **vid** and they are treating him for it. (19th May; US)

Interestingly, the homophony of *rona* and the first name and surname *Rona* has given rise to a number of personified variations that seek to temper the severity of the condition in a playful way. In these personifications, the coronavirus (and, thus, the disease it causes) is represented as an evil female character or "whore" on the prowl (hence *whore/hoe/ho Rona*, a near-homophonic play on *corona*), ruining things for everyone.

Things have been tough lately all thanks to **Auntie Rona**. (13th May; GHANA) | Getting killed by **Aunt Rona** because my co-worker is an idiot is a little different. (21st April; US) | I'm so congested today. **Big Rona** is that you? (20th March; US) | – You're telling me Harvey Weinstein has been sentenced to 23 years in prison AND contracted Coronavirus in the SAME WEEK – **Doña Rona** ain't playin'. (22nd and 23rd March; US) | Im in here trying to make a sandwich with no bread smh! i hate this **Hoe Rona**. (21st April; US) | It's wack that

husbands can't be in the room with their pregnant wives because of this **ho rona**. (20th April; US) | I hope **Lady Rona** pays you a sweet sweet visit. (24th March; US) | Herd immunity was, at the time of its writing, the official policy of the UK concerning **La Rona!** (28th March; US) | It sounds as if **Mama Rona** is about to pound y'all hard[.] (22nd May; US) | **Mamma Rona** popped up and it suddenly got a lot easier to not shake women's hands. (17th April; US) | I'm up in the midlands where **miss Rona** can't touch me[.] (19th March; UK) | My man and i had sex 4 times today, **Mrs Rona** Needs to sashay away. (17th March; US) | **Queen Rona** is not working hard enough... (11th April; AUSTRALIA) | I would love to attend my first Lost Lands, but **Rona** has other plans. (29th April; US) | Brian called coronavirus "**Señora Rona**" and that was the highlight of my quarantine. (20th March; US) | It's bout time **sis Rona** leave us aloneeee. (22nd April; LIBERIA) | I'd maybe wait a few months – some of the original series are on hold cuz of **Sista Rona**. (21st April; IRELAND) | The government really needs to get **Sister Rona** under control – this lockdown ain't it. (30th April; UK) | My 21st can't be ruined by this **whore Rona**. (27th March; US)

(iii) TERMS FORMED BY ADDING A DECORATIVE SUFFIX TO A CLIPPING OF *COVID*, *CORONAVIRUS* OR *CORONA*. Some synonyms are what Bauer/Huddleston (2002:1636) call “embellished clippings”. They consist of a shortened form followed by a suffix (-ie/-y, -o or -s/-z) that has a purely rhythmic or decorative function. They include *coronie/corony* and *corones/coronez* from the clipping *corone*; *corry*, *coros*, *coroski* from *coro*; *ronas/ronaz* and *ronaski* from *rona*; *roni/rony* and *rones/ronez* from *rone*; *covie/covey* and *covo* from *cove*; and *covvie/covvy*, *covvo* and *covs/covz* from *cov*.

Hope he's not got the **corones**. (13th March; UK) | [T]hat shit was definitely the **Coronez** still. (11th March; UK) | I've read too many articles about people with the **coronie** going to salons and infecting people. (25th May; US) | Jacare tested positive for the **coronies**. (9th May; US) | Can't wait to contract **Coronie V** so I can feel something. (6th March; US) | Well, may neither of us get the **coronie virus!** (22nd March; US) | So he DID catch the **corony**. (24th March; US) | If **corony v** gets me, I hope I get a fittingly grim field hospital. (25th March; UK) | [T]hink i've got **corony vee**. (1st February; UK) | Why couldn't we have some **corony vi** in like June so we'd know. (9th March; US) | Can I please go on the pitch at the Riverside before I die of **Corony virus?** (16th March; UK) | – That lady refused to take Black Jesus to Northcliff now we have the corona virus – **The Coros**. (5th March; SOUTH AFRICA) | She has a cough [...] It's not **coroski** though. (22nd March; UK) | It came to fetch everyone with the **corry**. (29th April; SOUTH AFRICA) | I knew he might have **Corry V** but I don't think it's cruel, just a play on words. (30th March; UK) | So weird that south africa has the most confirmed **Corry Vee** cases in Africa[.] (4th May; SOUTH AFRICA) | We need more info & stats about the **corry virus** in the country. (15th March; SOUTH AFRICA) | I wear a mask to not catch the **covey**. (13th May; US) | Tubs has the **Covie**. (30th March; IRELAND) | These job cuts had nothing to do with **Covo**[.] (18th March; AUSTRALIA) | [I]ncoming residents on july 1st are going to have to be ready for the **covs!** (24th March; US) | If getting infected with **covvie** means I never get another period again I'll gladly have someone cough it in face. (13th March; US) | Dutton's got the **Covvo**. (13th March; AUSTRALIA) | This is worse than the **covvy**. (26th April; UK) | What if I had the **covz** last newyear and I didn't know[.] (15th May; CANADA) | [M]en liming like normal an saying they immune to the **ronas**. (29th March; TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO) | All it takes is one



person to have the **ronaski** and its quiet. (27th May; US) | [I]s a stuffy nose a symptom of the **ronaz**? (10th April; CANADA) | You sure you don't have the **rones**? (17th April; US) | [T]he type to get the **ronez** and look you dead in the eye and say he doesn't have it. (14th March; CANADA) | You can get the **roni** from hospital. (24th March; UK) | I have the **roni virus** (20th March; US) | I better start my memoirs before the **rony** gets me. (20th March; UK) | Was supposed to be coming out this month but this **rony virus** is a bag a wank. (4th April; UK)

(iv) PLAYFUL ALTERATIONS, RHYMES AND PUNS. Light-heartedness becomes open jocularity when the base lexeme *coronavirus* or any of its shortened variants is creatively manipulated to produce new forms. Thus, *rona* and *roni* can be elongated to *macarona* and *macaroni* for comic effect, and these can even go one step further to become *macarena*, playing on the title (and title character) of a popular Spanish song of the 1990s. Rhyme can also be used to enhance the comic effect of wordplay. Examples are *My Sharona* (also *My Sharona virus* or just *Sharona*), courtesy of the girl who famously made Doug Fieger's "motor run" in the late 1970s, and the rhyming slang *Miley Cyrus* and *Billy Ray Cyrus* (also *Miley*, *Mileys*, *Billy Ray* or *Billy Rays*), namechecking the American popstrel and her country singer father (cf. Lillo/Victor 2017).

Boris mad for catching the **Billy Ray** with all the handshaking. (28th March; IRELAND) | They would be first shouting their mouths off and complaining if grandad snuffed it with the **Billy Ray Cyrus**. (21st May; UK) | That cough doesn't sound good Gus. Haven't got a dose of the **Billy Ray's**, have you? (20th March; AUSTRALIA) | Tell her you were sanitizing your body, so you wont get the **macarena**. (22nd March; US) | So all these celebrities got the **macarona**. (21st March; US) | We need some betting odds on the next superstar to catch the **macaroni**. (18th March; US) | [W]hat if Dom Cummings has got the **Miley**? (10th March; UK) | Hearing someone refer to corona virus as 'he's caught the **Miley Cyrus**' has made me pisssssss. (5th March; UK) | Think I've got a dose of the **Mileys** after delivering this today. (6th March; UK) | No one else better get the **my sharona** in the next 3 weeks so we can go back to normal. (24th March; US) | I am soooooo worried that wrestling might be disrupted by the **My Sharona virus** that I have started to #panicbuy sessions. (9th March; UK) | Overheard this old man saying "I'm not scared of the **Sharona**". (18th March; US)

Of course, when it comes to disease, there is a fine line between the cathartic quality of gallows humour and making light of human tragedy. The same jocular word may be callous and totally inappropriate in one context and innocently light-hearted in another. If this is true of jocular coinages in general, then it is even truer of homophone-based puns, be it because their humorous intent is too obvious or, on the contrary, because they "fail to connect significantly two or more levels of signification" (Meltzer/Meltzer 2008:154). Alaska Congressman Don Young caused outrage when he used *beer virus* to refer to the coronavirus at an event in his home state: "They call it the coronavirus. I call it the beer virus. How do you like that?" (*Anchorage Daily News*, 18th March 2020). Downplaying

the disease is bad enough without resorting to flippancy. When that is done by the wrong person in the wrong context (in this case, a politician talking to his constituents), it is not perceived as wit but as heartless mockery. Used in the right spirit, however, coinages punning on *Corona*, a popular branded pale lager produced in Mexico, have proved an excellent source of amusement. The variations on the same theme are so numerous it seems that during the pandemic many people turned creating beery lexemes into a hobby.

I don't know why people are freaking out over the US taking top spot on cases of the **beer bug**. (26th March; us) | I've been blowing down lines of Clorox all day to fight the **beer death** and my cognitive functions are struggling. (15th March; us) | How do I know if it's just a cold or **Beer Flu**?! (12th February; us) | [D]oubt the VP got the **Beer-19**. (17th April; us) | Won't be the **beer plague** that kills us, it will be starvation. (17th March; us) | Meh. I beat cancer. I can handle **beer pox**. (9th March; us) | With **beervid-19**, That's really bad news. (16th March; us) | This mask won't stop the **beer virus**. (18th March; us) | If **beer with lime virus** fucks us over going to Europe, I'll be so cranky. (2nd March; AUSTRALIA) | But until then, make sure not to get the **brew flu**. (26th March; us) | [T]here are 2 cases of **Brewski virus** in MY State too. (2nd March; us) | Been coughing the whole time and these 2 older white ladies looking at me like I got the **cervesa**. (4th March; us) | They look so overwhelmed with the **cervesa bug**. (10th April; us) | [T]he **cervesa sickness** is being used as a cover for the mass arrests about to go down. (30th March; us) | Catching the **cerveza bug** might be a lot better fate[.] (17th May; us) | Can't wait to find out Donald Trump paid China to release the **Cerveza disease** so he could ramp up border restrictions. (1st February; us) | You can't defeat the **cerveza flu** with travel bans. (13th March; us) | ICU nurse gives her view point on **CerVeza19**. (16th April; us) | As my buddy Mike Martins has always said about the **cerveza virus**, watch the numbers outside China for the real ones. (20th February; CANADA) | I went to the North pier at Tynemouth dodging the **lager flu**[.] (20th March; UK) | In these troubled times of **light beer disease**[.] (12th April; us) | [T]hey will never infect me with the **Mexican beer disease**. (10th March; us) | Since everything is closing down due to the **Mexican beer flu**, can we close the entirety of retail brick and mortar stores for a couple weeks too? (12th March; CANADA) | Allison is convinced I've got the **Mexican lager virus**. (3rd March; UK) | Just making sure **Mexican piss water virus** didn't get you. (12th March; us) | [M]y nose feels a lil stuffy.... y'all don't think it's... ya know, the **Pale Lager virus**???? (1st March; us) | [M]y friends and I call it the **Piss Beer virus**. (28th February; us)

Perhaps the final proof of the popularity of the *Corona* theme as a source of *COVID-19* synonyms is the fact that the pun works in reverse too. The available evidence shows that, at least in Australian and British slang, the word *virus* itself is sometimes used as a jocular reference to the Mexican brew.

Had a **bottle of virus** at work today. (6th March; AUSTRALIA) | [C]ustomers are asking staff for a **bottle of virus**. (28th February; UK) | From John Beumer: 'You can now ask for 'A **Virus Carton**' at the local bottle shop/liquor outlet in Queensland, Australia and be given, without hesitation, a carton of 'Corona' Beer!' (11th May; from a tweet by British slang lexicographer Tony Thorne, @tonythorne007; AUSTRALIA)

## 4 Some vilifying synonyms

The expressions examined so far can be considered irreverent, offensive or just plain grotesque in varying degrees. They contrast starkly with others whose level of insensitivity or animosity is shocking, to say the least. The two major targets of these pejoratives are the elderly and the Chinese, two groups representing the supposed main victims of the outbreak and its “perpetrators”. In the following subsections we will look closely at the synonyms that stigmatise each of these groups.

### 4.1 The elderly as “ideal victims”

Although age, specifically chronological age, is one of many factors to consider with COVID-19, there is a consistent body of evidence that shows that people that are sixty or over are the most vulnerable to severe complications and mortality from the disease (see ECDC 2020). The young, of course, have been quick to use this evidence to their benefit by creating an extraordinary array of compounds that contain ageist references to the older population, especially the large cohort of baby boomers, those people born roughly between 1946 and 1964.

The **baby boomer doomer** is spreading[.] (15th March; AUSTRALIA) | What should I do for my birthday when the **baby boomer killer** is around? (14th March; US) | Still not a single case of **Boomer aids** in mighty North Korea. (15th March; AUSTRALIA) | The **boomer deleter** caught another body. (15th March; US) | The **Boomer disease** has to be scary to an over-75 fatass that has the common sense of a 3 year old. (14th March; US) | Once the **boomer doomer** is over, we are going to have another baby boom. (26th March; US) | To those who are making light of this by calling it the “**boomer elimination disease**” I say, you need to know who those “boomers” are. (21st April; AUSTRALIA) | How do you do this without young voters who aren’t going to turn out for him!? He will need them with the **Boomer Eliminator** working it’s wonders! (18th March; US) | [T]heir 5 days worth of supplies won’t do much to stop the **boomer eradicator**. (14th March; US) | Kissing is teen granddaughter in mouth might have given him the **boomer eraser**. (20th March; US) | What if asymptomatic millenials go out of their way to spread the **boomer flu** as intergenerational warfare? (15th March; CANADA) | So the Z’s can call this virus the **Boomer Killer**, it trends on Twitter and the press turns a blind eye! (18th March; US) | Just heard word from a corr. off. in LA, **Boomer-19** circulating in gen pop here now. (15th March; US) | Let the **boomer plague** spread. (19th March; US) | Then again, maybe the **Boomer Pox** sweeps the nation over the next three months[.] (11th March; US) | I have been informed by a relative who is a middle school teacher that students are now referring to coronavirus as the “**boomer remover**”. (12th March; US) | No way we are getting the **Boomer virus**. (28th January; US) | I can attest to this, one of them even called it **elder melter**. (13th March; US) | They could be immune to the **geriatric dispatcher**. (26th March; US) | Tamaki high school teacher reveals that students refer to #Coronavirus as “**Ok Boomer**”

**Virus**. (6th March; NEW ZEALAND) | [Y]ou don't want to catch a case of the **senior deleter**. (15th March; US)

One might be excused for thinking that rhyme (*boomer doomer*), assonance (*elder melter*) and cheeky idiomatic charm (*OK boomer virus*)<sup>8</sup> can make some of these words playful, but the idea of generational cleansing they may convey is too chilling to be taken lightly. Indeed, all these terms make the point that the baby boomers have “lived enough” and should let the younger generations take over. This perfectly fits into the general narrative of boomer blaming (see Bristow 2019:18–37), according to which the “lucky” baby boomers, who were born at a time of economic prosperity and abundance, are responsible for many of the problems their millennial children and grandchildren have been left to face, including high levels of debt and unemployment, lower wages and climate change. They “lived the dream and failed the future”, to use part of the subtitle of Beckett's *What Did the Baby Boomers Ever Do for Us?* (2010). From a millennial's perspective, the doom of the coronavirus outbreak may be a simple, albeit macabre, way to cut the Gordian knot.

## 4.2 The Chinese as “evil perpetrators”

The naming of contagious diseases has always been closely related to the all-too-human need to identify scapegoats for the evils of the world. Political antagonisms, cross-border animosities, national stereotypes and, above all, the idea that foreigners are to be feared and blamed for the spread of such diseases account, for example, for the numerous epithets syphilis has received down the ages. From the early sixteenth century onwards the English monikers for this disease revealed its popular associations with France (*French pox*, *the malady of France*, *the Frenchman*, etc.), Spain (*Spanish needle*, *Spanish gout*, etc.), Italy (*the disease of Naples* and *Naples canker*) and Scotland (*Scottish fleas*). This naming practice is, as Green (2017:169) has put it, “a truly international pursuit” (see Sontag 1989:47–53; Allan/Burridge 2006:206–207; Hoppe 2018). But besides being a pervasive and well-documented phenomenon, the relationship between disease and xenophobia works in both directions. Hitler would refer to the Jews as a *disease*, an *infection* or a *virus*, among other metaphors (Rancour-Laferriere 2011:218), and today's xenophobes, health conscious to a fault, demean immigrants by calling

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<sup>8</sup> *OK boomer virus* is based on *OK, boomer*, a catchphrase used by young people to mock their elders for being out of touch with today's social mores and cultural values.

them a *plague* or *epidemic* (McEntee-Atalianis/Zappettini 2014:399; cf. O'Brien 2018).

In times of crisis like the present, scapegoating, along with the good old trick of conspiracy ideation and the postmodernist encouragement of multiple “truths”, is the go-to defence mechanism for unscrupulous political leaders. We know all too well who the usual suspects are (see Wodak 2015; Douglas et al. 2019). By pointing the finger at a group of people and blaming them for our problems and misfortunes, they seek to distract from their own inadequacies and to evade their share of blame and responsibility. If their finger-pointing is sincere, it is no more than a projection of their own fear to be responsible. In its simplest version, this form of scapegoating manifests itself in the adjective *foreign*, which, when applied to disease, lulls us into thinking that it is an external threat and, in consequence, that borders can protect us from it.

Took a walk early this morning and noticed how some local women had facemasks on [...] Local women refusing to die from the **foreign disease**. (26th March; NIGERIA) | I caught the **Foreign flu**. (3rd April; us) | [W]hen Trump said the “**foreign illness**” I was like soooooo diseases have borders? (13th March; us) | Dude looks like he caught the **foreign virus**. (12th March; us)

Yet, this adjective, however jingoistic, has too broad a semantic range to be useful as a scapegoat term. This is so because, more often than not, the scapegoated party is a national or ethnic group that is somehow perceived as powerful and malevolent (see Glick 2002, 2005; Kossowska/Bukowski 2015:152). In an environment that increases our uncertainty, like the present COVID-19 situation, we are particularly susceptible to fall into the scapegoat trap and subscribe to conspiracy theories that comfort us by providing simple answers to a very complex problem. Tellingly in this respect, Freeman et al. (2020), in a non-probability online survey of 2,501 people in England, found that half of participants endorsed, in varying degrees, conspiracy thinking about the coronavirus. That, I suspect, may have something to do with the proliferation of bigoted and stigmatising nicknames for the disease.

One of the most popular conspiracy theories is the one according to which the virus might have leaked from a laboratory in Wuhan, the capital of China’s Hubei province (see Blackwell 2020). This theory has the benefit of being plausible because Wuhan, the city where the epidemic is thought to have originated, hosts China’s main laboratory conducting experiments with bat viruses. A variant of this narrative is that the virus not only escaped, or was let loose, from a lab, but it was developed intentionally as a biological weapon (see Stevenson 2020). Both these theories can be easily debunked, since the outbreak has been identified as a zoonotic disease which was probably transmitted to humans through contact

with animals raised for food supply. But these two theories, combined (for good measure) with accusations against China over its initial cover-up of the disease outbreak (thus exacerbating its spread; see Graham-Harrison 2020) and overlapping with the widespread belief that the Chinese appetite for exotic meats such as bat, snake and pangolin, is behind it, have proved the inspiration for a spate of derogatory epithets for the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2. What these epithets have in common is that they overtly stigmatise China, the Chinese and their culture. In this way, they subvert the best practices offered by the World Health Organization, who recommend that infectious disease names not include geographic locations, people's names, species of animal or food and other references and terms that could incite fear or place blame (WHO 2015a; see Fukuda et al. 2015). These names, we are advised, should “avoid causing offence to any cultural, social, national, regional, professional or ethnic groups” (WHO 2015b).

The following synonyms cast aspersions on the Chinese and encapsulate the bigot's narrative of their yellow-perilous role in the pandemic, a toxic narrative ridden with disparagement humour. Indeed, it is regrettably not uncommon for bigotry and xenophobia to be wrapped in a cloak of tongue-in-cheekness. In his famous essay on anti-Semitism, Sartre (1946:24) argues that anti-Semites are well aware that their disparaging remarks about Jews are absurd, but they find them amusing nonetheless. I have an inkling the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of those who thought up and use many of the expressions below. These synonyms may be described as falling into one of six broad, sometimes overlapping, categories: (i) terms containing geographic references to the presumptive origin of COVID-19, (ii) terms containing political labels and slurs, (iii) terms containing cultural references and (iv) downright Sinophobic terms.

(i) TERMS CONTAINING GEOGRAPHIC REFERENCES. The expressions in this category are based on references to the presumptive original locus of the outbreak. Most of these terms are noun phrases made up of an adjective or attributive noun, usually *Chinese*,<sup>9</sup> its disguised version *C-word*<sup>10</sup> or *Wuhan*, and a head noun, often the word *flu* (hence *Fluhan Wu*, a spoonerism for *Wuhan flu*).

I have found the Chinese lab where they created the **asian affliction!** (20th March; us) | [I]t's his raging **China disease** that disqualifies him from ever being president. (22nd March; us) |

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<sup>9</sup> This adjective is a particular favourite of the US president. According to Factbase (<factba.se>), a website that tracks all of Trump's interviews, speeches and tweets, he used the phrase *Chinese virus* twenty times between 18th and 30th March.

<sup>10</sup> Note that when used in the phrase *the C-word disease*, *C-word* is a euphemism for *coronavirus* or *COVID-19* (see § 3 above).

That's what I thought in early January as soon as I learned of the **China sickness**. (27th March; US) | London Borough of Barnet is closed due to **Chinese Aids**. (1st April; UK) | Has the **Chinese Bug** morphed into something worse? (20th March; UK) | Anyone else got a feeling that London is going to show the world exactly how not to deal with the **Chinese Flu**? (18th March; UK) | I am immune to the **Chinese sniffles**. (28th March; US) | 5 London bus drivers dead from the **Chinese virus**, stop the buses NOW Boris. (5th April; UK) | We are good-no **c word bug** here (knock on wood). (6th April; US) | They are doing a sterling job with dealing with the **C-word virus**[.] (19th March; SOUTH AFRICA) | Does anyone have the **Fluhan Wu**? (21st March; US) | [T]he guy at work who calls Covid-19 'The **Oriental Flu**' said it was the best speech he ever gave. (12th March; US) | They fucked up with the cruise ship spewing **Wuhan Aids** across Australia. (19th March; AUSTRALIA) | The police state scares me more than the **Wuhan flu**. (11th April; US) | Everyone stay safe out there with the **Wuhan Herpes** flouting around. (7th March; US) | Well, the **Wuhan plague** attacks the internal organs[.] (23rd May; US) | Sorry you're feeling poorly. I'm guessing it's not the "**Wuhan Sniffles**" though!!! (2nd February; UK) | What is Kenya doing in regards to the **Wuhan virus**?? (23rd January; KENYA) | Uncle joe got the **Wuhan Wheezer**. (2nd April; US) | [A] 15-year old kid that has cabin fever from hiding out from the **Wuhan Wiggles**. (25th March; US) | [Y]ou won't have to worry about catching the "**Wuhan Woe**" from touching it! (8th April; US) | Hardly the time or occasion to tie that touchy issue to the current efforts to rein in the spread of the **Wuhy virus**. (6th April; INDIA)

In this category we also find a number of clipped compounds and elliptical forms based on *Chinese* and *Wuhan*. The former has spawned *Chicovid flu* (< *Chinese covid flu*), *Chin aids* (< *Chinese Aids*), *Chinfl u* (< *Chinese flu*), *Chinfl uenza* (< *Chinese influenza*), *Chivirus/ChiVi* (< *Chinese virus*) and *CHIVID-19/Chivid* (< *Chinese virus disease 2019*, patterned on *COVID-19/covid*).

Obama tied it in with the **chicovid flu**. (2nd April; US) | I tried but I tested positive for the **chin aids** before I finished the song. (3rd April; US) | Media will negatively point out S. Korea has done more testing for the **Chinfl u**, simple they had a two month headstart. (22nd March; US) | The reporter is suffering from **Chinfl uenza**. (18th March; US) | Harvey Weinstein got the **ChiVi**. (22nd March; US) | After the economic damage from the **chivid** it will be interesting to see what new and exciting ways the ruling party will use to raise lost revenue. (28th March; US) | **CHIVID-19** patients were placed back in the homes with healthy patients[.] (27th May; US) | The reason the **Chivirus** is spreading mostly in democrat cities is because of democrat decisions. (6th April; US)

Similarly, *Wuhan* has yielded a whole range of clipped compounds, including *WuVi* (< *Wuhan virus*), *Wuflu/Wuhuf lu* (< *Wuhan flu*, with a punning nod to *wushu* 'the Chinese martial arts'), *Wu Aids* (< *Wuhan Aids*), *Wufluenza* (< *Wuhan influenza*), *Wubonic Plague/Wuhanic Plague/Wuhonic Plague* (< *Wuhan + bubonic plague*), *Wumonia* (< *Wuhan pneumonia*), *WuhanVid* (< *Wuhan virus disease*, on the model of *covid*), *WuVID-19/Wuvid* (< *Wuhan virus disease 2019*, on the model of *COVID-19/covid*). Looking at these, it is no wonder that *Wuhan*, *Wuhans*, *Wuhy* and *Wu* have also been used on their own to refer to the disease.



Boris Johnson got the **Wu**. (27th March; US) | Who is going to mourn you when you get the **wu aids**? (1st April; US) | The **Wubonic Plague** is revealing what was just under the surface. (30th March; US) | They are wringing their hands over the impact of **Wuflu** on the economy[.] (2nd April; CANADA) | They're trying to use the **wuflu** as a starting point to achieve as much as possible. (16th April; US) | Over half of the folks who got the **Wuhan** have recovered from it (so far) with 4.3k fatalities. (11th March; US) | Who could possibly be responsible for the **Wuhanic Plague**? (21st March; US) | I have a severe dose of the **Wuhans**. (9th March; US) | Just all of a sudden start coz of **WuhanVid**. (24th April; AUSTRALIA) | I ain't gonna let the **Wubonic Plague** kill me. (19th March; IRELAND) | We need a 9/11 type commission to investigate Pelosi profiting from the **Wuhufu!** (3rd April; US) | They know they will be in quarantine if they get the **Wuhy**. (3rd May; INDIA) | Heath Ledger confirmed positive with a case of **Wumonia**. (17th March; US) | We The People are forceably imprisoned in our homes to prevent the '**WuVi** spread' and prisoners are set free?!?! (1st April; US) | Looks like mocking all those who have died from **Wuvid**. (30th April; US) | [T]hey didn't die from **WuVID-19** now did they? (11th April; US)

One interesting variation on this geographic template is *China-Originated Viral Infectious Disease*, a malicious and inflammatory reinterpretation of *COVID* that proves that the use of a place reference in the name of a disease can never be a mere neutral description of reality. The phrase achieved popularity in American usage in April 2020, after it was announced that Republican Senators Marsha Blackburn and Martha McSally would introduce the “Stop China-Originated Viral Infectious Diseases Act of 2020”, known for short as the “Stop COVID Act of 2020”, a bill that would allow US citizens to sue the Chinese Communist Party over the spread of the coronavirus in America.

Since the **China Originated Viral Infectious Disease** came out all other causes of death plummeted. (11th May; US)

(ii) TERMS CONTAINING POLITICAL LABELS AND SLURS. The last example above shows the interaction of geography and politics, clearly putting the blame on the Chinese government for their supposed slow reaction to the outbreak. This is also reflected in a number of expressions containing references to communism, the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and President Xi Jinping. Aside from predictable formations like *CCPitis*, *commie cough*, *Chicom chills*, *Chinazi flu* and *Xi virus*, we also find the humorous *Winnie the Pooh Flu* (sometimes simply *Pooh Flu* or *Winnie the Flu*), formed from one of the nicknames of portly Xi Jinping, and the more intellectual *Red Death*, based on the fictional disease in Edgar Allan Poe's short story “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842).

How does travelling in your car to get some fresh air or even taking a walk alone (or fishing) possibly spread the **CCP Flu**? (13th April; CANADA) | Takes a hell of a lot more than **CCPitis** to take down Old Florida Man... (14th April; US) | [E]veryone with **CCP-19** is isolated and



treated. (27th March; us) | China sees a surge of **CCPVID-19** cases[.] (21st March; us) | [I]f he contracted the **chicom chills**, do you think his handlers would just keep pushing him in front of a camera? (27th March; us) | Wish you liars wouldn't have let the **ChiCom Fever** spread. (20th March; us) | We need to lighten the mood or we will all die before were on cots in a school gym dying from the **Chicom Flu**. (27th January; us) | TDS kills more people than the **Chinazi Flu**. (15th March; AUSTRALIA) | I do not blame this woman for bringing the **commie cold** into the Holyoke Vets Home. (8th April; us) | You know, when the media was saying the **commie cough** was no big deal[.] (25th March; us) | The **commie flu** will soon pass. (21st March; us) | [T]hey might have the **communist flu** right now. (25th March; us) | First US Death from the **Pooh Flu**. (29th February; us) | [W]ould have been wonderful hosts had we not all been sheltering from The **Red Death**. (27th March; UK) | I don't remember the media warning me about the dangers of the **red flu**. (19th April; us) | You mean a seventy-year-old drug doesn't cure COPD or cancer when mixed with **Winnie the Flu**? (8th April; us) | [I]f it is possible to get **Winnie the Pooh flu** twice, a second dose would easily see him off. (10th April; UK) | The **Xi Disease** is killing Brits[.] (30th March; us) | Thinking about reports that the Chinese have been lying about the **Xi Flu**. (26th March; us) | I can catch the **xi virus** more easily. (2nd April; us)

(iii) TERMS CONTAINING CHINESE CULTURAL REFERENCES. To this category belong a number of terms that reference some major Chinese cultural elements and stereotypes, namely the consumption of certain exotic animals which have been suggested as a possible source of the outbreak, Chinese-style dishes (both authentic and westernised) and a small miscellaneous group of items that have entered the popular imagination through fiction, film and television.

Eating wildlife is an important part of Chinese culture. Yet the scientific claim that SARS-CoV-2 most likely jumped from a wild animal, presumably a bat, to humans has reinforced the widespread Western belief that nothing good can come out of that.<sup>11</sup> Texas Republican Senator John Cornyn did not mince his words when he said in an interview with *The Hill* that “China is to blame because [in] the culture where people eat bats and snakes and dogs and things like that, these viruses are transmitted from the animal to the people and that’s why China has been the source of a lot of these viruses[.]” (<thehill.com>, 18th March 2020).<sup>12</sup> It is unlikely, however, that bats passed the virus directly to humans. Based on what is known about the transmission of other coronaviruses, it seems there was an intermediate host, an animal that was infected by bats and then transmitted the infection to humans. Among the possible intermediaries that have been sug-

<sup>11</sup> This belief is based, partly at least, on the fact that civet cats, a delicacy in parts of China, were probably implicated in the 2003 SARS epidemic (see Cheng 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Many people subscribing to this view would surely agree with Olga Keff, the comedy alter ego of English actress Catherine Tyldesley: there would be no coronavirus if “the Chinese had stuck to cheese sandwiches” (<instagram.com>, 31st March 2020).

gested are snakes, pangolins and stray dogs. All of them, along with bats and DC superhero Batman, feature prominently in the corona lexicon.

Is the **bat disease** finally going to kill me today? (20th April; us) | Try not to get the **batflu**. (14th May; us) | The claim that deaths from **bat lung** would be worse without the lockdown tells us nothing about the number of deaths the lockdown will ultimately cause[.] (7th April; uk) | If we all survive the **Batman flu**[.] (18th March; us) | He may prescribe something for malaria to treat the **BatMan virus** if he chooses. (25th March; us) | Nobody deserves to get this nasty **batshit disease** in prison. (25th April; us) | I am sure China has been soooooo honest about numbers for the **Bat soup flu**. (8th April; us) | And **bat stew flu** is nowhere near as big an issue as the main stream media is trying to make it... (9th April; us) | If you're still jogging after 3 weeks in isolation you've probs not got the **pangolin aids**. (14th April; uk) | Once the **Pangolin Fever** has subsided, I'm there! (21st May; us) | I'm coming down with the **pangolin flu**. (18th February; us) | Boris has the **pangolin pox**. (27th March; uk) | We always knew the **Snake Flu** was going to reach here sooner or later! (31st January; uk) | Tested positive for **stray dog fever!** (19th April; us) | Weren't you secretary of state when Obama was ignoring something worse than **vampire aids?** (6th April; us)

A related set of synonyms is made up of references to authentic Chinese and westernised Chinese cuisine, which serve as indicators of cultural and national identity, and hence also as a vitriolic reminder of “where it all began”. Using the name of a Chinese dish to name a disease is the mocking equivalent of pointing the finger at the Chinese as responsible for the outbreak. As in other cases, the stigmatising effect is compounded when humour comes into play. Compound nouns whose head is the word *chicken*, such as *sweet and sour chicken*, *Kung Pao chicken*, *orange chicken* and *General Tso's chicken*, are frequently altered to end in *sicken* (that is, *sweet and sour sicken*, *Kung Pao sicken*, *orange sicken* and *General Tso's sicken*) and names of dishes containing /u:/, like *chop suey* and *pu pu platter*, are punningly blended with *flu* (hence *chop fluey* and *flu flu platter*).

Secondary infection could prove to be a far greater risk than even having a mild case of the **chop fluey**. (24th March; us) | And risk getting **chop suey flu**...what was I thinking. (20th March; us) | Harvard University President Lawrence S. Bacow says he and his wife have tested positive for The **Chow Mein Flu**. (24th March; us) | So today during the **Egg Roll Flu** update they said Facebook donated their 700,000 N95 masks. (24th March; us) | If you don't cough or start wheezing, you probably don't have the **Flu Flu Platter** at this time. (19th March; us) | I'm more worried about the Chinese losing control and lofting a ICBM than catching the **Fried Rice Flu**. (9th February; us) | My gut reaction is that if I drink enough gin while on an airplane that super high strain **General Tso's Chicken flu** will [...] move on to an easier target. (5th March; us) | I don't know the threat level of **General Tso's Revenge** as there is so much disinformation[.] (8th April; us) | Wait, I have a Darth Vader helmet, will that protect me from **General Tso's Sicken?** (6th April; us) | [Y]ou are talking about the **Kung Pao Chicken Flu**. (12th March; us) | I do not need to know every time some athlete I've never heard of, from some sport I don't care about, catches the **Kung Pao Sicken**. (10th

April; us) | Is that some sort of Cherokee healing dance to ward off the **Moo Shu Flu**? (24th April; us) | Still zero cases of **Orange Sicken** anywhere in Wakanda. (26th April; us) | Statistically, they're going to be the first to die from **sweet and sour flu** so great job. (1st March; us) | [I]t's quite possible these assheads panicking will get me infected with the **sweet and sour sicken**. (12th March; us) | I would rather go back to work and take my chances with the **wonton flu** and keep America running[.] (24th March; us) | They're all afraid of the **wonton soup flu!** (15th March; us)

One of the implications of the persistence of stereotypes and images in popular culture is that they can provide a ready source of raw materials for creating dysphemisms. In the area of synonymy we are dealing with, the world of martial arts, which many of us first got to know through films and television, has given us such terms as *Bruce Lee flu*, *Jackie Chan virus*, *kung fu flu*, *Hong Kong Phooey flu*, and the punning *kung flu* and *Hong Kong Fluey*, the last two formed on the same principle as *chop fluey* and *flu flu platter*.<sup>13</sup> In a similar vein, Sax Rohmer's fiendish mastermind Dr Fu Manchu, an appallingly racist caricature of the "evil Chinaman", makes his appearance not only in *Fu Manchu flu* and *Fu Manchu Virus*, but also, as might be expected, in *Flu Manchu* (sometimes spelled *flu man choo*) and *Fu Manflu*, the latter cruelly punning on that well-known imaginary illness, *man flu*.

This virus aint taking my husband if anyone is finishing him off its me ... Think ive done 17 years for a **bruce lee flu** to take over ... (7th April; UK) | The liberal media will find a way to link it to the **Jackie Chan Virus**. (3rd April; us) | I would be quaffing a few ales in Artists Rifles club at Bisley right about now and enjoying all things firestick if it weren't for those meddling Chinese and the **flu man choo**. (23rd May; UK) | However, there is high mortality with the **Fu Manchu**. (26th February; us) | [R]eimbursing the states is how a \$2.5bil plan will cost 8 or 9+ even if no one in... Illinois ...gets the **fu manchu flu**[.] (27th February; us) | [I]f I get the **Fu Manchu Virus** I'm taking the hydroxychloroquine. (22nd April; us) | When will Schiff get the **Fu Manflu**? (13th March; us) | Trump is about the only one that was saying anything about the **Hong Kong flooey**[.] (14th April; us) | [T]he evidence is overwhelming that the **hong kong fluey** is not a risk to younger people. (18th April; us) | This **Hong Kong Phooey Flu** is BS. Its nothing more than a cold. (12th March; us) | So if everyone in the UK gets the **Kung Flu** that is ONLY 1.32 million people. (15th February; UK) | A church in my hometown displayed on their digital billboard that they were closed due to the "**kung fu flu**". (5th April; us)

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<sup>13</sup> *Kung flu* is too tempting a pun not to have been used in pre-Rona times. According to an old riddle published in the *Ealing Gazette* (London) of 7th July 1978, *kung flu* is "the most dreaded Chinese disease". Cf. also the phrase *be kung flu fighting* "to be ill with COVID-19" ("You'll be kung flu fighting tomorrow Tom", 5th March; UK), a play on the title and lyrics of Carl Douglas's 1974 disco hit "Kung Fu Fighting".

(iv) DOWNRIGHT SINOPHOBIC TERMS. The names in this category express contempt for the Chinese in a more direct way. They fall into two major groups, depending on whether the primary sense of their derogatory element is a Chinese person or their language. Expressions like *Chinaman flu*, *zipperhead flu*, *rice nigger virus* and *chinken pox* fall into the first group.

[T]he trains have been shut down a month prior to the **chinaman flu**. (17th March; CANADA) | Seth had found the cure to the **Chinaman Virus**??? (23rd March; US) | I sure hope she doesn't have the **chinee flu**. (28th March; US) | HCQ, the off patent antimalaria drug promoted by doctors in the know for the **Chinee virus**[.] (22nd May; US) | So there's now a confirmed case of the **Chiney virus** in Toronto.... (25th January; CANADA) | Careful you don't catch the **Chink cough**. (27th March; US) | I will go to my virus infested grave calling it the **chinken pox** and you can't stop me! (22nd March; US) | I spit on the road at a stop light. A woman with a MAGA sticker stopped at her GREEN light to yell that i was "spreading the **Chink Fever**"[.] (20th March; US) | If it means the UK beats the **chinky flu** then I'm sure we can all go without a pint down the local. (20th March; UK) | Guaranteed not to catch the **chinky pox** either. (12th March; UK) | [I]f the **gook flu** doesn't get me diabetes will. (24th March; UK) | [T]hat's the price you pay for talking about the **rice nigger virus**. (18th March; US) | Cheez, we ain't heard the last of this **slant eyed virus**. (22nd January; US) | Old boris got the **slope flu**. (27th March; UK) | I'm "social distancing" due to the **Zipperhead Flu**. (20th March; US)

The second group comprises a set of terms containing a mocking reference to the Chinese language. The reference may be to the language in general, as in the expressions *Ching Chong* or *Ching Chang Chong* (both of which are, in fact, also used as ethnic slurs), or to certain features stereotypically associated with Chinese and Chinese Englishes – and often caricatured in jokes. *Colonavilus*, *colona*, *vilus*, *fru*, *Kung fru* and *brack prague* are all based on the confusion between /l/ and /r/, a widely held but rather naive stereotype,<sup>14</sup> whereas *far flung flu* and the facetiously distorted *sum dum flu* (< *some dumb flu*) and *wu ping cough* (< *whooping cough*, blended with *Wuhan*) are intended to imitate the staccato effect arising from the use of monosyllables. This is also the effect suggested by *sum ting wong flu*, although here the monosyllabicity of the phrase is accompanied by a traditional double whammy of linguistic xenophobia: the common Chinese mispronunciation of *thing* as *ting* and the stereotypical surname *Wong*.

Well, if it weren't for the **brack prague**, they'd be using the penis thing[.] (13th April; CANADA) | [A] long term side effect of the **ching chang chong** is punctured holes in your lungs that gives it a honeycomb like appearance. (16th March; UK) | My 2 local Chinese buffet

<sup>14</sup> Mandarin, the native dialect of most of the Chinese population and the basis of modern standard Chinese, does have distinct /l/ and /r/ phonemes. It is true, however, that their distribution is not the same as in English.

restaurants have been calling it the **Ching Chang Chong virus**[.] (20th March; us) | Dems are using the **Ching Chong flu** to avoid debates[.] (21st April; us) | [B]ye, be safe, don't get the **colona!** (7th April; us) | [P]rayers out to our Asian friends suffering from the **colonavilus**. (15th March; us) | A dose of 30 grams cures **far flung flu** for ever. (2nd April; uk) | You must be suffering from the **Fru**. (19th March; us) | Because the **Kung Fru** didn't kill him, he disappeared shortly after blowing the whistle on the CCP governments handling of it[.] (14th March; us) | [E]verything should be "nationalized" to control the **Sum Dum Flu**. (16th March; us) | Writing an intelligent article outlining how our liberties our being stolen with the pretext of the **sum ting wong flu**. (23rd March; us) | We gonnna kill the **vilus**. (5th March; SOUTH AFRICA) | You got the **Wu Ping Cough Stan**? Hopefully not. Get well soon. (13th March; uk)

Looking at these examples, it is not hard to see why even expressions such as *Wu Tang Clap* and *Wang Chung flu*, based on the Chinese-sounding names of a hip-hop act and a pop band, have more than a stench of the Sinophobic about them. A glance at Twitter will show that those who relish using them would like to have us believe otherwise.

The **Wang Chung flu** will be conquered by Gen X.... (15th March; us) | Don't get the **Wang Chung Lung**. (6th May; us) | You have to be an idiot to doubt that the **Wang Chung Lung Dung** was not engineered. (14th April; us) | **Wang Chung virus** hit Marion county? (30th January; us) | Tom Hanks caught the **Wu Tang** too. (12th March; us) | And apparently we shouldn't eat Italian either as it might be infected with the **Wu Tang Clan flu** now as well. (20th March; us) | You ain't got the **wu tang Clap** too do you? (29th April; us) | I really hope gasmasks are gonna be back in style now that **wu-tang flu** is airborne. (25th March; us) | It's not that he was scolded, he probably caught the **Wu Tang Virus**. (14th March; us)

## 5 Concluding remarks

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly sped up the pace of lexical creation, as evidenced by the data gathered by Thorne (2020) and Zimmer (@bgzimmer), the latter creator of the popular #coronacoins hashtag. But the research I have presented here shows the pandemic has also brought about a wide range of inventive and mostly dysphemistic ways of referring to the disease itself. Certainly, there is nothing inherently unusual or surprising about this. This is just a reflection of our own fears, anxieties and preoccupations, proof that words are a mirror of both the world we live in and how we feel about it. What really is remarkable is the speed at which the overlexicalisation of COVID-19 has taken place. The two hundred and seventy-odd synonyms collected during the four-month period covered by the corpus of this study bear good witness to that. And this collection is likely to represent but a fraction of a much larger and sadly ever-expanding area of synonymy.

All categorisations have fuzzy boundaries and overlaps, and the one I have presented here is no exception. Some synonyms can, in fact, fall into more than one of the categories above. *Kung fru*, for example, has been accounted for as a reflection of linguistic Sinophobia (*kung fru* < *kung flu*), yet the term is also offensive because it ultimately hinges on *kung fu*, a stereotyped cultural element. There are many instances of cross-fertilisation that I have excluded from analysis for lack of sufficient evidence of their usage (for instance, *Chinese Mexican beer flu*, *Wuhan snake lung* and *kung bat flu*); plenty of others, of course, continue to crop up every day. As I try to keep track of this new lexis, I cannot help but notice that the warped attitudes underlying it show no sign of fading any time soon. Surely they will still be there when the pandemic is over.

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## Appendix – COVID-19 synonyms

Asian affliction	boomer flu	Chinee virus ( <i>also</i> Chiney virus)
Auntie Rona	boomer killer	Chinese Aids
Aunt Rona	boomer-19	Chinese bug
baby boomer doomer	boomer plague	Chinese flu
baby boomer killer	boomer pox	Chinese sniffles
bat disease	boomer remover	Chinese virus
batflu	boomer virus	Chinflu
bat lung	brack prague	Chinfluenza
Batman flu	brew flu	Ching Chang Chong
Batman virus	brewski virus	Ching Chang Chong virus
batshit disease	Bruce Lee flu	Ching Chong flu
bat soup flu	C	Chink cough
bat stew flu	CCP flu	chinken pox
beer bug	CCPitis	Chink fever
beer death	CCP-19	Chinky flu
beer flu	CCPVID-19	Chinky pox
beer-19	C disease	ChiVi
beer plague	cervesa	Chivid
beer pox	cervesa sickness	CHIVID-19
beervid-19	cerveza bug ( <i>also</i> cervesa bug)	Chivirus
beer virus	cerveza disease	chop fluey
beer with lime virus	cerveza flu	chop suey flu
big C	CerVeza19	chow mein flu
big Coro	cerveza virus	C-19
big 19 ( <i>also</i> big nineteen)	Chicom chills	co
Big Rona	Chicom fever	colona
Billy Ray	Chicom flu	colonavilus
Billy Ray Cyrus	Chicovid flu	commie cold
Billy Rays	China disease	commie cough
boomer Aids	Chin aids	commie flu
boomer deleter	Chinaman flu	communist flu
boomer disease	Chinaman virus	coro
boomer doomer	China-Originated Viral Infectious Disease	corona
boomer elimination disease		coronareezy
boomer eliminator	China sickness	corone
boomer eradicator	Chinazi flu	corones ( <i>also</i> coronez)
boomer eraser	Chinee flu	

- coronies  
 corony (*also coronie*)  
 corony v (*also coronie v, coronie vee*)  
 corony vi  
 corony virus (*also coronie virus*)  
 coros  
 coroski  
 corry  
 corry v (*also corry vee*)  
 corry virus  
 cov  
 cove  
 covey (*also covie*)  
 covid  
 coviddo  
 coviddy  
 covidz (*also covidz*)  
 covidsky  
 covo  
 covs (*also covz*)  
 covvie (*also covvy*)  
 covvo  
 CV (*also see-vee*)  
 C-virus  
 CV-19  
 C-word  
 C-word bug  
 C-word disease  
 C-word virus  
 Doña Rona  
 egg roll flu  
 elder melter  
 far flung flu  
 flu flu platter  
 Fluhan Wu  
 Flu Manchu (*also flu man choo*)  
 foreign disease  
 foreign flu  
 foreign illness  
 foreign virus  
 fried rice flu  
 fru  
 Fu Manchu flu  
 Fu Manchu virus  
 Fu Manflu  
 General Tso's chicken flu  
 General Tso's revenge  
 General Tso's sicken  
 geriatric dispatcher  
 gook flu  
 Hong Kong Fluey (*also Hong Kong Flooey*)  
 Hong Kong Phooey flu  
 ho Rona (*also hoe Rona*)  
 Jackie Chan virus  
 kung flu  
 kung fru  
 kung fu flu  
 Kung Pao chicken flu  
 Kung Pao sicken  
 Lady Rona  
 lager flu  
 La Rona  
 light beer disease  
 macarena  
 macarona  
 macaroni  
 Mama Rona (*also Mamma Rona*)  
 Mexican beer disease  
 Mexican beer flu  
 Mexican lager virus  
 Mexican piss water virus  
 Miley  
 Miley Cyrus  
 Mileys  
 Miss Rona  
 moo shu flu  
 Mrs Rona  
 My Sharona  
 My Sharona virus  
 OK boomer virus  
 19 (*also one-nine*)  
 orange sicken  
 Oriental flu  
 pale lager virus  
 pangolin Aids  
 pangolin fever  
 pangolin flu  
 pangolin pox  
 piss beer virus  
 Pooh flu  
 Queen Rona  
 Red Death  
 red flu  
 rice nigger virus  
 rona (*also roner; usu. personified as Rona*)  
 rona rus  
 ronaz (*also ronaz*)  
 ronaski  
 rona vi  
 rona virus  
 rone  
 rones (*also ronez*)  
 roni (*also rony*)  
 roni virus (*also rony virus*)  
 rus  
 senior deleter  
 Señora Rona  
 Sharona  
 Sis Rona  
 Sister Rona (*also Sista Rona*)  
 slant eyed virus  
 slope flu

snake flu	Wu	Wuhufu
stray dog fever	Wu Aids	Wuhy
sum dum flu	Wubonic plague	Wuhy virus
sum ting wong flu	Wuflu	Wumonia
sweet and sour flu	Wufluenza	wu ping cough
sweet and sour sicken	Wuhan	Wu Tang
vampire Aids	Wuhan Aids	Wu Tang Clan flu
vi	Wuhan flu	Wu Tang Clap
vid	Wuhan herpes	Wu Tang flu
vilus	Wuhanic plague	Wu Tang virus
Wang Chung flu	Wuhan plague	WuVi
Wang Chung lung	Wuhans	Wuvid
Wang Chung lung dung	Wuhan sniffles	WuVID-19
Wang Chung virus	WuhanVid	Xi disease
whore Rona	Wuhan virus	Xi flu
Winnie the Flu	Wuhan wheezer	Xi virus
Winnie the Pooh flu	Wuhan wiggles	zipperhead flu
wonton flu	Wuhan woe	
wonton soup flu	Wuhonic plague	

