

**“Words Matter”**  
**A Case Against CoronaVocab in Traumatic Times<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

Language is a way to behave and influence our environment. A good example of the importance of what we say is what we are experiencing during the current pandemic: instead of staying united more than ever and thinking that we are in this together, the words we use are actually keeping us apart because all they convey is violence, incitement to a war (against the virus, against one another) and the actual desire to practice social distancing. The current war on virus is modeled on the war on drugs; brute force is and always will be an essential part of politics because it serves its purpose, which is to manipulate people.

Never did I ever think that this English professor would find job affirmation via New York’s Governor Cuomo.

“Words matter,” he declared last month, rejecting the notion that he was putting New Yorkers under a “shelter-in-place” order. That phrase, Cuomo explained, which is “used currently for an active shooter or a school shooting,” needlessly fosters and evokes wartime panic. Instead, New York State would go on “PAUSE.”

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<sup>1</sup> Poiché “le parole contano”, si è scelto di non tradurre questo articolo così da permetterne la lettura in lingua originale.

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Yes, words matter. I stake my career on it. Which why I've been paying close attention to some of the revealing, troubling language that has stealthily ensconced itself in our day-to-day lives during the current pandemic: call it CoronaVocab.

CoronaVocab is, most of all, saturated in the language of war and violence — a la the omnipresent “shelter-in-place.” President Trump spoke of the pandemic as “our big war,” adding, “We have to win this war. It’s very important.” New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio referenced “battlefield medicine” when detailing New York’s health-care crisis, later adding that questions about his administration’s response to coronavirus should be examined “after this war is over.” New York City Council Speaker Corey Johnson urged the city to “act like any wartime government and do whatever it takes to support our economy,” while Governor Cuomo denounced President Trump’s ideas about US travel restrictions as “a declaration of war on states.” In recent days the surgeon general told the nation to brace for “our Pearl Harbor moment.”

Also populating CoronaVocab are bureaucratic-sounding euphemisms. It’s not “isolation” or “radical aloneness” or just plain “loneliness,” but the ultra-antiseptic phrase of the century: “social distancing.” New York City isn’t vulnerable to the virus because it is crowded, overrun and under-resourced for all but the wealthy, but because it is a place of “social density.” We shouldn’t stay home in an effort to stop disease and death but in order to do our part as compliant citizens to “flatten the curve” (“compliance” is a must). Next month’s such-and-such event wasn’t shut down because we are living through the biggest crisis in modern history, the world is having a collective anxiety attack and nothing and no one feels safe anymore; it was cancelled out of an “abundance of caution.”

Consider, too, the linguistic opacities of CoronaVocab. What exactly is an “essential worker”? Can we say more about these vague “underlying health conditions” that some victims of the virus allegedly possess? When my large-scale university suddenly ordered a “recalibration period” for students and faculty, I wondered who and what had been “calibrated” in the first place and what and how was it now being “re-calibrated”?

Yes, words matter. They can de-escalate panic, alleviate dread and calm frayed nerves. We need our words to do that right now. But we also need our words to, more than ever, be honest and full of pathos — not sterile, bureaucratic, and devoid of humanity. We need them to richly acknowledge the grief and trauma that we as a world are collectively

enduring, even as we are expected by our employers and our newly all-virtual lives to proceed with business as usual. CoronaVocab's corporate-speak serves not just to keep us in line but to numb us, to deny us our vulnerability and normalize what is not at all normal.

Most disconcerting, CoronaVocab's "war on virus" discourse is eerily reminiscent of another war against something that cannot actually be fought with ammunition: the war on drugs. To hear politicians, particularly in the US and the UK, engage in war-on-virus rhetoric is to be haunted by a litany of US presidents like Ronald Reagan declaring, as he did in 1981, "We're taking down the surrender flag that has flown over so many drug efforts; we're running up a battle flag."

One cannot wage war on a virus any more than one can wage war on people who struggle with substance abuse — a fact that even former president Bill Clinton acknowledged in recent years' public apologies for his administration's brutal, racist war-on-drugs regime. As has finally been widely recognized in the wake of the US's opioid crisis, drug dependency is a public health issue, not a criminal justice one; the way to address it is through broad-reaching support, smart science and community-based services. Similarly, the way to take on the terrifying pandemic we are living through is via smart science and careful, nuanced planning, not discourse of battlefields and brute force.

Brute force, though, sells. It's at the crux of US political discourse; it's language that keeps people afraid, easily manipulated and, most of all, entrenched in a state of skirmish — a me-versus-them approach to the world. And that is the exact antithesis of what we as a global community need right now. Even as heightened borders have become the universal response to a virus that is evidence of how ultimately borderless our world truly is, we must recognize that a pandemic urgently calls for cooperative global action. Aggressive talk of waging war imagines that there is an "us" and a "them," when in fact the us *is* the them — we are all in this together. So it is incumbent upon us to both collectively act and collectively speak with a kind of wisdom, humanity, pathos and candor that is perhaps unprecedented, but now more than ever demanded by our life's lexicon.