

## Sociolinguistic Innovations in Nigerian English Usage in the Covid-19 Era

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### **Abstract**

*The novel coronavirus (SAR-COV-2) and its attendant respiratory disease, COVID-19, said to have originated in Wuhan, China in December, 2019 has become a global concern with far-reaching impact on all facets of human life. Its impact on the English language can be seen in the emergence of new forms of expressions, extension of the meaning of existing words and the resuscitation of hitherto not commonly used expressions. A number of these innovations and usages affect the English language generally, yet language use is context-bound revealing the cultural realities of its users and their environment so that language at all times exhaustively catalogues the things, events and processes in its environment of use (Carrol, 1966:102). This study adopts the Functionalist Approach to investigate the linguistic impact of COVID-19 discourse on the Nigerian variety of the English language using data from Nairaland, an online Nigerian forum. It establishes that COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the character of Nigerian English by way of morphemic coinages, phrasal restructuring, syntactic composition, semantic broadening, lexical resuscitation and acronymic coinages.*

**Keywords:** *COVID-19, language resuscitation, Functionalist Approach, Nigerian English*

### **Introduction**

An incontrovertible fact about natural languages is their intrinsic flexibility and amenability to change in order to reflect prevailing realities and shifting concerns. Research in the field of sociolinguistics reveals that language users creatively exploit these characteristics so that at all times language is able to meet their need to communicate, inform, educate, share experiences and express their thoughts (Adegbija, 2004; Labov, 2001). Disease situations such as epidemics and pandemics usually present language users with such need to exploit their potentialities. They often give birth to new socio-cultural realities

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and consequently new communication and interactional opportunities which language users creatively deploy together with other resources of language to meet their language needs (Kupolati, Adebileje&Adeleke (2021).

The emergence of the novel coronavirus (SAR-COV-2) and its attendant respiratory disease, COVID-19, in Wuhan, China in December, 2019 and its subsequent exponential global spread has altered social relationships, cultural habits, modes of communication, economic landscapes and physical mobility more than any other epidemic has (Nicola, M., Alsufi, Z. & Agha, R 2020; Haleem, A., Javaid, M. &Vaishya, R. 2020). It has since become a global health emergency having been declared ‘a pandemic’ by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020. Its emergence, spread and effects have therefore sired a linguistic burden and need to express novel sociolinguistic realities and concerns (Paton, 2020). A recent corpus based research, (April, 2020), by Oxford English Dictionary reveals a prevalence of certain words, expressions and collocations in native English speech and discourse as the native speaker of English response to these novel sociolinguistic realities. But is this response uniform across all varieties of the English language especially given the fact that communication needs vary across contexts and users? Kupolati, Adebileje and Adeleke (2021) reveal that vocabularies of the Covid-19 are differently conceived by different societies and cultures depending on social status and experiences, social, political, economic, religious, etc. Also, perceptions of the virus which invariably inform the vocabularies vary along the lines of culture, civilization, age, socio-religious ideologies, and educational attainment (Chimuanya & Igwebuikwe, 2021; Inyabiri, Aboh & Mensah, 2021). Kenneth (2020) provides up to eighteen variations of pronouncing the word ‘coronavirus’ in Nigeria. These studies underscore the fact that different people across the globe express their understanding of crisis situations differently using the available linguistic tools at their disposal. In some cases, they stretch the semantic scope of existing words or else invent or coin new ones which are peculiar to them but understandable because of shared socio-cultural knowledge and shared ways of encoding and decoding. The burden of this paper therefore is to investigate the English as second language speaker response, specifically Nigerian English response, to the communication needs engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

The study adopts the functionalist approach to language studies which looks beyond structure in the quest for meaning and ‘takes a much wider view of what constitutes semantics’ (Butler, 2006:1). Functionalism, usually associated with the Prague school of linguistics

(1930s), is in contradistinction to both structural and formal theories and was popularized in the 1960s by Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday. It explains language as expressing meanings created within a social system and social reality as encoded in language (Nordquist, 2020). As Butler, (2014) puts it, the major function of language is for communication, Thus, language in this essence helps to meet communicative ends (Nichols, 1984). For Dik (1986), the paramount aim of natural language is the establishment and enhancement of human communication while other aims are secondary or derived. So language is initially conceptualized as an instrument of social interaction among human beings; it is used with the intention of establishing communicative relationships (Butler, 2014). With this, emphasis is on what people do and achieve with language, and how it helps them interact with one another (Dik, 1997a). Language in this vein is viewed as a system of human communication, rather than as an infinite set of structural description of sentences (Foley & Van Valin, 1984). This means that language is functional and this function is to make meanings which are in turn conditioned by their cultural and social contexts of exchange (Halliday, 1973; Eggins, 2005). Appropriateness is thus a function of context of use such that language function takes precedence over language structure. So, language is something that allows human beings to communicate with one another (Butler, 2003). In that regard, any reasonable language interpretation should acknowledge this essence and therefore consider the communicative ability and purpose of language. Thus, in any human altercation, the first point to consider is whether meaning has been transferred and a feedback is received. In such situation, meaning becomes context-based while the situation determines the interpretation. The outbreak of COVID-19 has created new linguistic situations and scenarios and Nigerians have responded to these developments, especially in their use of English language to communicate their thoughts, ideas and feelings about the pandemic.

Nigerian English is the variety of English spoken in Nigeria, a post-colonial, multilingual, multi-tribal and multiethnic society. It is a second language variety of English, an outer circle variety (Kachru, 1985, 1992), which exhaustively catalogs the things, events and processes in the Nigerian environment and invariably caters for its communication needs. It is a 'natural response to [the] yawning linguistic and socio-cultural needs' of Nigerians, a variety of English 'doing what Nigerians want it to do' (Adegbija 2004: 21--22). The variety maximally exploits the intrinsic dynamism and functional potential of language giving rise to unique and distinctly Nigerian usages, Nigerianisms, at all levels of linguistic analysis and meaning. Achebe

(as cited in *The New Yorker* May 26, 2008 issue) corroborates this: '[Nigerian English is] a new English, still in full communication with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings'.

The variety exists alongside about 500 indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin (Obiorah, 2021; Mensah, 2021). It reveals the degree of domestication and adaptation of the English language in order to express the norms of the linguistic behavior of its users in their sociocultural milieu (Akere, 2004). It is characterized by: Loan words from the many local languages, English words which have acquired new meaning(s), words coined for local situations, acronyms, creative development of English, distinctly Nigerian usages, attitudes and pragmatic use of language, innovations in lexical items and idioms and their meanings and transfer of phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic patterns of Nigerian languages (Bamiro, 1994; Bamgbose, 1995). Like other New Englishes, it is different from the Older Englishes at all the levels of linguistic analysis, phonology (especially), lexis, grammar, and semantics. The variety also has internal varieties (Mensah, 2021). The linguistic innovations that characterize Nigerian English are seen in all situations in the Nigerian experience.

Most pre-Covid-19 linguistic studies on disease situations in the Nigerian context had mostly focused on the domestication of English in patient-medical practitioner contexts while only a few like Igboanusi and Odoje (2016) and Kenneth (2020) investigated epidemics and language use in the Nigerian context. The studies reveal coinages informed by local and contextual communicative initiatives as well as linguistic innovations in the form of acronyms, abbreviations, medical jargons (Odebunmi 2016) and secret codes which facilitate communication in disease scenarios and enable health practitioners in Nigeria discharge their duties effectively to provide meaning in doctor-patient interactions in Nigeria (Faleke 2014). Existing Covid-19 and post-Covid-19 linguistic studies have focused on both linguistic and non-linguistic effects of the pandemic in the Nigerian context. Kenneth (2020) focuses solely on the pronunciation fall-out of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in Nigeria and identifies eighteen various ways that the Coronavirus is pronounced in Nigeria. Inyabri, Aboh and Mensah (2021) demonstrate how humour is used to express doubts, reservations of the reality of the corona virus and to downplay its fatal global menace. Chimuanya and Igwebuiké (2021) investigate how complex religious doctrines and ideologies, cultural and personal linguistic processes inform and institutionalize the apocalyptic worldview of the pandemic. The role of indigenous languages in the dissemination of Covid-19 related information has also come under scrutiny (Obiora, 2021). Kupolati, Adebileje and Adeleke (2021) explore,

using the variationist model, lexical innovations and variations in the lexemes of Nigerian English formed during the pandemic and the influence of region, class and situational contexts on the linguistic variations. Their data came from Nigerian English speakers in South-West Nigeria. Differing from these studies, this study engages the functionalist approach to investigate the overall Nigerian English response to the communication needs necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Research Methodology**

Using a qualitative method of data collection and analysis, data for this study, which include recently coined words, abbreviations, phrasal expressions, syntactic structures, semantically extended and rejuvenated words that are associated with COVID-19 were collected from an online communication platform called *Nairaland*. Conversations on the platform are in categories: politics, health, religion, education, science and technology, sports, etc. Covid-19 related discourses are listed on all the categories but especially health and politics. Personal posts on the pandemic, commentaries on the posts and commentaries on Covid-19 related news events were extracted through random searches and these were compiled and categorized according to relevant linguistic tags. The data were collected between March and September 2020. The number of conversational treads constituting the data varied with the months corresponding roughly with three periods of the pandemic: pre-lockdown, lockdown and post-lockdown. A descriptive method of analysis is adopted in the data presentation and discussion.

Membership of *Nairaland* is free and voluntary but predominantly made up of Nigerians within and those in diaspora. Membership as at October 12, 2020 stood at 2, 559, 665. Also, the membership cuts across all social and educational classes so that the forum is a microcosm of the Nigerian society. In fact, *Nairaland* is one of the online communities that are popular among Nigerians. Created by Seun Osewa in March 2005, the online discussion forum enables Nigerians to undertake both formal and informal written exchanges on numerous topical issues of national interest. Language use on the forum therefore replicates Nigeria's social-cultural and linguistic realities.

The choice of the online discussion website is first hinged on its large membership and wide outreach which covers all strata of the Nigerian society. Also, conversations undertaken in the website are in English language that is typically Nigerian—Nigerian English. This makes it appropriate since the study's focus is on Nigerian English usage in the face of the emergent coronavirus pandemic. In identifying the data,

conversations on *Nairaland* that centered on the corona virus within the said period were randomly sampled and recurrent lexical innovations identified. Table 1 contains a list of the identified new Nigerian English expressions. The words and expressions are new by virtue of their having come into use with the incidence of the corona virus pandemic. Table 2 shows the percentage frequency of use of each innovation. Also, the examples given to illustrate the use of the new Nigerian English expressions were culled from written conversations on COVID-19 that were carried out in the forum. Below is the URL of *Nairaland*: <https://www.nairaland.com/nairaland>

## Results

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered the social realities of Nigerians. Part of this alteration can be seen in their language use since the emergence of the pandemic. An investigation of the English language usage of Nigerians in COVID-19 related discourse on *Nairaland* reveals a preponderant use of certain words, expressions, acronyms, collocations and metaphors. Some of these words and expressions are new while some others, although already existing English words, have acquired new meanings, new meaning associations and new collocations. Table 1 contains a list of the identified words and expressions presented in three main language structural headings:

### Morphemic coinages, Word/Phrasal Resuscitation, Phrasal Expression/Collocation and Acronym

**Table 1: COVID-19 Vocabulary/Expressions in Nigerian English**

S/N	Morphemic Coinage	Word Resuscitation	Phrasal Expression	Acronym			
1	COVID-419	7	WEBINAR	12	PALLIATIVE PACKAGE	15	PTF
2	COVIDIOT	8	PALLIATIVE	13	PHYSICAL DISTANCING	16	NCDC
3	CORONAPOCALYPSE	9	COUGHING AND SNEEZING	14	SOCIAL DISTANCING	17	CACOVID
4	AUDIO DEATH	10	VERONICA BUCKET				
5	COVID FUND	11	(A)SYMPTOMATIC				
6	SCAMDEMIC						

Table 1 above captures the words and expressions which have come into preponderant use in COVID-19 discourse in Nigeria. While a number of them like Covid-fund/figure, Covid-419, audio death, palliative package and CACOVID are peculiar to Nigeria, some like social distancing/physical distancing are common in other countries too. Their peculiar usage in the Nigerian context, as will be seen in the examples of usage and in the analysis, stands them out. Others like (a)symptomatic, webinar, veronica bucket and coughing and sneezing are neither new nor peculiar to Nigeria. They are mentioned here



because they have come into frequent use in the event of the pandemic. They are listed under ‘word resuscitation’ nos. 7 -11; giving the meaning that the use of such words have been rejuvenated with the outbreak of the pandemic. The table additionally reveals the following linguistic processes at play: morphemic coinages (MC) (by way of compounding and affixation) (numbers 1-6), acronym (AC) (numbers 15-17), phrasal formation (PF) (numbers 12-14), semantic extension (SE) (numbers 8 and 9) semantic restriction (SR) (numbers 12 - 14) and lexical resuscitation (LR) (numbers 7, 9, 10, 11 and 14). The overlapping observed in the categorizations is insightful. It suggests that different linguistic processes may be applied to linguistic items to capture different experiences.

Table 2 shows the percentage frequency of the identified lexical innovations. It reveals the most productive linguistic process(es) and possibly the most popular and acceptable additions to Nigerian English vocabulary.

**Table 2: Percentage Frequency of Occurrence (Use)**

	<b>Word/Expression</b>	<b>No of Occurrences</b>	<b>% Frequency of Occurrence</b>
1.	COVID-419	245	70
2.	COVIDIOT	105	30
3.	CORONAPOCALYPSE	4	1.1
4.	AUDIO DEATH	227	64.9
5.	COVID FUND	40	11.4
6.	SCAMDEMIC	237	67.7
7.	WEBINAR	215	61.4
8.	PALLIATIVE	203	58
9.	COUGHING AND SNEEZING	213	60.9
10.	VERONICA BUCKET	175	50
11.	(A)SYMPTOMATIC	190	77.1
12.	PALLIATIVE PACKAGE	250	71.4
13.	PHYSICAL DISTANCING	311	88.9
14.	SOCIAL DISTANCING	311	88.9

	Word/Expression	No of Occurrences	% Frequency of Occurrence
15.	PTF	330	94.3
16.	NCDC	285	81.4
17.	CACOVID	167	47.7

### Morphemic Coinages

Morphemic coinages identified in the data include new words formed from compounding two existing words, a word and a figure (alpha-numeric), and blending (compounding parts of two existing words). Whereas number 1 (Covid 419) is alphanumeric, 2, 3, and 6 are blends: Covid and idiot; corona and apocalypse; scam and pandemic. Numbers 4 and 5 are compound words while 15-17 are acronyms. These words and acronyms have been specially coined to reflect the new normal in Covid-19 Nigeria. They not only reveal the prevailing socio-cultural and economic realities of Nigerians but also their attitudes towards them. It additionally reveals their perceptions of the pandemic and the Nigerian government's response to it. The coinages sometimes have slightly varying particles or collocations. The usage examples below are particularly insightful. The issues which engendered the conversations and responses have been included for proper understanding of the context.

#### *Covid-419*

- i) *It is over 6 months that covid-419 started reigning and I have not set my eyes on anyone coughing or sneezing in Lagos. Abi everybody dey hide to cough or sneeze? (or are people coughing and sneezing in secret?) Well, cough and catarrh syrup full chemist shops. (cucumbae(m): 5:52am On Jul 05, 2020)*
- ii) *This covid-419 thread no dey get traffic as before. That is to tell you people don tire to dey hear numbers without proof [people are tired of listening to figures without proof] (Modify: July 5, 2020).*

Covid-419 is an expression that relates to fraudulent acts associated with the corona virus disease in Nigeria. 419 is a section of the Nigerian Criminal Code that deals with fraudulent practices and obtaining things by deceit or pretense. In Nigerian English, one who is usually fraudulent in his dealings is referred to as a *419er* while a fraudulent act is usually referred to as *419*. The term has therefore been coined to capture the real and perceived government insincerity and fraudulent activities surrounding the pandemic in Nigeria and consequently the



average Nigerian attitude to the pandemic: denial and distrust. Iyabri, Aboh and Mensah (2021) suggest that the Nigerian president's initial mispronunciation of 'Covid nineteen', (Covid-19) as 'Covid one-nine', (Covid-1-9), as well as the perceived fraud in the government's approach to and management of the pandemic have additionally informed the coinage. The speaker in example (i) has not seen anyone coughing or sneezing in Lagos, the supposed epicenter of the pandemic in Nigeria, in the past six months. Coughing and sneezing ordinarily very evident symptoms of the corona virus disease are also symptoms of common cold. With an innuendo that addresses the suspicion of fraud, the speaker seems to believe that even people with common cold have gone into hiding for fear of being falsely and forcefully designated 'covid-19 victims' by the officials of the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). The coinage thus captures Nigerians' doubts and reservations of the reality of the virus and disconnects from and lack of trust in their government.

### ***Audio Death***

- iii) *How many test have they carry out in this country since over 3 months now and no one has been slump and die of corona virus, except the **audio death** dish out every day (sic). (astonished: 6:35pm On May 26, 2020)*
- iv) *With these 40 something deaths being announced on a daily basis on Covid 419 we supposed dey see obituary poster plenty, Ncdc ought to be announcing the states where the death and infections are coming from. This audio death weyna only midnight them dey announce am. Na so USA and Europe dey do their own? [With the number of deaths announced on a daily basis, obituary posters should have been everywhere. Ncdc ought to be announcing the states where the death and infections are coming from. What kind of death is only announced at midnight? Is this how USA and Europe announce theirs?] (comshots(m): 2:06am Jul 09, 2020)*

Audio death refers to the daily media Covid-19 data update. The deaths are only *audio death*: no real life evidence of the deaths announced in the media, no obituary announcements, no announcement of the particulars of the deceased (examples iii and iv). Moreover, the testing facilities in Nigerian are grossly inadequate so it is unlikely that the number of infected persons announced were tested (example iv). The data can as such only be fake data especially as it is usually announced at an hour when no one would be around to question it (example iv). This further reinforces the expression *Covid419*. Due to this lack of faith and trust in the government, the figures presented in the media as the number of infected, recovered and dead people are *covid figures* (fake).

Inyabri, Aboh and Mensah (2021) corroborate this when they observed that Nigerians regard these alarming high figures of coronavirus cases released by NCDC as evidence of fraud at the heart of government's handling of Covid-19 protocols. They report that Pastor Nicodemus, a popular Nigerian comedian and social media comedy skit producer had expressed Nigerians' concern that the government seemed to be 'adding other cases to the Covid-19 cases in the country' and that the number of cases in Nigeria would soon out-number that of China, the 'home' of the corona virus. Such other cases seemingly included among the Covid-19 cases by the Nigerian government included 'divorce cases, court cases, suitcases and briefcases!' (p. 112).

### ***Covidiot***

- v) *Hmm, scary I must say...Hope online and offline **covidiots** will learn. Listen to that old covidiot in the video saying until he sees dead people surrounding him, he won't believe...I pray he doesn't end up a covid corpse (ntyce(m): 5:46am On Jul 09, 2020)*
- vi) *TheGiftedOne: Travelling amidst the inter-state lock down What a **covidiot** (Nobody: 11:27pm On Jun 29 2020)*

*Covidiot* and *Coronapocalyse* are blends borne out of the Covid-19 experience. *Covidiot* is formed from the words 'covid' and 'idiot'. The slang denotes anyone who doubts the reality of the Covid disease or calls it a government or WHO or NCDC scam. In the Nigerian socio-cultural context, idiots are anti-social, anti-progress, stupid and to be avoided. *Covidiots* are therefore threats to the war against Covid-19. Just like fools or idiots, *covidiots* also extend to those who either are uninformed about the pandemic or else live in denial of it (example v) and those who do not observe travelling restrictions (example vi). The data however reveals that "covidiots" outnumber "non-covidiots" given that the expression constitutes only 30% of the data.

### ***Covid Fund***

- vii) *The trouble with Nigerian government is that people don't trust them again. It has always been like that from Obasanjo to Goodluck and the present one. For example how many times has the president had live audience with Nigerians, rather what we see are ministers. Did Nigerians vote for ministers? Look at covid figures, where do they get them? Where are testing equipment for over 200 million people? What about **covid fund**? (Bluntemperor, July 9, 2020).*
- viii) *As you are probably aware, we are doing everything possible to continue to support our entrepreneurs, artisans and self-employed residents. We assisted over 200 businesses to access the covid loan from CBN through the Microfinance and*

*Enterprise Development Agency (MEDA). We will also ensure that Ekiti residents benefit from the multiple initiatives from the Federal Government to support the economy, including the recently launched covid Survival fund. (Truetalk3139: 8:24pm On Sep 13)*

*Covid fund* also *Covid survival fund* (example viii) is a term coined to denote foreign, private and public sector donations towards the cause of the Corona virus pandemic in Nigeria. It also includes Nigerian Federal government's monetary aid to states as well as state governments' supposed monetary aid to poor communities and individuals to contain/cushion the effects of the pandemic. Unfortunately however, Nigerians do not feel the impact of the fund: not in the upgrading of testing facilities nor on their standard of living (example vii). We can see the theme of distrust, disconnect and suspicion recurring. The speaker in (example vii) says the elected president has apparently handed over his responsibilities to appointed ministers who announce forged figures of infected and dead persons, fail to provide adequate testing facilities and funds to cushion the economic effects of the pandemic. The government is therefore accused of failing in its basic responsibilities.

### ***Coronapocalypse***

ix) *Like seriously!! Speaking of WORKING FROM HOME...With distilleries shifting production to the hot black market hand sanitizer trade, it got governors and NCDC across the country thinking. Could they allow bars to stay open and ensure a safe experience for their citizens during coronapocalypse? You mean keep people from earning a living and providing for their families? Yeah I'm pretty cynical. There is a sense of urgency so something has to be done now ... (Yenefer(f): 7:04am On Mar 23, 2020)*

Nigerians are fundamentally religious. BBC News (2020) reported it as the most religious nation in the world. Chimuanya and Igwebuike (2021) report that of Nigeria's more than 200 million population, 46.3% are Christians, 46% muslims and 7.4% traditional worshippers. This religious streak colours all Nigerians' socio-cultural and linguistic interactions. The term *Coronapocalypse* is evidence of this. The term is a blend from 'Corona' and 'apocalypse'. Apocalypse is a religious term which refers to an unraveling of great knowledge or widespread destruction. It is believed to be associated with the complete destruction of this world order (Carey, 2017). Due to the turn of events, especially the closure of churches and other worship centres, Nigerians fear that the pandemic is a gateway to the 'end of time'. Additionally, their socio-

religiosity and religious economy sired two major portrayals of the pandemic which undoubtedly informed their ‘reconstruction of the pandemic as the long awaited “doomsday” thus the blend. Firstly, its portrayal as an invention of the devil and other dark forces and secondly, its portrayal as a sign of the end of times (Chimuanya and Igwebuikwe (2021, p. 400). The term therefore depicts the period of revelation of government insincerity and insensitivity, a period of universal lockdown; a turning point that is full of hardship in the lives of Nigerians. The speaker in example (ix) is unhappy that people are forced to stay at home hungry and deprived, while some companies like distilleries are allowed to make money through production of hand sanitizers instead of drinks. The data however reveals that the expression is not popular as it constitutes less than 2% of the data.

### ***Scamdemic***

- x) *I am so furious about lots of gullible Nigerians who still believe this **SCAMdemic**. No covid-19 in Nigeria, it's a BIG SCAM, evidences are coming out every day, but no media house thinks about it and asks questions, all they do is to broadcast whatever this fantastically corrupt government dish out to them. (astonished: 6:35pm On May 26, 2020)*
- xi) *The school authorities already knew that COVID19 is nothing but just a **scamdemic**. But since everyone who can profit from the **scamdemic** is already doing so, they decided to join the bandwagon and make some cool cash out of the **scamdemic**. (bluefilm: 3:16pm On Sep 29, 2020)*

As a result of the ‘public distrust in authority and political leadership’ (Brant & Voltmer, 2011, p.1) evidenced by audio deaths and misappropriated Covid-fund, what exists in Nigeria is a *scamdemic*, a scam of enormous and far-reaching proportions, an avenue for profiteering (by the government, school authorities and NCDC), not a pandemic. Whereas the speakers in (examples v and vi) believe that those who doubt the existence of the corona virus are *covidiots*, the speaker in (example x) believes that those who believe in the existence of the virus in Nigeria are gullible. Not even the media is excluded. Covid-19 in Nigeria is as such a high yielding business which everyone who can profit from is already doing so (example xi).

### **Phrasal Forms/Semantic Restriction**

The phrasal expressions found in the data are mostly new collocations which have emerged in Nigerian English as a result of COVID-19 outbreak: numbers 12-14. Although the constituents of the phrasal expressions are existing words in the English language, their pairing

(collocations), contexts of use and connotations are informed by the COVID-19 presence. Consider the examples below:

***Palliative Package***

- xii) *Ndungbu (wicked people), it's only during elections that they become elegant and vibrant. A lot of families can't feed any longer because of lockdown not even a good **palliative package** was given (Tonymegabush(m), July 2, 2020).*
- xiii) *The Edo State Government in collaboration with the United Nations (UN) Women and the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, has provided **palliative packages** to women in Edo State. Commissioner for Women Affairs and Gender Issues, Hon. Mrs. Maria Edeko, said the items were distributed to women in Abudu in Orhionmwon Local Government Area (LGA) and Uromi in Esan North East, LGA, specifically to Women Living with Disabilities, aged women, People Living with HIV and widows (talk2anderson23(m): 7:38pm Jul 19, 2020)*

*Palliative package* (number 7) has been coined for the monetary and food aid supposedly given by the Nigerian federal and state governments as well as the private sector to IDP (internally displaced persons), poor communities and supposed poor individuals to cushion the economic effects of the pandemic. The public interest and concern generated by these packages is attested to by the relatively high incidence of its occurrence in the data, 71%. The speaker in (example xii) complains that the government is wicked: Elected office holders are quick to share food items during electioneering campaigns but cannot give any meaningful help to the many needy families to cushion the effects of the pandemic. The mixing of the Igbo word *Ndungbu* in an otherwise English sentence gives pragmatic force to the utterance (Inyima, 2021). It succinctly captures the emotional state of the speaker. Anchimbe (2007) describes this as 'linguabridity' and 'identity protection' (p. 15 & 17) where 'circumstance, convention and convenience' (Bamgbose, 1971, p. 6) informs a speaker's choice of language in multilingual societies. Code-switching and code-mixing are common features of Nigerian English.

***Physical Distancing***

- xiv) *Do I need to say anything about **physical distancing**? We simply don't see any need for it. People sit together chatting and playing nonsense games (highbee02(m): 12:58pm On Jul 13, 2020)*
- xv) *I think **physical distancing** should be applied by specifying the space between worshippers instead of fixing the no. of persons.*



*Churches and Mosques should be allowed the freedom to arrange seats based on advised physical distance. Consideration should be given to the size of the Church/Mosque (streetfabulous: 8:54pm Aug 01, 2020)*

### ***Social Distancing***

- xvi) *Since the outbreak of the corona virus disease 2019 (Covid-19), we have been practicing **social distancing**, no handshake policy, even staying indoors. Many people have adopted different greeting strategies as handshake is on hold for now. (BankyGee(m): 2:47pm , Apr 07, 2020)*
- xvii) *Campaigns are actively ongoing in Edo state oo with so many crowds with markets and other things moving well, but just mention opening school and semi illiterate Nigerians will remember **social distancing**, and how difficult it is for children to practice, as if ghosts are the ones doing campaign. Is Nigeria not a wonderful place?(Mistakemaker: 1:25pm , Sep 05, 2020)*

*Physical distancing* (number 8) is distinguished from *social distance* (number 9). *Social distance* in the Nigerian context is restricted to social behaviours and activities: greeting by hugging, shaking hands, kissing, partying, clubbing etc., (examples xvi and xvii) while *physical distance* is interpreted as avoiding physical contact or abstaining from any physical touch (examples xvi and xv) so non-contact greeting is viewed as maintaining *social distance* (example xvi). The meanings of the expressions are as such restricted in the Nigerian context. In (example xvii), we once again see the lack of trust in the intentions of the Nigerian government. The same government that has shut down schools to enforce physical and social distancing has allowed political campaigns where people gather together unrestricted.

### **Semantic Extension**

This involves the expansion of the semantic scope of existing English words. Jowitt (2019) considers semantic extension as one of the major word formation processes in Nigerian English. Part of the Nigerian English response to the COVID-19 pandemic has therefore been the use of some native English words to express additional experiences and meanings (numbers 10 and 11). Consider the examples below:

### ***Palliative***

- (xviii) *Do you know that some of the so called private school teachers still eat bc [because] they have their public counterparts to borrow money from? Either campaign for schools to resume or **palliatives** for private school teachers (bettermike, July 9, 2020).*



- (xix) *Furthermore, many philanthropists have exhibited their humanitarian altruistic nature during this rampaging Covid-19. They donated **palliatives** both to government and individuals to ameliorate the effect of the virus on the society (grassrootsig, July 9, 2020).*

A palliative (noun) ordinarily is a 'symptom-treating medicine'. It refers to preliminary medical care given to a sick patient either 'to reduce the violence of a disease or ease its symptoms without curing the underlying disease' (Merriam-Webster, 2022). This meaning has however been expanded in Nigerian English in recent times as seen in examples (xviii and xix) to include monetary aid, food (especially rice, noodles) and medical supplies given by the private sector to government or given by the government and the private sector to communities and individuals to mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic. Thus palliative (noun) as currently used in Nigerian English in response to COVID-19, means 'something that cushions the economic hardship and effects occasioned by the pandemic.' Also, *Coughing and sneezing* reported and reputed to be symptoms of COVID-19, have acquired new connotations in the Nigerian context (example i). They have become synonymous with the disease such that people rarely cough or sneeze in public anymore for fear of stigmatization and detention by NCDC (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control)!

### **Word Resuscitation**

Resuscitated words in the data include hitherto unused words which have gained currency in Covid-19 Nigeria. Numbers 7, 10 and 11 webinar, Veronica bucket, and a(symptomatic) (table 1) are lexical items which were almost non-existent in everyday Nigerian English vocabulary prior to the pandemic. As table 2 reveals, these words have gained currency in Nigerian English. Webinar occurred 215 times (61.4%), Veronica bucket occurred 175 times in the data (50%) and a(symptomatic) occurred 190 times (77.1%). The reasons for this are not far-fetched. The term *Veronica/Monica bucket*, relatively unknown in Nigerian English prior to the pandemic, has come into frequent use because of the WHO and NCDC (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control) insistence on hand washing with running water. The bucket has a tap fixed at the bottom. It was invented by Veronica Bekoe, a Ghanaian, to help contain the spread of infectious diseases through hand washing in the absence of conventional running water. The bucket has become a common sight at shops, restaurants, garages, petrol stations and such other public places in Nigeria and therefore become part of the linguistic repertoire of an average Nigerian. Also, due to stringent restrictions on movement and the emphasis on non-contact meetings, government

establishments, business enterprises and other cooperate bodies have resorted to online meetings hence the reintroduction or resuscitation of the word *webinar*. *A(symptomatic)* although usual in medical discourse has become common from over-use in awareness campaigns and media broadcasts on Covid-19.

### **Acronym**

Acronym found in the data include abbreviations or first letters of terms, names, institutions and governmental and non-governmental organizations which have emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the activities to contain its spread and fatality. They include abbreviations derived from newly established committees like PTF (Presidential Task Force on COVID-19), or some humanitarian organizations like CACOVID (Coalition Against COVID). Also, NCDC (National Centre for Disease Control) although long in existence has gained currency in its use. Below are some examples of their uses in some expressions.

- (xx) *The **ncdc** said that a sudden loss of taste and smell with fever, headache or runny nose may be COVID-19 and not malaria. “Do not ignore these symptoms. Call your state hotline to arrange for a COVID-19 test immediately (Perfecttouchade, July23, 2020).*
- (xxi) *They'll definitely come up with something before their next **ptf** briefing, we can as well tag some national TV stations like channels TV, Arise news etc. (Yenefer, March 23, 2020)*
- (xxii) *According to some media reports, BUA donated N1billion to the **cacovid** basket fund put together by the organised private sector to support the federal government. It also reportedly bought 20 pickup vans and 4 Ambulances for the Kano State Government, and gave Edo State government N100 million and two Ambulances (Damistorian, April15, 2020).*

Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, Nigerians rarely knew of the agency that is saddled with the responsibility of controlling the spread of diseases in the country --- National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) but since the outbreak of COVID-19, it has become a household acronym. *NCDC* is the only authorized agency that carries out COVID-19 tests and issues results; it also releases all medical and diagnostic information and protocols relating to the disease. *NCDC* officials, who are almost present in every state in Nigeria, coordinate efforts aimed at stemming the tide of the disease. In example (xx), the speaker relays information released by *NCDC* on symptoms of COVID-19. To have a united front in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, the Nigerian government headed by President Muhammadu Buhari on March 9, 2020, established the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 (PTF), “to

coordinate and oversee Nigeria's multi-sector intergovernmental efforts to contain the spread and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria (<https://statehouse.gov.ng/covid19/objectives/>). *PTF* which is headed by the current Secretary to the government of the Federation Mr. Boss Mustapha has a national outlook and coordinates all efforts geared towards combating the pandemic. It holds briefings, releases guidelines to all tiers of government and institutions and reports directly to the President. Owing to its pivotal relevance in the fight against COVID-19, *PTF* has become an often used acronym in official and informal communications as exemplified in (xxi) where the speaker is looking forward to another of its regular briefing. The Coalition Against COVID-19 (*CACOVID*) is a private sector task force in partnership with the Federal Government, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) with the sole aim of combating Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Nigeria (<https://www.cacovid.org/>). As a task force, *CACOVID* receives donations from industries and business organisations, as seen in example (xxii), to support government in providing, equipping and improving medical facilities across the country. These acronyms represent further evidence of the linguistic effect of COVID-19 on Nigerian English.

The analyzed excerpts reveal the use of different linguistic codes, Standard English, semi-educated English, indigenous codes, Nigerian pidgin and Educated Nigerian English. This underscores the linguistic situation in Nigeria where speakers have a myriad of language choices and different levels of proficiency in English and would often code-switch or code-mix (Jowitt, 1991; Anchimbe, 2011). Anchimbe (2007; 2011) see this as unavoidable in post-colonial spaces and an expression of the inborn element of hybridization which the indigenous peoples have grown with. Additionally, the switches and mixings which are often informed by context and topic of discourse help sustain the mixed or contact languages. Mensah (2021) sees the mixing/switching to Nigerian Pidgin as a way of accommodating non-users of English and giving a greater sense of belonging to speakers of non-Standard English within the community (p.4). Inyabri, Aboh and Mensah (2021) opine that the switches to Nigerian Pidgin are laden with semantic undertones. They serve to aptly convey Nigerians' disapproval of government's management of the pandemic and additionally make light of it. It is 'an offensive weapon in the hands of the oppressed...' (p.11). Nigerians have thus creatively deployed their experiences and perceptions of the pandemic in the expansion of the vocabulary of Nigerian English.

## Conclusion

This study provided valuable ideas that are to be added to second language speaker response to the communication needs occasioned by the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has altered Nigeria's socio-economic and political realities. This alteration has affected Nigerians' communication habits and requirements especially their use of the English language. They have adjusted their linguistic capabilities to effectively grapple with the situation. To this end, they have coined new words and extended the meaning of some existing English words to cater for their expressional requirements. New phrasal forms and collocations whose method of pairing as well as context of use is purely Nigerian have also emerged. Some hitherto dormant words have gained currency and new acronyms spring up. The study thus identified parts of the Nigerian English response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and observed that the emergence of the disease has impacted greatly on the linguistic framing of most Nigerians. This reiterates the fact that language is dynamic and infinitely amenable to change, even pandemic-induced change.

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