

Semantics of the virolect with particular regard to the Hungarian language

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: the COVID-19 pandemic has a major impact on the various arenas of communication. The most striking language changes can be observed in the lexicon. Since 2020, thousands of new pandemic-related words and phrases, so-called virologisms, appeared in many languages of the world, including the Hungarian, English, German and Russian. It is worthwhile to examine virologisms from a word-formation aspect and a semantic aspect. The present study focuses mainly on the semantics of the Hungarian virologisms. Linguistic examples are reviewed from the aspect of lexical (i.e. word) relationships such as synonymy, polysemy, or homonymy.

Objective: to identify the semantics of virologisms of the Hungarian language (in comparison with the English, German and Russian).

Research materials: published articles, studies and dictionaries in the Hungarian, Russian and English languages with particular regard to the Karanténszótár, COVIDictionary and Slovarj ruskogo jazyka koronavirusnoj epochi (Dictionary of the Russian Language of the Coronavirus Era).

Results and novelty of the research: to the best of the authors' knowledge, no comprehensive work presenting an analysis of virologisms from a semantic aspect has been published, up to the beginning of 2022 in the Hungarian or in any other language they are familiar with, as the majority of the studies approach the problem from a formal perspective. The present study points out intra-lexical and inter-lexical semantic relationships (e.g. synonymy, polysemy, and homonymy) that can be observed between lexemes belonging to the same language register and those belonging to different language registers: while synonymy makes the talk about the pandemic more colorful, polysemy and homonymy can sometimes be a source of misunderstanding.

Key words: virology, virolect, virologisms, semantics, synonymy, polysemy, homonymy, Karanténszótár, COVIDictionary, Slovarj ruskogo jazyka koronavirusnoj epochi (Dictionary of the Russian Language of the Coronavirus Era)

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Семантика виролекта с особым вниманием к венгерскому языку

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Введение: Пандемия COVID-19 оказывает серьезное влияние на различные области коммуникации. Наиболее яркие языковые изменения наблюдаются в словарном составе языка. С 2020 г. во многих языках мира, включая венгерский, английский, немецкий и русский, появились тысячи новых слов и словосочетаний, связанных с пандемией, так называемых вирусологизмов. Вирусологизмы заслуживают рассмотрения с точки зрения формы (словообразования), а также и значения. Настоящее исследование посвящено в основном семантике венгерских вирусологизмов. Языковые примеры рассматриваются с точки зрения лексических отношений, таких как синонимия, полисемия или омонимия.

Цель: выявить семантику вирусологизмов венгерского языка (в сопоставлении с английским, немецким и русским).

Материалы исследования: опубликованные статьи, исследования и словари венгерского, русского и английского языков, с особым вниманием к словарю карантинной лексики венгерского («*Karanténszótár*») и английского («*COVIDictionary*») языков и «Словарь русского языка коронавирусной эпохи».

Результаты и научная новизна. Насколько известно авторам, до начала 2022 г. не было опубликовано ни одной комплексной работы, представляющей анализ вирусологизмов с семантической точки зрения, на венгерском или любом другом известном им языке, поскольку большинство исследований подходят к вопросу с формальной точки зрения. Настоящее исследование указывает на возможные внутри- и межъязыковые семантические отношения (например, в области синонимии, полисемии, омонимии), которые можно наблюдать между лексемами, принадлежащими как к одному, так и к разным языковым регистрам: в то время как синонимия делает разговоры о пандемии более красочными, полисемия и омонимия иногда могут быть источником непонимания.

Ключевые слова: виролингвистика, виролект, вирусологизмы, семантика, синонимия, полисемия, омонимия, словарь карантинной лексики венгерского («*Karanténszótár*») и английского («*COVIDictionary*») языков, Словарь русского языка коронавирусной эпохи

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Introduction

In an earlier study [11], the authors of this paper dealt with the virolect as an emerging new language variety, the subfields and genres of virologistics, the virolinguistic landscape as a type of linguistic landscape, the lexical elements related to the pandemic (virologisms), but the intra-lexical system of semantic relations has not yet been discussed. In the present study, the authors consider the possibilities of classification into lexical (i.e. word) relationships, mainly based on example material in Hungarian (but also Slovak, English, German and Russian) and also examine some semantic phenomena that can be interpreted by considering language contact. A number of linguistic works promising a complete analysis of the topic were published by the beginning of 2022 [8]. However, the authors of present study know of no comprehensive semantic analysis of the virolect in any of the languages they are familiar with, thus this study work can be considered pioneering in some respects. The relationship between the virolect and metaphors is discussed in several studies [24; 14], but this subfield of semantics will now be set aside.

Material and methods

Since the advent of Covid-19, thousands of new pandemic-related words and phrases, so-called virologisms, appeared [11, 96–100] in many languages of the world, including Hungarian, English, German and Russian. It is worthwhile to examine virologisms from a word-formation aspect and a semantic aspect. In the course of the analysis, the study compares the meanings of Hungarian lexemes belonging to different language registers, sometimes comparing them with the examples found in other languages. The comparisons made here are based on the dictionaries titled *Karanténszótár* [28], *COVIDictionary* [26], *Slovarj russkogo jazyka koronavirusnoj epochi* [23] and studies and articles on the subject published in various languages.

Results

Language varieties and lexical relationships

«Virologistics can be seen as a heterogeneous, general linguistic discipline that enables the discourse between linguistic branches that might seem distant at first glance but are identical in their themes (focused on the virus)» [11, 94]. Thus, virologistics is a kind

of umbrella term that involves the study of different entities of the virolect – e.g. neologisms, memes, emojis or outdoor signs – that serve as a warning, as entertainment or as a way to relieve stress [11, 93–94]. In this sense, it should also be laid down that the virolect is not a uniform language variety, but at least three registers need to be considered. The first one is the formal variety, which can be identified as a part of the medical language. The second one is the neutral register, which can be linked to the spoken and written standard language (including the journalistic style). The third one is the informal variety, which is mostly related to jokes and trolling (e.g. the so-called coronavirus memes) characterized by the use of blend words and morphological reanalysis (folk etymology), e.g. *kovidióta* ‘covidiot’, *kovidinka* ‘covidork’, *maradjotthonka* ‘stayhome clothing’ [28, 51–52]. Of course, this phenomenon is characteristic not only to the Hungary language, but there are parallels also in for example English and Russian: *covidiot* [26, 31] and *ковидоидиот - ковидо-идиот* ‘covidiot’ [23, 119].

Although technical languages can be distinguished from other language varieties primarily based on the use of terminology – as technical terms are used very often in a given field, but they are rarely used outside of it [9, 25] –, a sharp demarcation between the three registers (as is usually the case for language varieties in general) is almost impossible, since the phenomena involved have an impact on society as a whole. The problematic nature of such demarcation is also shown by the fact that the meaning and stylistic value of a given word is often different in everyday language use than in a technical language: e.g. the concept of *democracy* is almost indefinable in the standard, but can be precisely defined in legal language, the stylistic value of *primitive personality* is neutral in medical language, but offensive in the standard [9, 27–8]. This finding is based on Putnam’s idea of linguistic division of labor, according to which the primary, basic meaning of words (e.g. *oltás* ‘vaccination’, *járványhelyzet* ‘pandemic situation’ etc.) is linked to ordinary people, while their more detailed, more professional meaning is only linked to experts (doctors, virologists etc.). Of course, there can also be migration between language varieties: the terms *FFP2-es maszk* ‘FFP2 mask’, *reprodukciós ráta* ‘reproduction ratio’ or *szekvenálás* ‘sequencing’ had belonged to a technical language, but have become part of the standard overnight [15]. As a result, some variants of the virolect have come to contain words

that otherwise essentially belong in another register.

In connection with language registers, it is also worthwhile to examine the different ways in which they relate to lexical relationships. Lexical relationships allow for the interpretation and description of lexical elements of a language in a specific system, but they do not always facilitate comprehension and can sometimes even make it more difficult. Polysemy (as a manifestation of linguistic economy) and synonymy (which in some respects can even be considered an expression of tautology) are examples of potential sources of misunderstanding. This is why none of the lexical relationships is truly typical in technical languages, where clarity is the goal: the referential meaning of terms refers to an elaborated system of concepts, explicitly defined or identifiable based on necessary and sufficient features (not prototypical), does not depend on individual perception or experience (there is no individual variability), is independent of context, is not modified by pragmatic factors; hyponymy, i.e. subordinate, superordinate and coordinate conceptual relations to other terms, plays a decisive role in the meaning relations between the terms, while synonymy, polysemy and collocation do not play a role in defining their meaning [9, 29]. Naturally, this does not mean that there are no polysemous or synonymous meanings in technical languages, only that such meanings are less common in these language registers compared to other ones.

In the present study, the authors mainly examine synonymous, polysemous and homonymous meanings, but allomorphs and paronyms are also addressed in connection with them.

Synonymy

Synonyms can be divided into two major groups. In the first case, the words are freely interchangeable in any (non-idiomatic) context (this can be called cognitive synonymy), but in the other case they are not (this can be called near-synonymy). However, with regard to the limitation of interchangeability, it is often difficult to decide whether one is still dealing with synonymy at all, or rather with subordinate concepts (hyponyms) of a given superordinate concept (hyperonym) within a semantic field, whose relationship to each other is coordinate (cohyponyms). This is well exemplified by the pairs *pandémia* – *világjárvány* ‘pandemic’, *járvány* ‘epidemic, pandemic’ – *betegség* ‘disease’ or *koronavírus* ‘coronavirus’ – *vírus* ‘virus’, the first of which are clearly synonymous, while the other

two are often also used as synonyms, they can also be classified as items in a semantic field.

With regard to cognitive synonymy, there is a need to look at several groups. The first includes synonyms that show a partial morphological difference, i.e. were formed from the same root via synonymous suffixes, e.g. *oltakozik* – *oltakodik*, *oltózik* – *oltódik* – *oltószik* ‘gets vaccinated, takes the vaccine’ [17, 4] or *vakcinál* – *vakcináz* ‘vaccinates’ [18, 37]. A Russian parallel to this in the field of noun formation is for example *антивакцинист* – *антивакциционер* ‘vaccine denier’ [23, 20] where the *-ник*, *-щик* are also synonymous suffixes.

In the second group, a verb with a synthetic structure is opposed to an analytic construction containing a reflexive pronoun or an analytic construction formed from the substantive verb and an adverbial participle (transgressive): *oltakozik* – *beoltatja magát* ‘takes the vaccine’ [3], *megvakcinálták* ‘they vaccinated him/her’ – *meg lett vakcinálva* ‘he/she has been vaccinated’ [18, 38].

The third group includes pairs one of whose members is of foreign origin and the other is Hungarian. There are cases in which a single lexeme is used in both languages (*karantén* – *vesztégház* ‘quarantine’, *antivaxxer* – *oltástagadó* ‘vaccine denier’, *oltóanyag* – *vakcina* ‘vaccine’, *lockdown* – *lezárás*) and those where a single compound word is used in Hungarian and a syntagma is used in English (*oltáskampány* – *vaccination campaign*, *oltásturizmus* – *vaccine tourism*) [4, 67]. Although it can also be said about the first two groups that they are often discouraged by linguistic purists [3; 17], most attacks are aimed at pairs of this third group, as the Hungarian variant is considered by some to be more beautiful and better and the foreign language equivalents to be superfluous [25].

As a comparison, in Russian, triads of synonyms can sometimes be encountered, e.g. *локдаун* ‘lockdown’ – *карантин* ‘quarantine’ – *(само)изоляция* ‘(self)isolation’, the first one of which is a neologism of English origin and the other two are well-established loanwords [27, 113–116]. It should also be noted that the Russian coronavirus dictionary [23, 25] does not contain *противопрививочник*, a lexeme formed with a Russian prefixoid, but only its English-prefixed *антипрививочник* ‘anti-vaxxer’ variant, despite the fact that the former is well documented in Internet sources and the same

dictionary lists not less than four words formed with the prefixoid *npomubo-* [23, 217–218].

The fourth group includes synonym groups of the English name of the disease *coronavirus* – *covid-19* – *corona* – *covid* – *infection* [13, 61], further expansion of which is possible in the different recipient languages [16].

In connection with synonymy, the names of the different virus variants should also be mentioned. Initially, each variant was given the designation *British*, *South African*, *Brazilian* and *Indian*, but the countries concerned felt that it would have a serious impact on tourism and infringed on their cultural rights (think of the names *Spanish flu* or *franciakór* ‘French disease’, an old name for syphilis in Hungarian) and so the WHO – after ruling out the possibility to name each mutation after a Greek deity or songbird [5; 10] – switched to naming after the letters of the Greek alphabet.

Finally, there are pairs of synonyms that emerged in education terminology during the pandemic: *hibrid oktatás* ‘hybrid learning’ – *vegyes oktatás* ‘blended learning’, *online oktatás* ‘online learning’ – *digitális oktatás* ‘digital learning’, *online vizsga* ‘online exam’ – *távvezsga* ‘distance exam’. The interesting thing about them is that although they are used both in Hungary and in the Hungarian-inhabited regions of Slovakia, their frequency of occurrence is different: of the names appearing in the Hungarian texts in Slovakia it can be said that while the terms of the official prospectuses of educational institutions use the terms as they are used in Hungary, in Hungarian press articles in Slovakia, in addition to technical terms, standard language equivalents also occur [21, 58–59].

Polysemy

Polysemous meanings and semantic networks of different words are formed via semantic broadening: the name of one concept and/or sign object is transferred to another (third, fourth etc.) concept and/or sign object based on either metaphoricity or metonymicity: Some words undergo semantic change: they gain new meanings or senses (or connotations) and/or get placed in new association fields (*korlátozások* ‘restrictions’, *karantén* ‘quarantine’, *élesztő* ‘yeast’, *alapbetegség* ‘underlying condition’ etc.). It follows that there exists a primary, basic meaning¹, which is usually the

¹ The primary or basic meaning here is not the same as the meaning designated as denotative, referential, cognitive etc., but instead, what is being referred to is the main meaning that forms the base of the other meanings.

first one listed in the dictionary material. Naturally, the primary meaning needs not be the starting point for the development of further meanings, which is well illustrated by the idea of family resemblance used in cognitive semantics.

The phenomena associated with virolect polysemy can be divided into three groups:

1. The primary meaning of a word/lexeme is relegated to the background² and is replaced by the most recent but most frequent one. Good examples for this are the names of the different virus variants [19]: the primary meaning of the words *alfa*, *béta*, *delta* ‘alpha, beta, delta’ in the explanatory dictionaries is connected to the letters of the Greek alphabet, but as a result of recent years’ events, this meaning is (usually) not the one that comes to mind first. Naturally, this does not mean that these new meanings will be the first ones listed in newer editions of the explanatory dictionaries, but it cannot be ruled out that they will be included in the lexicographic material in the near future.

This phenomenon is even more pronounced in the case of frequently used lexical elements: an example is *teszt* ‘test’ and the noun *tesztelés* ‘testing’ derived from it, one of the primary meanings of which is related to the assessment of knowledge and not to the method of screening for the disease; the verb *eloltották* [20], which does not refer to the suppression of a fire, but to the situation when all the vaccines have been used up (the verb *olt* does mean both ‘extinguish’ and ‘vaccinate’) or the noun *hullám* ‘wave’ whose most common meaning used today is not about the movement of water but about periodic or episodic increases in the incidence of a disease. The *Karanténszótár* [28] does not contain a *hullám* headword, the *COVIDictionary* [26, 71] contains only *second wave*, but the *Slovarj russkogo jazyka koronavirusnoj epochi* [23, 41] has a lengthy entry for *волна* ‘wave’. At the same time, there is no information given on the extent to which this meaning has become the primary one. The noun *korona* ‘crown’ but also ‘corona’ should also be included here, which first went through an ellipsis and only then did the semantic broadening of the initial form occur.

Naturally, semantic broadening can be observed not only for words but also for syntagmata: the

phrase *kötelező oltás* ‘compulsory vaccination, vaccine mandate’ was used in the past almost exclusively for children, now it is used to mean a coronavirus vaccine mandate, the phrase *társadalmi távolságtartás* ‘social distancing’ can be interpreted not only as distancing oneself from something, but also as a basic concept of proxemics [7].

2. There are also cases when words that did not exist before gained several meanings in parallel: the term *posztkovid* ‘postcovid’ refers not only to the symptoms experienced after the disease, but also to the future period after the end of the pandemic.

3. A word with a single meaning becomes a multi-meaning word: for example, *omikron*³, denoting the previously little known 15th letter of the Greek alphabet, has now become well known overnight in connection with its recently added new meaning. The source of another example is Slovak and German: the *koronakríza* ‘COVID crisis’ and the *Coronakrise* ‘the same’ does not only denote the economic aspects of the pandemic (as it is in Hungarian) but are also used in a ‘pandemic situation meaning’.

Allomorphs are (in the absence of appropriate examples) not discussed in more detail, so it should be noted here that in the Hungarian language varieties spoken in Slovakia, pairs of internationalisms often coexist as variants with minimal difference in form where the *koronakrízis* – *koronakríza* (< Slovak) ‘COVID crisis’ pair also belongs. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that there are differences in the scope of use of the two words (the latter is exclusively spoken) and that a partial word split can also be observed. With regard to allomorphs, the Russian shows several examples where the coexistence of a one-word form and a hyphenated form can be observed, which suggests that the lexemes are neologisms: *коронакризис* – *корона-кризис* [23, 158] ‘COVID crisis’, *ковидоидиум* – *ковидо-идиум* [23, 119].

Homonymy

There are three known ways homonyms are created (the first case involves only one language and the other two involve more than one language):

1. Two meanings were once in a polysemous relationship, but no connection can be discovered

² This phenomenon also draws attention to the fact that one cannot at all be sure that the original basic meaning of a given word was the one which linguists would think today/

³ It should be noted that none of the dictionaries examined by the authors of present study contains the word, which can be explained in all likelihood by the fact that so far it did not have more than one meaning, similarly to the *alfa* ‘alpha’ and *delta* words or the word *ómega* ‘omega’ denoting the last letter of the Greek alphabet.

between them even for etymologists (these are called pseudohomonyms), 2. two forms were once different, but then converged with time and now they are now completely identical, 3. a word form is identical to an already existing word (usually an acronym) from the moment of its creation.

An example of the first case is the abbreviation *SARS* in the official name of the coronavirus, the use of which the WHO avoids in order to prevent panic in regions previously hit by SARS and so that people do not think that current coronavirus mutations cause a disease similar to the SARS of 2003 [6]. It is therefore a question of deliberately increasing the distance between two related names so that speakers do not see a connection between them, so this example illustrates the problem of the synchronic and the diachronic approach to the demarcation between polysemy and homonymy [22, 55–58].

Because convergent development takes a relatively long time, our further examples illustrate the aforementioned third way of homonym creation.

Although the Hungarian-based OTP Bank had operated in Slovakia for a long period of time, the acronym OTP used in the Slovak language indicates that certain places are only open to persons who are either vaccinated (O = *očkovany* ‘vaccinated’) or have a recent coronavirus test (T = *testovaný* ‘tested’) or have overcome the disease (P = *prekonan* ‘has overcome’). This naturally results in the use of the abbreviation and its derivatives in the Hungarian press in Slovakia (*OTP-rezsim* ‘OTP regime’, *OTP-üzemmód* ‘OTP mode’ etc.), so these instances of homonymy are mainly characteristic to the Hungarian language varieties used in Slovakia.

The German 3G abbreviation also results in a similar homonymous relationship, which, in addition to the mobile Internet standard, also relates to the opportunities available to persons vaccinated (*geimpft* ‘vaccinated’), recovered (*genesen* ‘recovered’) and tested (*getestet* ‘tested’). Another instance of interlingual homonymy results from the fact that a different number of coronavirus waves are distinguished in each country: the wave that is designated as the fourth wave in Hungary is called the third wave in Slovakia.

The name *omikron* ‘omicron’ with has been addressed in the context of polysemy, but so far no explanation has been offered as to why the newer mutation is not named after the Greek letter that comes after *delta*. One reason for this was that there also were eight less significant variants of

the coronavirus (*epsilon*, *zeta*, *eta* etc.). Another reason is that the next possible letter, *nu* can be easily confused with the English adjective *new* (*nu coronavirus* ~ *new coronavirus*). However, the most important reason from the aspect of homonymy is that the Greek letter *xi* matches the name of the current Chinese supreme leader, thus, in order to avoid possible malicious speculation, the WHO has decided not to use it as a name [12]. Incidentally, using letters to identify the coronavirus variants also contributed to the non-emergence of another pair of homonymous forms, as not only the *omicron* originated in South Africa but the *beta* variant also.

The mutation called IHU should also be mentioned here, which was not named after a letter of the Greek alphabet, but was instead given the name of the French laboratory in which it was discovered. Homonymy emerged as a result in this case too because the English acronym IHU stands for ‘I Hear You’ or ‘I Hate You’.

The members of the *nu* - *new* pair differ partially in form and completely in meaning, so they are neither homonyms nor variants, but belong in paronymy. The same can be said of the names *pandémia* ‘pandemic’ – *plandémia* ‘plandemic’: the latter suggests that the crisis that took place was not a random occurrence, but a pre-planned epidemic [29, 16]. A similar phenomenon can be observed for proper names: The figure *Djokovid* was created from the surname of Novak Đoković due to his infection and the fact of his not being vaccinated was added to this given name (*novac*).

Constructions involving folk etymology like the English expressions *pando* or *Nightingales* [1, 32] are similar in nature. Similar examples can be found in Hungarian. One is linked to the name of the disease: because older speakers do not understand the term *kovid* ‘covid’, they reinterpret it as *kovi*, which is a blended form of *koronavírus* ‘coronavirus’. The other is the previously mentioned *kovidinka* ‘covidork’, which sounds like the name of the grape variety *kövidinka* [28, 21].

Discussion and conclusions

In the present paper the authors dealt with the semantics of the virolect: the focus was primarily on the lexical relationships of synonymy, polysemy and homonymy, but other semantic relations were also touched upon in connection with them.

No example of such a rapid and large-scale enrichment of the Hungarian vocabulary has been

seen since the age of the language reform (in the 18th and 19th century) [11, 96], but it can also be predicted that virologisms will rapidly become archaic (and undergo semantic narrowing) in the period after the pandemic.

Further research may be focused on the semantic and pragmatic study of virus-warning emojis [30] and the analysis of lexical relationships forming the basis of script clashes [2] in coronavirus memes spreading on social media sites [11, 103–105].

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