




(Spanish) Terminology and writing in COVID-19 times

Terminología y escritura en tiempos de COVID-19

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Abbreviations

DPD: *Diccionario panhispánico de dudas* (Panhispanic Dictionary of Doubts)

DTM: *Diccionario de términos médicos* (Dictionary of Medical Terms)

RAE: *Real Academia Española* (Royal Spanish Academy)

WHO: World Health Organization

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Before we begin, we want to “greet” (*saludar*) in a special way, the community of scientists who are fighting this large pandemic today, especially since it seems that this verb has also mutated with coronavirus¹; we read the latter in the News section of the website Fundéu BBVA (*Fundación del español urgente*, Madrid), created in 2005, under the sponsorship and advice of the *Real Academia Española* (RAE [Royal Spanish Academy]) to ensure the proper use of the Spanish language in the media, mainly the news media. Paradoxically, this term comes from the Latin *salutare*, with the meaning of “wish for health” or “to say health”; currently, this word and the gestures associated with it have gone to the opposite extreme of its meaning, to the point that right now a *saludo* (greeting) is synonymous with “taking health away” through contagion, instead of giving or offering it¹.

When in January 2020, the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2) was officially recognized by the Chinese authorities as the causative agent of a series of previous cases of pneumonia diagnosed in Wuhan, China, and the disease that produced this virus, named, in its original language, Novel Coronavirus Infectious Disease 2019 –from which its well-known acronym COVID-19 arises–, was declared, the same month, by the World Health Organization (WHO) as an emergency of international concern, and as a pandemic on March², no one imagined the avalanche of new terms, and others of not very frequent use, that would begin to swarm in the health community.

The RAE pointed out, on its online platform, that exceptional situations generate new words that can become ephemeral; however, it points out that there are others that will be remembered because they have entered our daily conversation³.

With the aim of communicating well, given the dissimilar ways used by the media indistinctly for some of the terms associated with the current world context, we show some of the already coined proposals that will rep-

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resent a mandatory reference for our health professionals.

Coronavirus

This voice is written in Spanish in a single word, with a Capital letter if it is used as the common name of the virus or, by metonymy of the disease. It is invariable in the plural. The qualifier comes from the resemblance of the outer part of the virus with the solar corona; it is a common name taken from the scientific Latin and registered in the *Diccionario de términos médicos* (DTM [Dictionary of Medical Terms]) of the *Real Academia Nacional de Medicina* (Royal National Academy of Medicine [Spain])³.

¿COVID-19 or Covid-19?

The WHO has proposed this acronym taking the English abbreviations of the words Corona, Virus and Disease, while the number after the hyphen comes from the last two digits of the year 2019. As it is an acronym for recent creation is not lexicalized yet, thus, it is indicated that all its letters should be capitalized. In the event that it eventually became the common name for the disease, the writing would be all lowercase: covid-19³.

This identification applies to the disease, not the virus, which the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses has designated as SARS-CoV-2.

COVID-19: she or he?

According to the RAE, the use of both genders is valid in Spanish: the acronym COVID-19 is normally used in masculine due to the influence of the coronavirus voice's gender, and of other viral diseases that take the name of the virus that causes them as metonymy; likewise, the use in feminine is justified because the nucleus of the acronym is resulting from Corona, Virus and Disease³.

Epidemia (epidemic) and pandemia (pandemic), differences

The RAE and the DTM establish the traditional distinction between the terms *epidemia* (epidemic) and *pandemia* (pandemic): the first refers to a disease that spreads through a country for some time, while the second is indicated when the disease extends to other countries⁴.

Therefore, when we refer to the spread of the new coronavirus and the infections it causes, it would be possible to use, in general, the term pandemic, since, according to the COVID-19 Panel of the Johns Hopkins University Center for Science and

Systems Engineering (USA), until June 2, 2020, people infected with the virus had been detected in 188 countries⁵.

However, the WHO prefers to use pandemic only when a new serious disease has spread to all health zones in the world. In the meantime, there is considered more appropriate to use the term epidemic or, in a more technical context, a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC). It is also recalled that the expressions *pandemia global* (global pandemic) and *pandemia mundial* (worldwide pandemic) are not considered incorrect redundancies⁴.

Epicentro del foco del virus (epicenter of the virus outbreak), redundant expression

It is advisable to speak of the *foco del virus* (virus outbreak) or the *epicentro del virus* (virus epicenter), rather than “the epicenter of the virus outbreak”, which reiterates excessively the same information⁴.

Some institutions have also shared, from their point of view, those linguistic questions that may interest any Spanish-speaking country.

Cuarentena (quarantine), meaning

The term *cuarentena* (quarantine), as indicated in the Dictionary of the Spanish language, is a “preventive isolation to which people or animals are subjected for a period of time, for health reasons”; therefore, it does not necessarily imply a 40 day period⁴.

Enfrentarse a or enfrentarse con, no enfrentarse ante (Use of different prepositions with the verb “to confront” in Spanish)

Enfrentarse (*confronting*), meaning “to confront someone or something, especially a problem or danger”, is used in Spanish with the prepositions *a* or *con*, hence, the form *enfrentarse ante* is discouraged.

According to the *Diccionario panhispánico de dudas* (DPD [Panhispanic Dictionary of Doubts]), the verb *enfrentar* (confront) can be used without any preposition or, more frequently, with the pronoun *se* and a complement introduced by *con* or *a*. It must never be used like “*nuestra generación se enfrenta ante un reto...*”⁶ (our generation confronts a challenge...).

Medications: uppercase and lowercase⁷

The trade names of the drugs are written with a capital letter in Spanish, but the names of the active ingredients with which they are produced are written

in lowercase.

In the media, there is hesitation in the writing of medications, as shown in the following examples: “China registra buenos resultados con Favipiravir, un antigripal usado contra el coronavirus”, “Seis alternativas naturales al Ibuprofeno” o “Los dos se colocan con ‘captagon’, la droga de moda en Oriente Medio”. (“China records good results with Favipiravir, an anti-flu used against the coronavirus”, “Six natural alternatives to Ibuprofen” or “Both got high with ‘captagon’, the fashionable drug in the Middle East”).

As the Spanish Academic Spelling explains, “the names of the active principles of medicines, that is, the medication itself, are common and are written with a lowercase initial”; on the other hand, “the registered trade names of medications, as with trademarks, are proper nouns and must be capitalized”. In neither of these two cases are quotation marks or italics necessary.

Thus, paracetamol or acetaminophen is one of the components of Panadol, Gelocatil or Atamel; the favipiravir is traded under the brand Avigan; the fenetilín is traded under the names of Captagon, Bio-capton and Fitton; the amoxicillin has the trade names Amoxil and Trimox, among others; the povidone is the basis of the Betadine, Isodine or Pervinox; the clorazepate is Tranxene and Tranxilium; the almagate is Almax.

In the case of brands that have ceased to function, they are written in lowercase, because they are used with generic value, such as band-aids for adhesive drapes and aspirin for acetylsalicylic acid. Moreover, it is recommended to keep the capital letter of the commercial brand when referring to the capsules, dragees, portions or doses of the medicine with that proper noun: *un Nolotil* (a Nolotil).

Consequently, in the above examples, it would have been better to write: “China registra buenos resultados con favipiravir, un antigripal usado contra el coronavirus”, “Seis alternativas naturales al ibuprofeno” y “Los dos se colocan con Captagon, la droga de moda en Oriente Medio”.

***Infección, no infectación*⁸ (infection, no infection)**

The term *infección* (infection), and not *infectación* (infectation), is appropriate to refer to the invasion of a living being by a pathogenic microorganism, such as a virus or bacteria. As the DPD explains, the noun that corresponds to the verb *infectar* (infect) and that refers to the invasion of pathogenic micro-

organisms such as viruses or bacteria is *infección*, not *infectación* (infectation).

According to this work, it would be a cross between *infección* (infection) and another similar voice, *infestación* (infestation), although with a different meaning, since the latter alludes to an invasion in the form of a plague of a large number of individuals of the same species, as in «*La infestación de piojos preocupa a las escuelas*» (The infestation of lice worries schools).

In the case of the verb *desinfectar* (disinfect), “remove the infection or the property of causing it from something, destroying harmful germs or preventing their development”, the Spanish Academic Dictionary accepts the forms *desinfección* (disinfection) and *desinfectación* (disinfection), although it prefers the former.

***Volver a la nueva normalidad*⁹ (Back to the new normal)**

That sequence of words, indeed, can be paradoxical. Probably, the message that is intended to express is that *normalidad* (normal/normality) is going to be restored, although this normality is not going to be the one we knew, but a different one. To summarize, it ends by saying “*volver a la nueva normalidad*” (return to the new normal), a twist that contains the anomaly that it indicates: it is affirmed that one returns to a new state.

This difficulty could be avoided with a small change: *volver a una normalidad nueva* (return to a new normal). This sequence is preferable, since, on one hand, the definite article “*la*” (the) is replaced by the indeterminate “*una*” (a), hence, that *normalidad* (normal) referred to is treated in a more non-specific way, which makes some type of back precision; on the other, then, precisely in order to specify how this normality is going to be, the adjective is postponed to the noun, thus acquiring all its qualifying value: we are talking about a new, different normality, not the one we knew.

In this sense, it should be remembered that the prefix of the adjective tends to be interpreted in Spanish as an epithet, that is, as well-known or non-restrictive information: in *la blanca nieve* (the snow white), the adjective does not provide new information, while in *la nieve blanca* (the white snow) the adjective can be used to distinguish between this and the one that is already gray due to the footprints or rolling of the vehicles.

In any case, it should be added that this same idea could have been expressed using other verbs,

such as *alcanzar la nueva normalidad* or *llegar a una normalidad nueva* (reaching the new normality or reaching a new normality).

Tasa de mortalidad and *tasa de letalidad* (mortality rate and fatality rate), difference¹⁰

The mortality rate is calculated taking the total population as a reference, while the fatality rate only takes into account people affected by a certain disease, i.e. it is not advisable to confuse both expressions.

The DTM defines *tasa de mortalidad* (mortality rate) as the “proportion between the number of deaths in a population during a certain period of time and the total population in that same period” and *tasa de letalidad* (fatality rate) as the “quotient between the number of deaths due to a certain disease in a period of time and the number of people affected by the same disease in the same period”.

This same work indicates that, in order to refer to the fatality rate, it is also possible to speak of the specific mortality rate.

PCR: feminine o masculine¹¹

The English acronym PCR means polymerase chain reaction, which is equivalent in Spanish to *reacción en cadena de la polimerasa*. The core of this expression, as can be seen, is the feminine noun *reacción* (reaction) and, therefore, it is normal to speak of “*la PCR*” (the PRC).

What happens is that this acronym is being used not to refer to this molecular biology technique, but to the tests that are carried out with it. In fact, it is common to find the structures in apposition *prueba PCR* (test PCR) and PCR test. From this use in apposition, the leap is made to talk about *la PCR* and *el PCR*, omitting the nouns *prueba* and test, respectively. With this meaning, then, both masculine and feminine uses can be considered valid in Spanish.

In any case, it can be considered a valid metonymic use, in which the name of a technique is used to refer to the test that is performed with it.

Escenario (scenario), use and abuse¹²

The noun *escenario* (scenario), which, among other things, means “possibilities or perspectives of an event or situation”, has synonyms in Spanish, so that, although its use cannot be censored, it could become a term that is abused these days in those information that try to address the multiple possible or probable situations in the development of the current pandemic.

To offer alternative drafting, it is recalled that, in some cases, it is possible to avoid the term *escenario* without the sentence, strictly speaking, changes its meaning. Example, “*Londres se prepara para un escenario de colapso sanitario*” (London prepares for a health collapse scenario), you can choose: “*Londres se prepara para el colapso sanitario*” (London prepares for a health collapse).

In other sentences, voices of similar meaning can be used as *posibilidad* (possibility), *hipótesis* (hypothesis), *supuesto* (assumption), *caso* (case), among others. Thus, “*El mejor escenario para EE.UU. podría ser 240 000 muertos...*”, “*En el mejor de los casos, EE.UU. podría tener 240 000 muertos*” (The best scenario for USA could be 240 000 deaths ..., At best, USA could have 240,000 deaths).

Distanciamiento físico and *distanciamiento social* (Physical distancing and social distancing)

The expression *distanciamiento físico* (physical distancing) refers to the greater or lesser distance between people, which can be measured in meters, while *distanciamiento social* (social distancing) refers to the degree of isolation of a person or a group within their society.

Both, physical distancing and social distancing, are valid expressions and can often be related. It may happen, for example, that the lack of contact, the minimum space to be saved or the recommendation to remain confined or telework (physical distancing) cause social isolation. In this sense, it can be argued that the fact of transferring social relations from a physical to a virtual plane represents, at the same time, a physical and social distancing.

However, despite the semantic closeness and their possible overlap in certain contexts, it is advisable to differentiate both expressions and opt for physical distancing in those cases in which the recommended meters are indicated between two workers or clients of an establishment, between two users of a means of public transport or between those who share a park, a public road or an enclosure to play, run, practice a sport or keep fit¹³.

Now we can greet them, not with kisses or hugs, affections forbidden for all at the moment. The *aislamiento social* (social isolation), translated for many into the staunchest home confinement, has been responsible for the modification of the greeting in shock of elbows, shoulders or feet, so to speak, there are those who have made more innovative proposals always in line with the digital flood that has generated all this phenomenon. Here is ours: we

wish health to all and see you soon, we will resist.

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