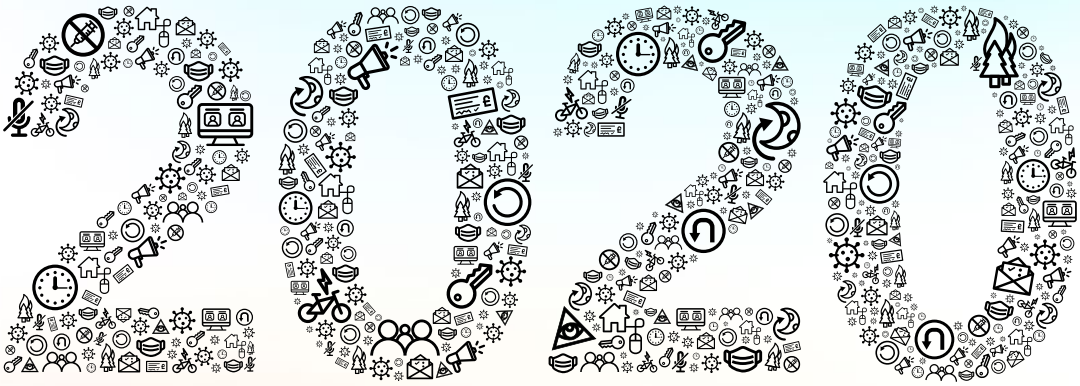
Oxford**Languages**



Words of an **unprecedented** year

OXFORD

OxfordLanguages

2020

Words of an **unprecedented** year

* Words assigned to the month in which they reached their peak frequency of usage. Source: Oxford Monitor corpus.

Jan

Bushfire

One of the defining climatic events of the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020 was the Australian bushfire season, the worst on record.

Impeachment

A hot topic in January when the trial to impeach Donald Trump began.

Feb

Acquittal

Peaked in February at the conclusion of Donald Trump's impeachment trial.

Mar

Coronavirus

One of the more dramatic examples of increased usage, by March this year it was one of the most frequently used nouns in the English language, after being used to designate the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Covid-19

A completely new word this year, first recorded in a report by the World Health Organization as an abbreviation of coronavirus disease 2019. It quickly overtook coronavirus in frequency.

Lockdown

The preferred term in most Anglophone countries, including the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, for government-enforced quarantine measures in response to the spread of Covid-19.

Apr

Social Distancing

Surged in frequency as governments across the world introduced measures to reduce the spread of Covid-19.

May

Reopening

Towards the Northern Hemisphere summer more hopeful words increased in frequency, including reopening (of shops, businesses, etc.)

Jun

Black Lives Matter

Exploded in usage beginning in June of this year, remaining at elevated levels for the rest of the year as protests against law enforcement agencies over the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other black Americans took root in communities across the United States and across the world.

Jul

Cancel Culture

Many societal tensions that characterized the year saw a significant rise in usage, such as cancel culture, the culture of boycotting and withdrawing support from public figures whose words and actions are considered socially unacceptable.

BIPOC

Usage surged for BIPOC, an abbreviation of black, indigenous, and other people of colour.

Aug

Mail-In

A big political focus as far as word use increase is concerned has been the US postal service as a means of casting votes in these troubled times, with mail-in seeing an increase in use of 3,000% compared to last year.

Belarusian

The August re-election of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus saw the adjective Belarusian rise up the corpus charts rapidly as the story made the news around the world.

Sep

Moonshot

Had a rocket-powered ascent to significance in September as the name of a UK government programme for mass Covid testing.

Oct

Superspreader

Dates to the 1970s, but became significantly more frequent this year. There was a particular spike in usage in October, mainly with reference to the well-publicized spread of cases in the White House.

Net Zero

On the rise as the year draws to an end: the recent increase partly relates to the historic pledge made by President Xi Jinping in September, that China will be carbon neutral by 2060.

The English language, like all of us, has had to adapt rapidly and repeatedly this year. Given the phenomenal breadth of language change and development during *2020*, Oxford **Languages** concluded that this is a year which cannot be neatly accommodated in one single word.

Contents

5 — **Words of an unprecedented year**

7 — **The language of Covid-19**

7 — Coronavirus, Covid-19, and related words

9 — Pandemic and other -demics

10 — Social distancing, lockdown, and other measures

12 — Masks and coverings

13 — Epidemiological terms

14 — On the frontline

15 — **World Englishes**

20 — **Technology and remote working**

24 — **The environment**

27 — **Social movements and social media**

31 — **Politics and economics**

34 — **Closing statement**

35 — **Definitions**

Glossary

blend n. a word formed by merging parts of two other words and combining their meanings (for example, motel is a blend of motor + hotel)

coinage n. the invention of a new word or phrase; (also) a new word or phrase

collocate n. a word that is habitually juxtaposed with another with a frequency greater than chance

compound n. a word or lexical unit formed by combining two or more words (for example, bookcase is a compound, from book + case)

contronym n. a word with two opposite meanings

corpus n. a collection of written or spoken material in machine-readable form, assembled for the purpose of linguistic research

derivative n. a word formed from another word by the addition of a prefix or suffix (for example, happiness is a derivative, from happy adjective + -ness suffix)

keyword n. (in corpus linguistics) a word which is significantly more frequent in one part of the corpus than in another part or than in the corpus as a whole

token n. (in corpus linguistics) the smallest unit of a corpus, typically either a word or a punctuation mark

Words of an **unprecedented** year

What words best describe 2020? *A strange year*? *A crazy year*? *A lost year*? Oxford Languages' monitor corpus of English shows a huge upsurge in usage of each of those phrases compared to 2019. The corpus gathers news content, updated daily, and currently contains over 11 billion words for lexicographers to search and analyse. *Unprecedented* was another adjective whose usage soared. But what's exceptional in our own lived experience often has parallels in history: the English language is studded with words from previous plagues and pandemics, mass social disruption, and an abundance of expressions that fulfil humanity's perennial need to describe an often inhospitable world. Though what was genuinely unprecedented this year was the hyper-speed at which the English-speaking world amassed a new collective vocabulary relating to the **coronavirus**, and how quickly it became, in many instances, a core part of the language. Even back in April we noted that the frequency of the word *coronavirus* had exceeded one of the most frequently-used nouns in the English language, *time*, as detected by our corpus data.

2020 brought a new immediacy and urgency to the role of the lexicographer. In almost real-time, lexicographers were able to monitor and analyse seismic shifts in language data and precipitous frequency rises in new coinages. At Oxford Languages we continue to follow these developments and revise our language datasets, including the Oxford English Dictionary and many other Oxford dictionaries, which recently updated their coverage outside of their normal publication schedules to record these dramatic changes. In a short period of time specialist epidemiological and medical vocabulary entered everyday discourse, such as the **R number** and **community transmission**. Public health initiatives rapidly inserted new or unfamiliar terms (**lockdown**, **social distancing**, **self-isolation**) into not just our language but our lives, drastically altering our behaviours – public, private, and professional – in

ways inconceivable in almost any other circumstances. Trending cultural and social expressions typified the realities of the **new normal: doomscrolling** (the action of continuing to scroll through and read content on social media that is depressing or worrying), and **in-person** (such as in-person worship, in-person voting, etc.), expressed poignantly one of the language changes brought on by the pandemic, as previous assumptions inherent in words now need to be made more explicit. Also, many societal tensions that characterized the year saw a significant rise in usage, such as **cancel culture** and **systemic racism**.

The English language, like all of us, has had to adapt rapidly and repeatedly this year; so we would like to report more expansively on the phenomenal breadth of language change and development during 2020 and on the evidence-based approach Oxford Languages has taken to tracking and analysing the unfolding story.

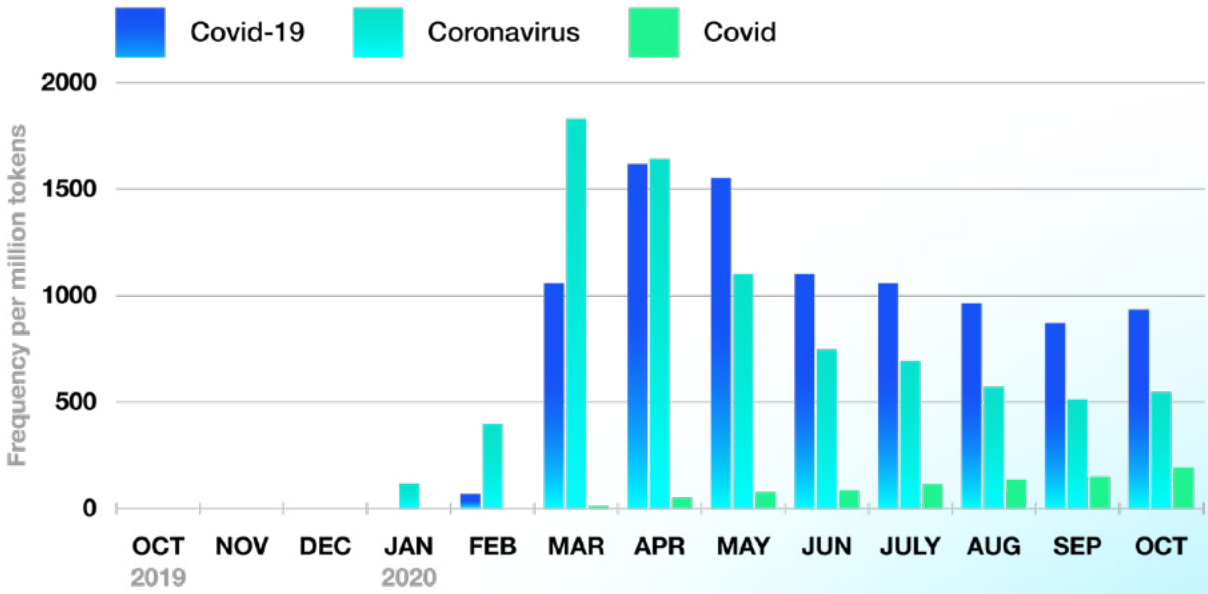
In almost real-time, lexicographers were able to monitor and analyse seismic shifts in language data and precipitous frequency rises in new coinages

Of course, **Covid-19** (which was coined in February and entered the *OED* in April) and all its related vocabulary provided a clear focus for our language monitoring this year, but there were many other areas of activity which saw enormous language change and were equally demanding of our attention, such as political and economic volatility, social activism, the environment, and the rapid uptake of new technologies and behaviours to support remote working and living. We also cast our net wide to capture how English around the world expressed its own view, sometimes sharing the collective expressions for the phenomena endured globally this year, and at other times using regionally specific words and usages. All of which goes to illustrate that 2020 is a year which cannot be neatly accommodated in one single "word of the year".

The language of **Covid-19**

Coronavirus, *Covid-19*, and related words

Although the word **coronavirus** dates to the 1960s, before 2020 its use was mainly confined to scientific and medical specialists. By March this year it was one of the most frequently used nouns in the English language, after being used to designate the SARS-CoV-2 virus. **Covid-19** is a completely new word this year, first recorded on 11th February in a report by the World Health Organization, as an abbreviation of *coronavirus disease 2019*. It quickly overtook **coronavirus** in frequency.

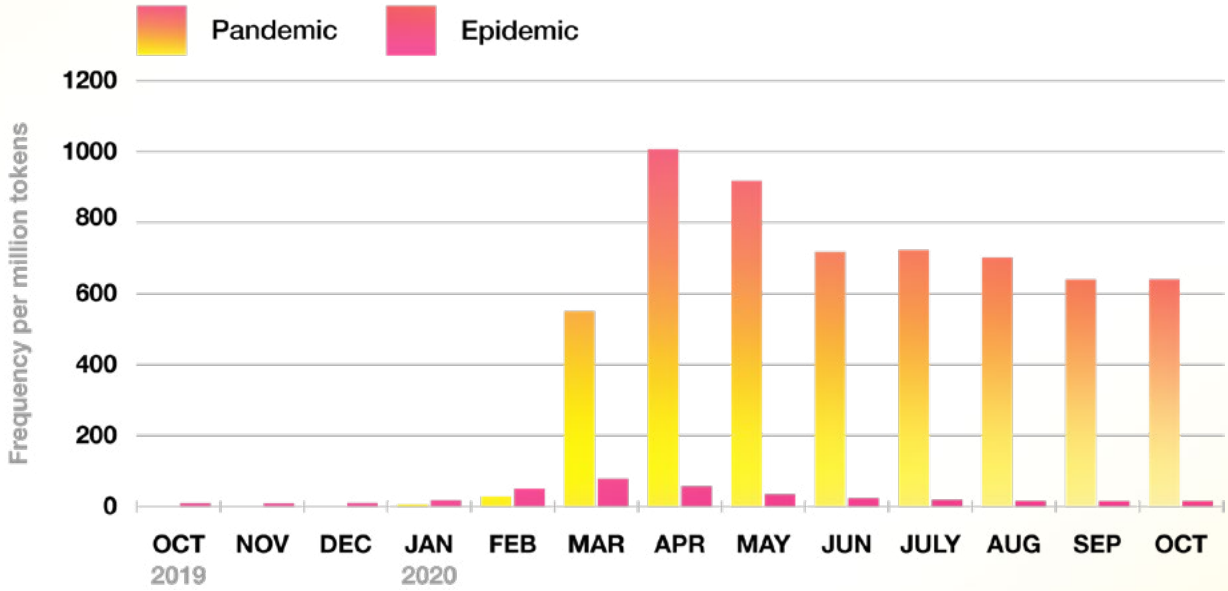


It is a sure sign that a word has become embedded in the language when it develops its own abbreviations, compounds, and other formations. This is certainly the case with **Covid-19** and **coronavirus.** The major shortening is of course **Covid**, the growing frequency of which is shown in the chart: it is still less common than **Covid-19** in written news material, but is very common in speech and less formal writing. Other abbreviations include **CV**, **C-19**, and the informal **corona** and **rona**: the latter was originally used mainly in Australia and the US but is now more widespread. As we make comparisons with life before the pandemic – and as we look ahead to a future beyond it – the words **pre-Covid**, **post-Covid**, **pre-coronavirus**, and **post-coronavirus** have also become common, as well as the humorous **BC** ('before Covid' or 'before coronavirus'). More creative formations include **covidiot** (a blend of *Covid* and *idiot*, typically referring to a person who disobeys guidelines designed to prevent the spread of Covid-19), **coronials** (a term jocularly proposed for the generation of babies conceived during lockdown, blending *coronavirus* and *millennials*), and a host of other more or less ephemeral uses.

By March this year *coronavirus* was one of the most frequently used nouns in the English language

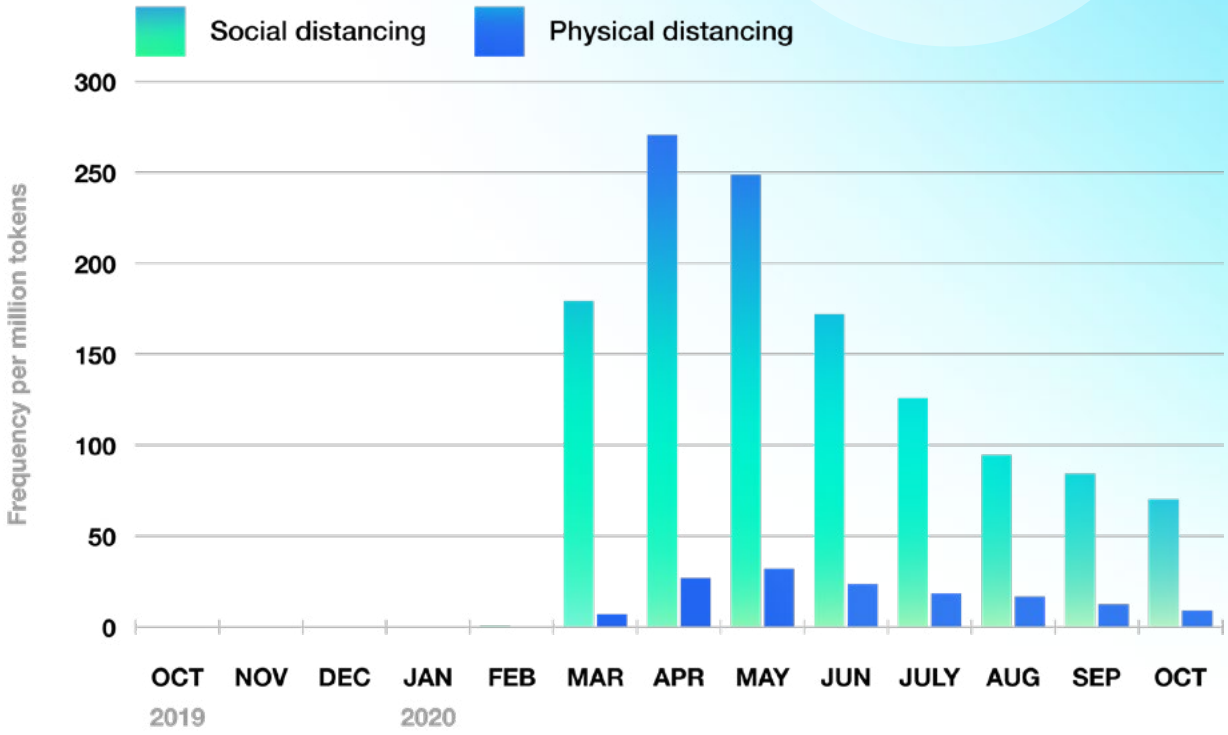
Pandemic and other *-demics*

An **epidemic** is a disease which is widespread in a community; a **pandemic** is one which has spread much more widely, across a whole country, multiple countries, or the whole world. Both words are ultimately from Greek (from *epi* + *dēmos* 'among the people' and *pan* + *dēmos* 'all the people') and both have been used in English since the 17th century. Before this year it was *epidemic* that was the more frequent word, but on 11th March 2020, that changed: the World Health Organization announced that it was characterizing Covid-19 as a pandemic, and since then **pandemic** has become one of the most significant words of the year – its frequency has increased over 57,000% since last year.



We have also seen the coinage, or increased use, of various other words formed on *pandemic* or *epidemic*. **Infodemic** (from 'information epidemic') is not a brand-new word: it was first used in 2003 with reference to the explosion of information (and misinformation) associated with the SARS epidemic, but was revived in March and April this year, in the context of similar concerns about Covid-19. Some sceptics and conspiracy theorists have referred to Covid-19 as a **plandemic**, i.e. a planned pandemic, and this was the name of a pair of videos spreading misinformation about the disease. The word, though, is not completely new this year: there is evidence dating back to 2006 in a different sense, 'a proliferation of plans'. Meanwhile, a -demic word that does appear to have been coined this year is **twindemic**, referring (hypothetically) to an outbreak of seasonal flu coinciding with an upsurge in Covid cases.

Social distancing, *lockdown*, and other measures



The term **social distancing** dates to the mid-20th century in the general sense of being remote from others, and to the early 21st century in the specific sense of maintaining distance from others in order to reduce the spread of infection, but before 2020 it was relatively rare. In March this year, as governments across the world introduced measures to reduce the spread of Covid-19, **social distancing** – along with the related verb **socially distance** and the adjective **socially distanced** – surged in frequency. The alternative **physical distancing** has been adopted by some people and organizations, notably the World Health Organization, as arguably more accurate: although people are being asked to maintain physical distance from each other, they can remain socially connected through social media, phone calls, and the like. However, **social distancing** has remained by far the more frequent of the two terms in most varieties of English.

Other notably frequent words in our corpus in March and April this year reflect other measures taken to control the virus, including **lockdown**, **shelter-in-place**, **stay-at-home** (in **stay-at-home order**), **self-isolate**, and **self-quarantine**. Towards the summer more hopeful words increased in frequency, including **reopening** (of shops, businesses, etc.) and **easing** (of lockdown measures); and people were able to form support **bubbles** (UK) or **pods** (US) with other households under certain circumstances. As the year progresses and lockdowns are reintroduced in various countries, other terms on the rise include **firebreak** and **circuit breaker** (see also the World English section of this report), and – with reference to specific regional and local measures – **tier**, used as part of a system to note the severity of restrictions.

One aspect of the response to Covid-19 has been an emphasis on good hand hygiene, from viral songs through to government messages like the UK's 'hands face space' campaign, and words like **handwashing**, **hand gel**, and **hand sanitizer** have all become more frequent this year. So too have other words relating to sanitization, such as **deep cleaning** and **fogging** (applying disinfectant to an area via a spray or mist). However, some have questioned the efficacy of these practices, referring to them as **hygiene theatre** – that is, cleaning practices which give the illusion of sanitization without actually reducing the risk of infection. The term (formed on the pattern of the similar *security theatre*) is not completely new – there is evidence on Twitter going back to at least 2009 – but it has seen a marked increase in usage this year.

Masks and coverings

Another area of vocabulary which has expanded enormously this year is that relating to face masks and coverings. Some official guidelines state that a **face mask** is a mask designed to be worn in a healthcare setting to reduce the spread of infection (sometimes the more specific terms **medical mask** or **surgical mask** are used), while **face covering** is a more general term, referring to any piece of material worn over the mouth and nose – although in everyday language, face mask is also used in the general sense. The term **face shield**, meanwhile, usually refers to a clear plastic visor worn over the whole face. As masks and coverings have become a part of everyday life for so many, it is no surprise that the words denoting them have increased dramatically in usage.

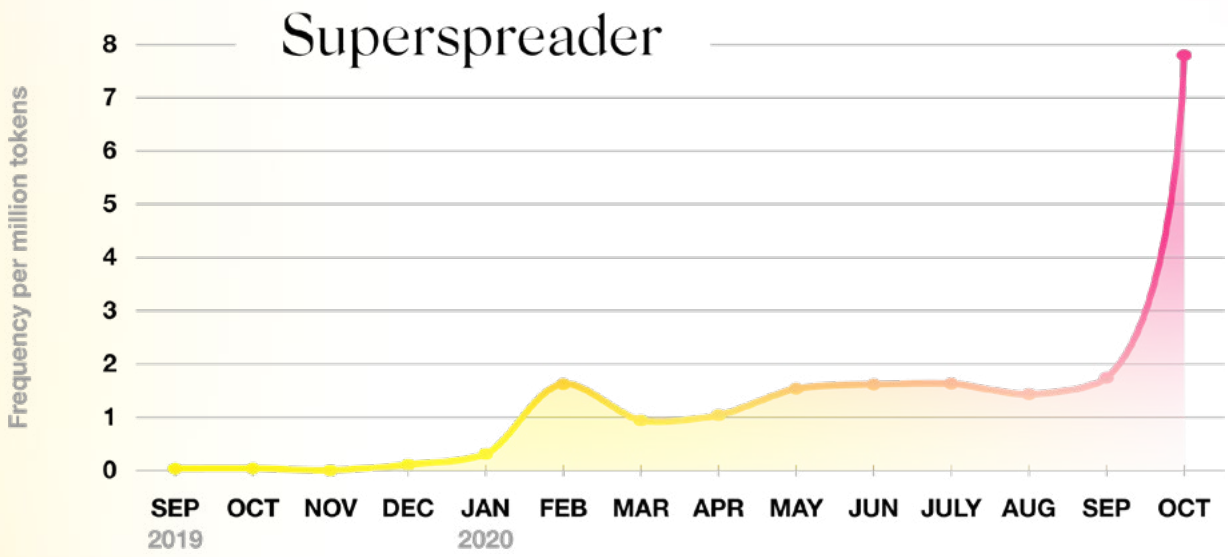
Mask-shaming is especially interesting as it is a contronym which has two opposite meanings

We have also seen a proliferation of words reflecting attitudes towards the issue of mask-wearing. These include **maskless** and **unmasked** (referring to people not wearing masks, a situation which was the norm before the pandemic and would not have required comment), **mask up** (meaning 'to put on a mask'), **anti-mask**, **anti-masker**, and **mask-shaming**. This last joins several other *-shame* and *-shaming* words which have entered the language in recent years (such as *flight-shaming* and *body-shaming*). **Mask-shaming** is especially interesting as it is a contronym which has two opposite meanings: it can refer either to the action of shaming someone for wearing a mask (as in this article), or the action of shaming someone for not wearing a mask (as in this).

Epidemiological terms

One of the most remarkable linguistic developments of the year has been the extent to which scientific terms have entered general discourse, as we have all become **armchair epidemiologists**, and governments often claim to be **following the science** (a phrase which has increased in frequency over 1,000% compared to last year). For example, most of us are now familiar with the term **R number**, or simply **R** (short for **reproduction number** or **reproductive number**), which refers to the average number of cases of an infectious disease arising by transmission from a single infected individual: the aim is to drive R below 1, so that the number infected decreases. Before 2020 this was a term known mainly to epidemiologists; now non-experts routinely talk about 'getting the R down' or 'bringing R below 1'. Other terms which have become much more common this year in everyday discourse include **flatten the curve** and **community transmission.**

An important aspect of reducing transmission is eliminating **superspreader events.** The word **superspreader** (denoting a person who transmits an infectious disease to an unusually large number of other people) dates to the 1970s, but it has become significantly more frequent this year. There was a particular spike in usage in October, mainly with reference to the well-publicized spread of cases in the White House.



On the *frontline*

Other very significant words of the year are those relating to the medical response to Covid-19, including **PPE** (and its fuller form **personal protective equipment**) and **ventilator**. There has also been a recognition of medical staff and other workers providing an essential service, often referred to as **key workers** (especially in the UK), **essential workers** (especially in the US), or **frontline workers**. The term **frontline** (or **front line**) was first recorded in the 17th century referring to a military front, and then developed various figurative uses. References to **frontline** workers, or workers **on the frontline**, go back to the 20th century, but have become much more frequent this year, often with the original military metaphor invoked: such staff are described as frontline *warriors*, or as frontline workers *battling* the pandemic.

Most statistically significant noun modified by *essential:*

in 2019: **oils**

in 2020: **worker**

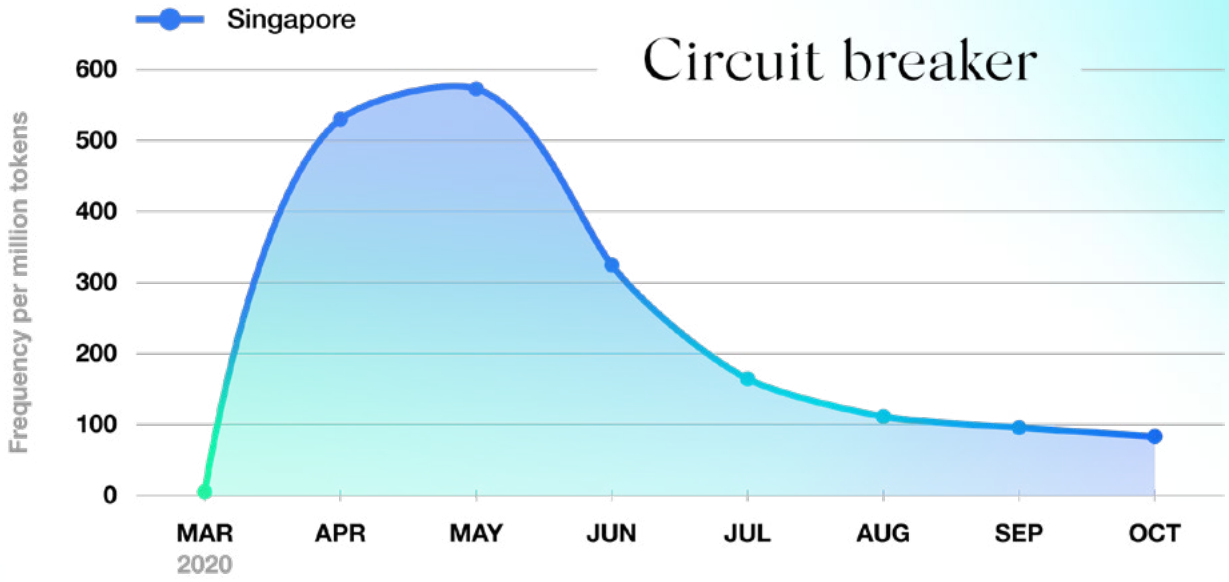
As the prospect of a vaccine for the coronavirus draws nearer, the frequency of the word **vaccine** has risen significantly (by over 400% this year compared to last). We have also noticed an increased usage of the term **anti-vaxxer** (a person opposed to vaccination); this is first recorded in 2001 in the OED, though related terms like *anti-vax*, *anti-vaccinator*, *anti-vaccinationist*, and *anti-vaccinist* have been documented since the 19th century.

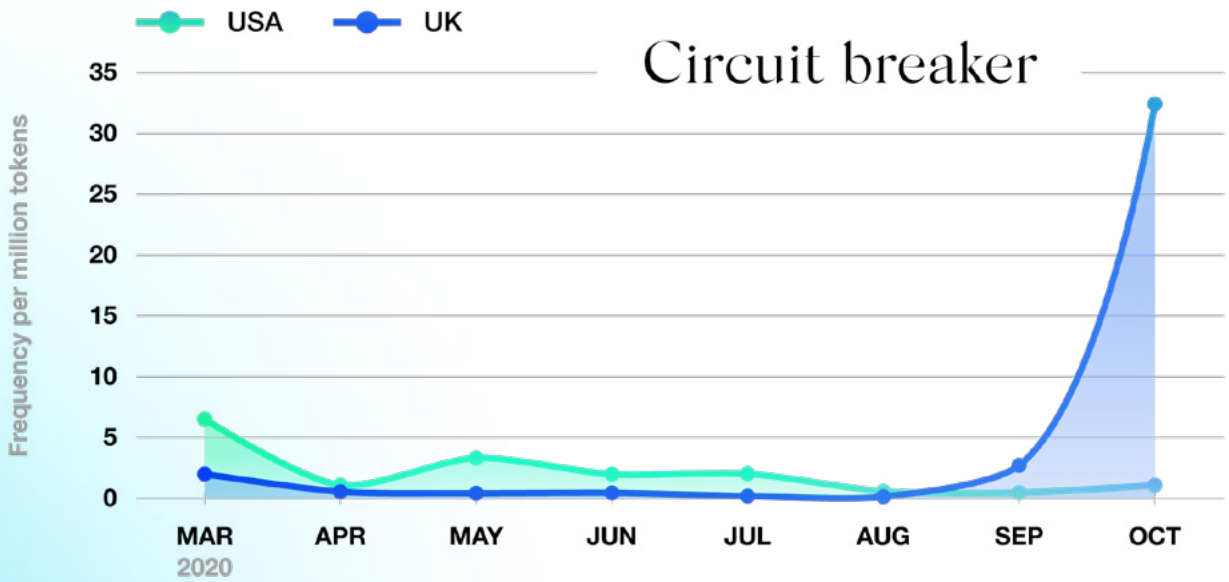
World Englishes

Throughout the English-speaking world, whether in North America or the Caribbean, in East, West, or South Africa, in South or Southeast Asia, in Australia or New Zealand, most lexical innovation happened this year as a reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic, with some interesting variation occurring in specific geographical areas. This can be seen in the different ways that government-enforced quarantine measures have been referred to in different parts of the globe. The previously mentioned **lockdown** is the preferred term in most Anglophone countries, including the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, while in the United States **shelter-in-place** is also commonly used.

Most lexical *innovation* happened this year as a reaction to the Covid-19 **pandemic**

A particularly noteworthy example is **circuit breaker**, a term originally referring to a safety device that stops the flow of current in an electric circuit, and later also in widespread use as a piece of financial slang for a regulatory instrument designed to prevent panic selling by temporarily stopping trading on an exchange. However, there was a remarkable spike in usage of *circuit breaker* in Singapore beginning in April 2020 when the term was adopted by Singaporeans as a name for their government's stay-at-home regulations. A few months later, in September and October, *circuit breaker* became a much-used term in British English, describing a short, fixed-term set of restrictions which scientists recommended the government should implement in order to stem another incoming tide of coronavirus infections.



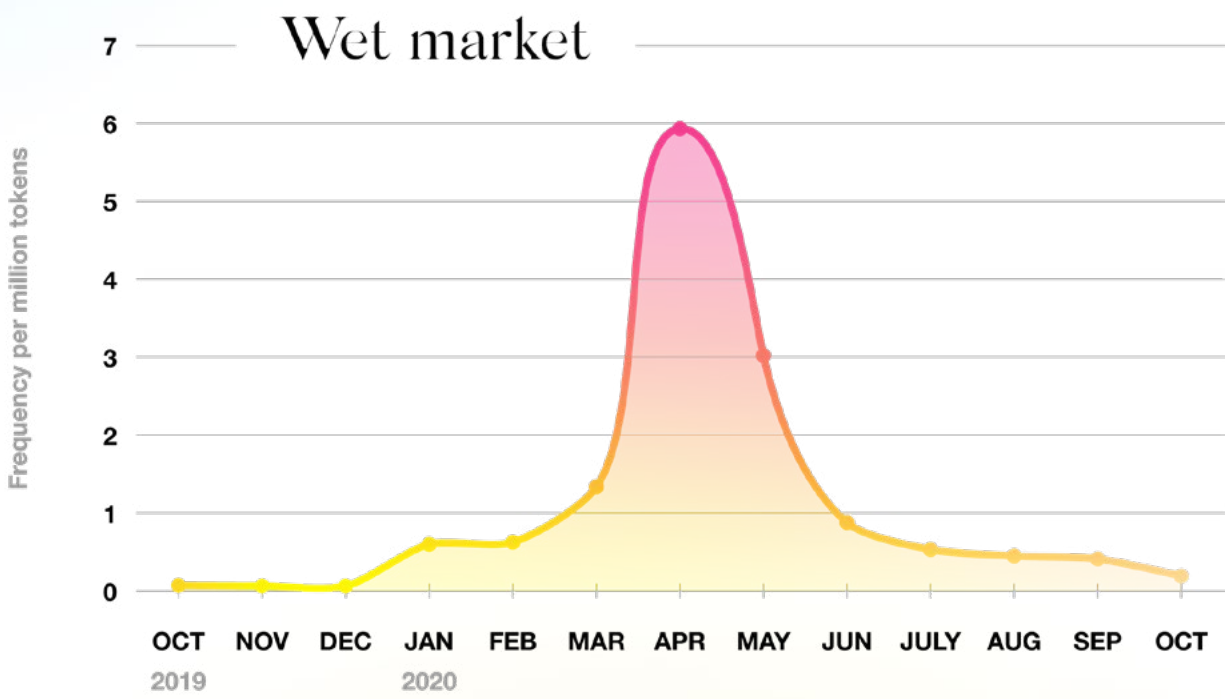


In other countries, lockdown measures are referred to by their official government designations, shortened to initialisms: in Malaysia, **MCO**, short for **movement control order**, and in the Philippines, **ECQ**, short for **enhanced community quarantine**.

- **Lockdown** - UK, Canada, and Australia
- **Shelter-in-place** - US
- **Circuit breaker** - Singapore and UK
- **MCO** (movement control order) - Malaysia
- **ECQ** (enhanced community quarantine) - Philippines

The coronavirus pandemic and local responses to it have led to a number of other coinages in different varieties of English. In the Philippines, frontline workers are called **frontliners**, while Filipinos from other regions stranded in a locked-down Manila are referred to as **LSIs**, short for **locally stranded individuals**; in Singapore, a person who needs to self-isolate is issued an **SHN** or **stay-home notice**; while in India those who wish to cross internal borders need to have an **e-pass**, an official government document authorizing a person's movement during quarantine. In Australia, people help contain the spread of coronavirus by regularly using **sanny** (hand sanitizer), while in West Africa, people wash their hands using the **Veronica bucket**—a type of sanitation equipment composed of a covered bucket with a tap fixed at the bottom and a bowl fitted below it to collect wastewater, named after its Ghanaian inventor, Veronica Bekoe.

At the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, a Southeast Asian word suddenly gained global prominence: **wet market.** This term, first recorded in 1978, was originally only familiar to Southeast Asians, who use it to refer to a market for the sale of fresh meat, fish, and produce, an essential link in the food supply chain of countries in the region. However, when a Wuhan market was identified as ground zero for the coronavirus outbreak, people outside of Southeast Asia began to incorrectly conflate wet markets with illegal wildlife markets, subjecting wet markets to much public criticism and causing a considerable increase in the usage of the word in the first four months of 2020.



Education has also become an important topic of conversation as governments considered how to deliver effective teaching to the world's millions of schoolchildren and university students during a global pandemic. Faced with the challenges of providing face-to-face classroom teaching, the education sector in many countries turned to technology: **e-learning** has become a widely used term in Africa and Asia; in Southeast Asia, there has been much discussion on new **learning modalities**; and more widely **blended learning** which combines online with in-person instruction has seen a significant increase in usage.

Beyond the pandemic, activism has also influenced World English vocabulary in 2020. For instance, although the rest of the world largely use **SARS** to mean 'severe acute respiratory syndrome', another disease caused by a coronavirus, in Nigeria **SARS** is overwhelmingly used in reference to the **Special Anti-Robbery Squad**, a highly controversial unit of the Nigerian police whose activities sparked a wave of mass protests in the country and its diaspora. This movement, known as End SARS, began in 2017 but was revitalized in 2020, with huge public demonstrations calling for the disbanding of SARS.

Technology and **remote working**

The recent lockdowns around the world accelerated the move towards flexible, remote working which had been gaining traction in recent years, made possible by advances in communications technology and increased connectivity. Most businesses would have seen this shift taking place over the next five or ten years; Covid-19 made it happen in a matter of weeks.

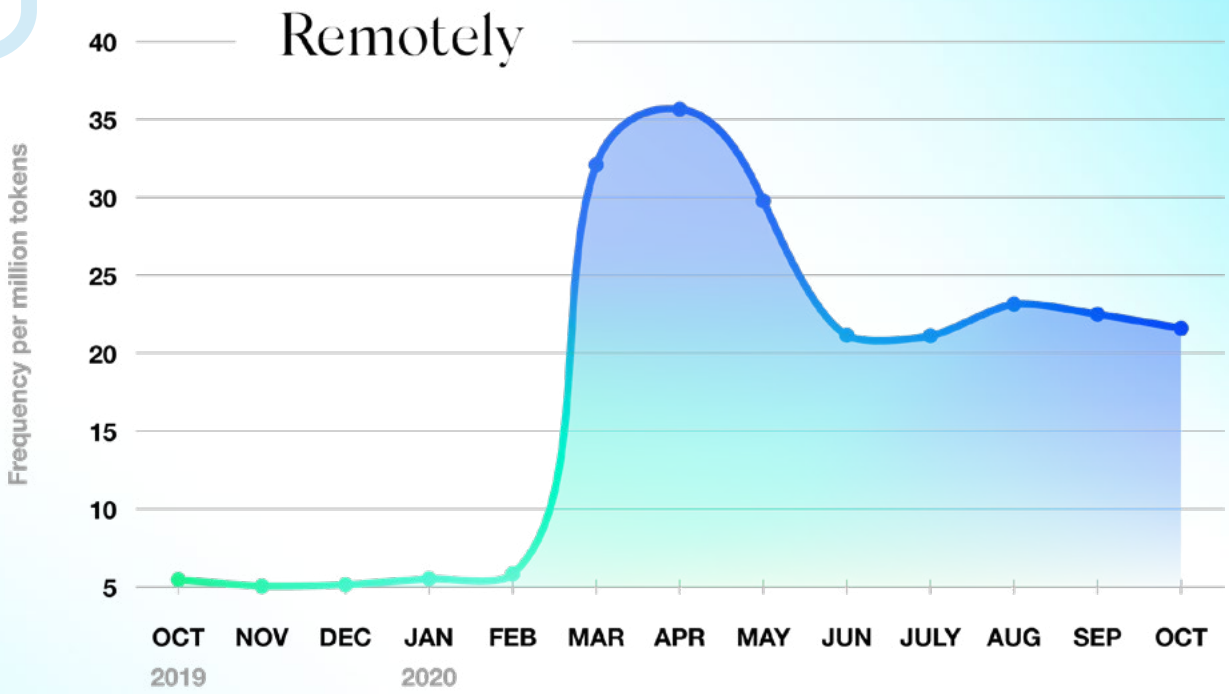
The lockdown accelerated the move towards *flexible*, remote working

Unsurprisingly, two words that have seen a huge surge in use since March are **remote** and **remotely**. These are of course not new words, dating to the 15th and 16th centuries respectively in the general sense, and to the second half of the 20th century with reference to working at home rather than in an office.

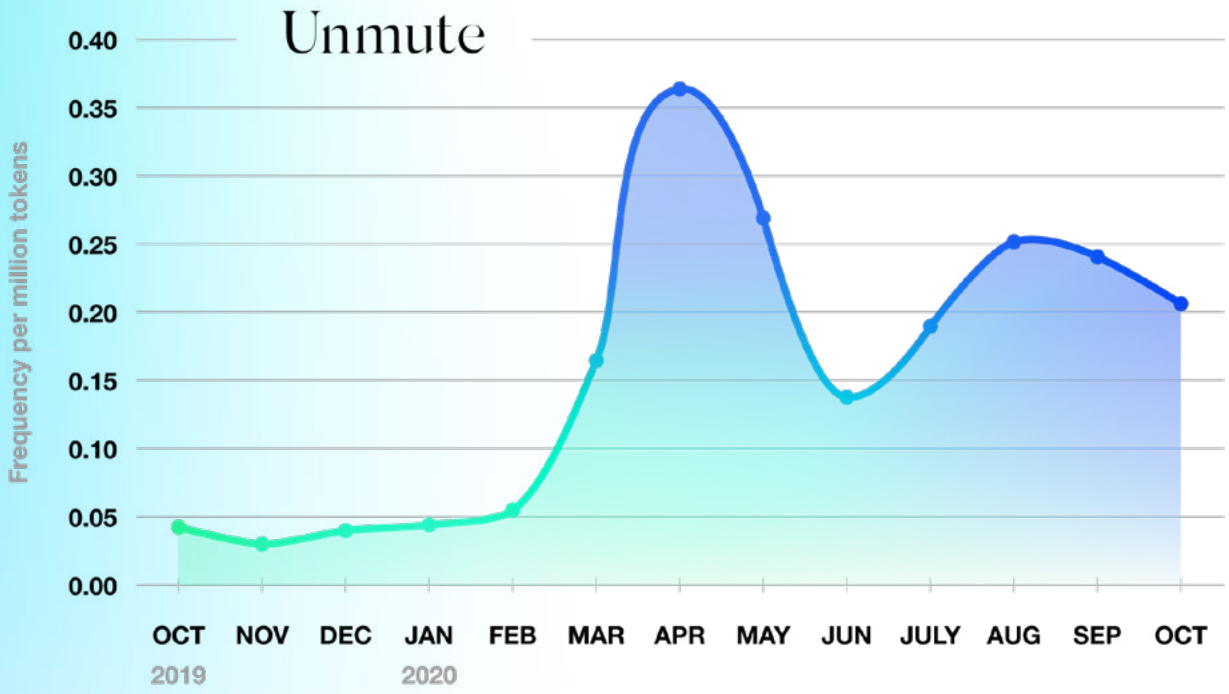
Most statistically significant noun collocates of *remote*

2019	2020
village	learning
island	working
control	workforce
location	instruction
monitoring	monitoring

But the use of both words surged in March 2020, and **remotely** has seen an increase in use of over 300% compared to last year. Our corpus has also shown distinct changes in the words used in collocation with **remote** and **remotely** this year. We are talking about *studying*, *teaching*, *meeting*, and *voting* remotely now – patterns that were much less common before the pandemic.



Remote working and living brings with it a whole host of new challenges and potential pitfalls, many of which are related to technology. How many times have you been holding forth in a virtual meeting, only to realise that no one can hear you? You may be reassured to find that you are not alone: the word **unmute** – relatively uncommon before March this year – has seen a 500% rise in use, while the related phrase **on mute** has seen a similar surge, as flustered workers across the country scramble for the right button to make themselves heard.



Of course, there are more serious hazards to conducting so much of our lives online, one of which is the phenomenon of **Zoombombing**. Drawing on the name of a popular online meeting platform, and modelled on the now familiar *photobombing* (first recorded back in 2008), *Zoombombing* is the practice of infiltrating video conference calls and posting violent, pornographic, or offensive content, generally as a deliberate attempt to cause disruption. Zoombombing attacks usually result in the shutdown of the session, and have become a serious issue for schools and businesses, leading to increased scrutiny of online security.

Zoom has also had an influence on words reflecting the lighter side of our newly online working and social lives. New compounds have emerged to describe the very particular preparations that are required for online appearances, such as **Zoom-ready** and **Zoom-friendly** (used to describe tops and shirts, as well as earrings, hairstyles, and make-up). One of the major benefits of home-working is the need to only dress **waist-up**. While this form was seen occasionally before the lockdown, it is now becoming common in phrases such as *waist-up dressing*, *waist-up fashion*, and *waist-up outfits*, to describe the increased focus on our upper bodies – the only part visible during conference calls.

Of course, being confined to our homes has taken its toll on everyone. The reduction in social interaction and the removal of so many of the things that usually shape and define the week – such as the morning commute, taking the kids to school, or meeting friends for a Friday-night drink – can lead to the feeling of days blending into one another and time beginning to lose its meaning. People have seized upon the term **Blursday** – a day of the week that is indistinguishable from any other – to describe this phenomenon. **Blursday** is not entirely new – there is evidence of its use in print dating back over 20 years – but since March it has gained traction, especially on social media.

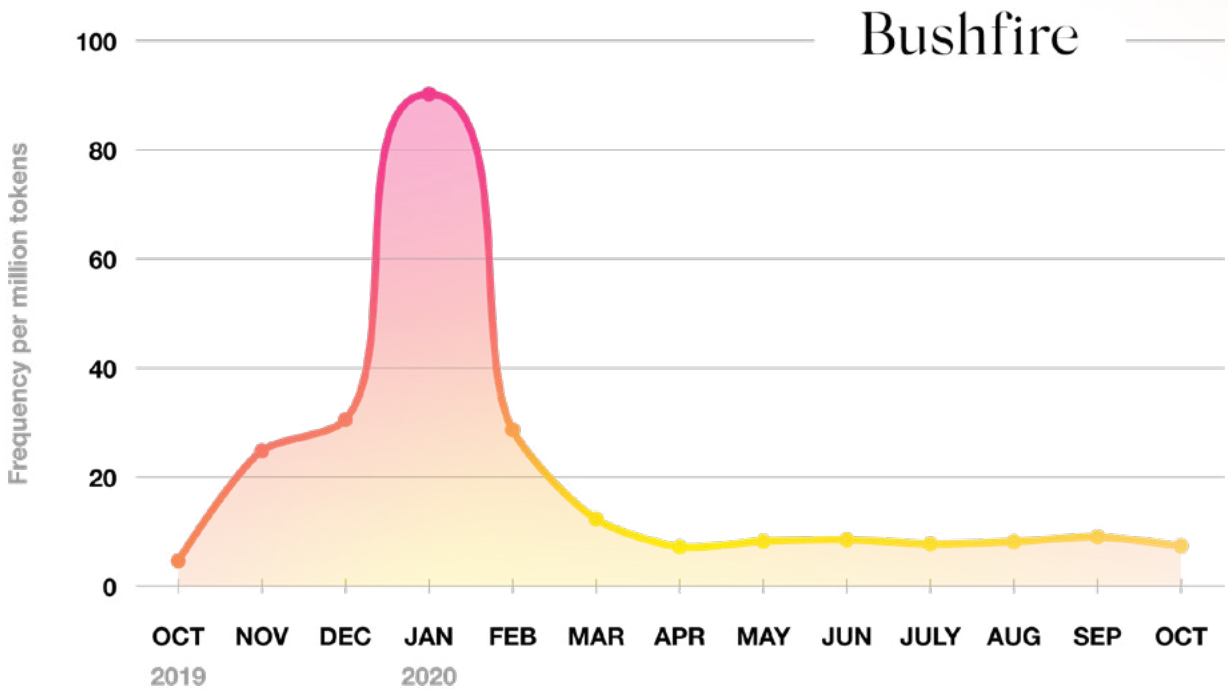
Most statistically significant collocates of (words juxtaposed with) *zoom*

2019	2020
10x	via
optical	meetings
5x	conferencing
click	optical
lens	Skype

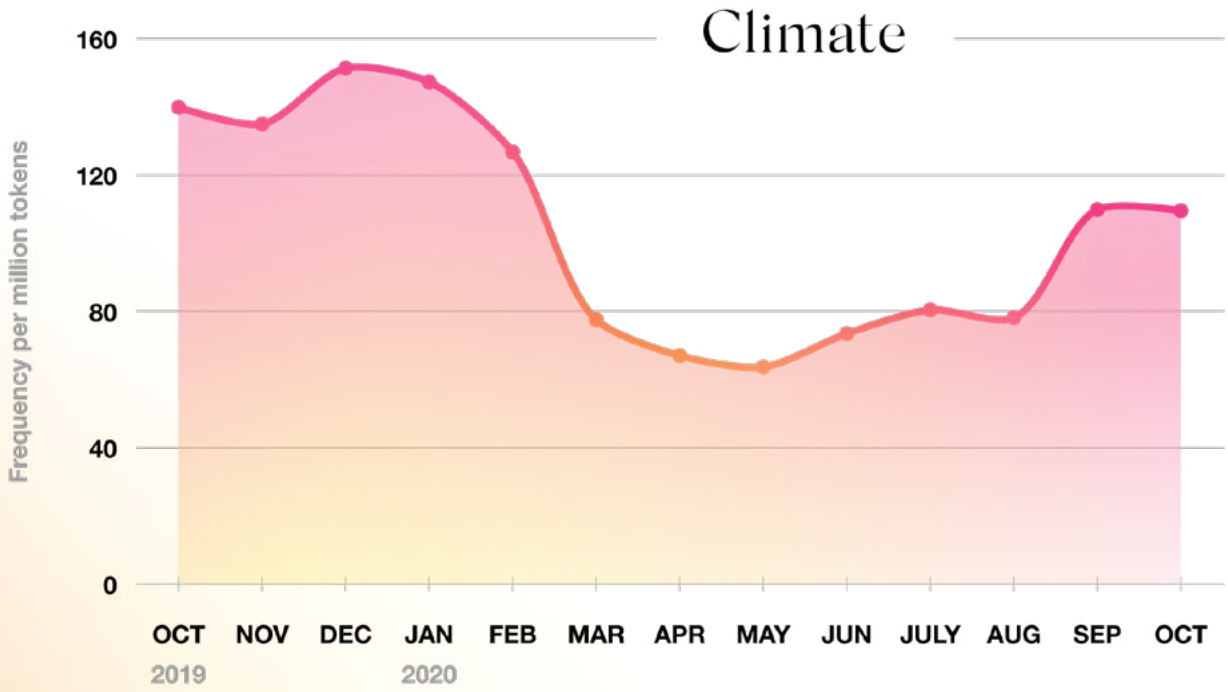
A change of scene may help to cure the Blursday blues, though that can be a challenge with so many restrictions on both domestic and international travel. Perhaps a **workation** could be the solution? A **workation** (also spelled **workcation**) is a holiday in which one also works, and although the word has been in use since at least the early 20th century, it has seen a leap in frequency in 2020 – with an increase of almost 500% compared to last year – as people begin to embrace the flexibility that remote working can offer.

The environment

One of the defining climatic events of the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020 was the Australian bushfire season, the worst on record. The word **bushfire** surged in frequency in January, and was one of the top keywords in our corpus that month.

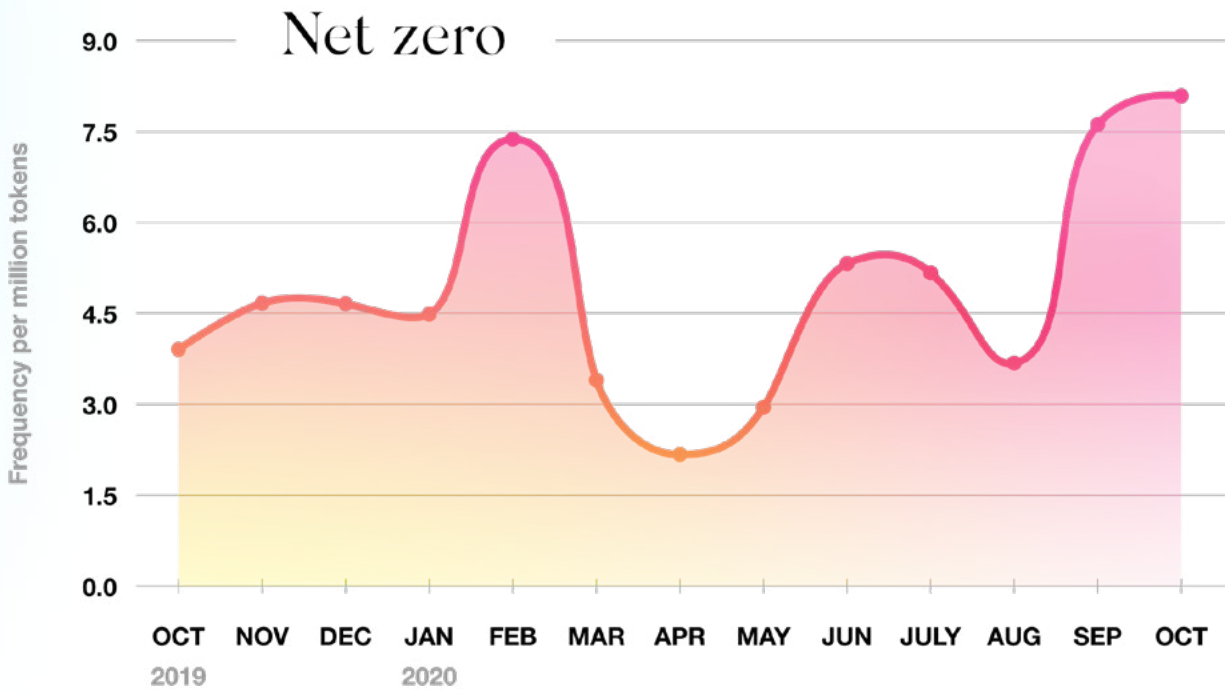


Other major climate-related events this year have included the devastating California wildfires in September, a record-breaking Atlantic hurricane season, and historic loss of Arctic sea ice. And yet, with a few exceptions, climate change has not received nearly the amount of media attention as it has in previous years, as Covid-19 and other issues have dominated the news. Last year, the Oxford Languages Word of the Year was **climate emergency**, with a shortlist composed entirely of words relating to climate and environmental issues. In March this year, the frequency of **climate**, **global warming**, and related terms plummeted in our corpus.



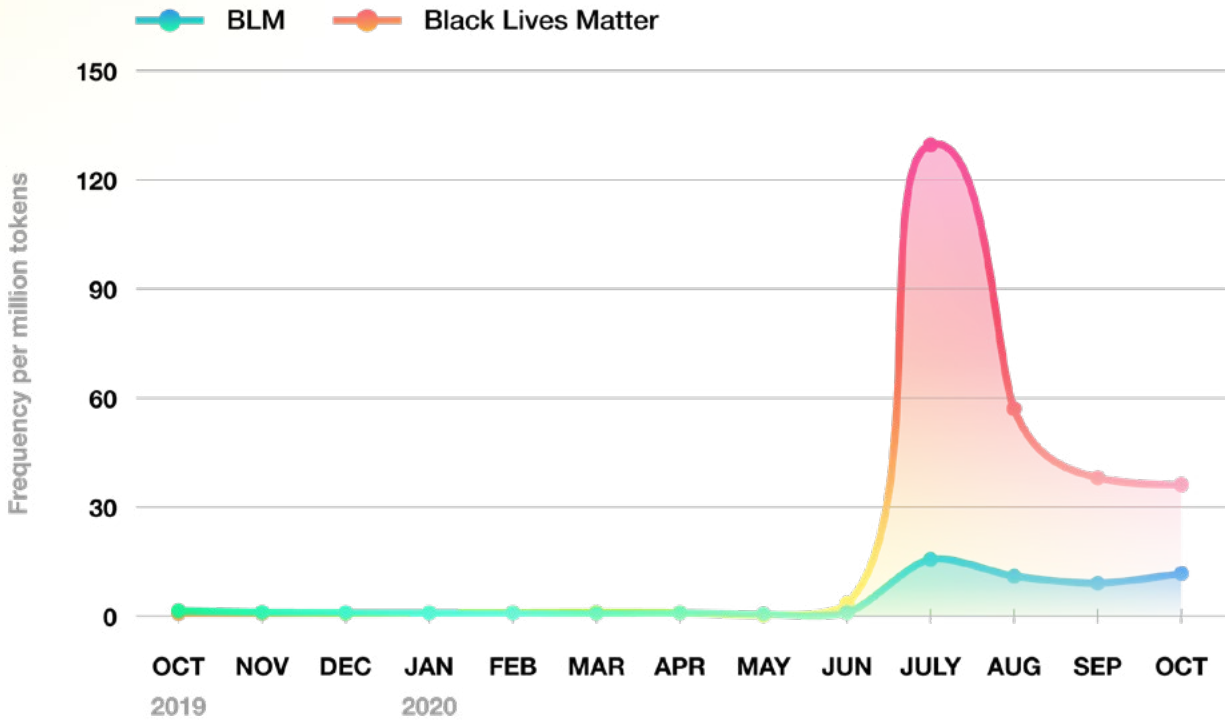
An interesting environment-related coinage has arisen precisely because of the social impacts of Covid-19 – **anthropause**, which first appeared in our corpus in June 2020, the month of its coinage. Formed from *anthropo-* ('relating to humans') and *pause*, it refers to the global slowdown of travel and other human activity during the pandemic, and alludes to some of the welcome consequences of this slowdown – fish were visible in the Grand Canal in Venice due to the reduction in water traffic; light and noise pollution across much of the world has decreased; and animals are being seen more frequently in their natural habitat as humans stay away. Another trend relating to more restricted options for travel this year is the staycation, a holiday spent at home or in one's home country. The word **staycation** is well-established in English – it is first recorded in 1944 in the *OED* – but its frequency has increased by almost 380% this year compared to last, and there is also growing evidence of its use as a verb. We have also seen an increased used of the related term *workation* (discussed in the remote working section above).

As the year progresses, there are signs that attention is turning back towards the climate crisis. **Climate** and related terms are becoming more frequent again, while **net zero** (another word on our 2019 Word of the Year shortlist, referring to a target of completely negating the amount of greenhouse gases produced by human activity) is also on the rise: the recent increase partly relates to the historic pledge made by President Xi Jinping in September, that China will be carbon neutral by 2060.



Social movements and **social media**

Despite a global pandemic that greatly restricted people's ability to organize and safely gather in large numbers, the summer of 2020 saw a surge in demonstrations and activism for the rights of black people as well as other marginalized groups. As a result, while it is hardly new, the term **Black Lives Matter**, and its abbreviation **BLM**, exploded in usage beginning in June of this year, remaining at elevated levels for the rest of the year as protests against law enforcement agencies over the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other black Americans took root in communities across the United States and across the world.



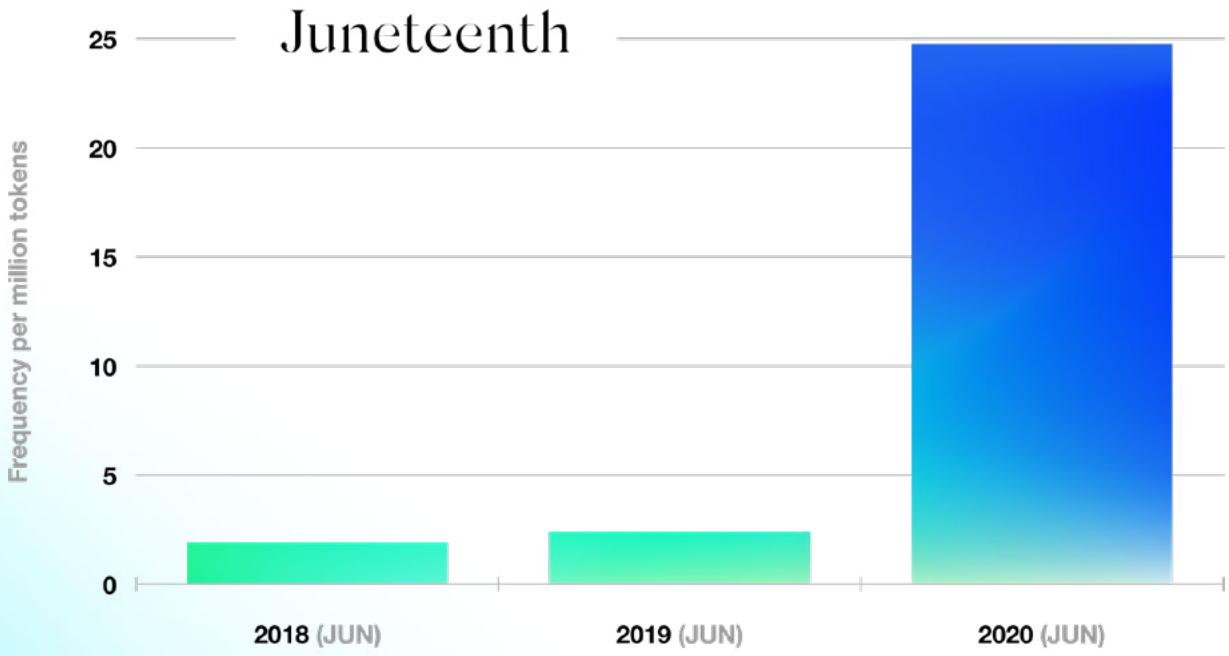
Other words that saw increased use over the summer of 2020 were **wokeness** (the noun derivative of *woke*, an entry on our Word of the Year shortlist in 2016) and **allyship**, both of which reflect the unprecedented growth seen in the number of non-black Americans who reported support for the Black Lives Matter movement. *Wokeness* is a tricky word to generalize about, however, as it is sometimes used to refer not to a raising of social consciousness but to social justice virtue-signalling.

There was a similar spike in usage of the phrase **take a knee**, an action originally performed by NFL players silently protesting during the National Anthem. In the summer of 2020, with the NFL off for the season and all other organized sports cancelled, taking a knee became a more widely used gesture of protest against institutional racism.

This year's global protest movement has also led to huge growth in discussions and debates around issues and policies that directly relate to the Black Lives Matter movement, such as whether to **defund** US police forces and how to tackle **decolonizing** or otherwise reforming the institutions and systems widely perceived as perpetuating **systemic** racial inequality.

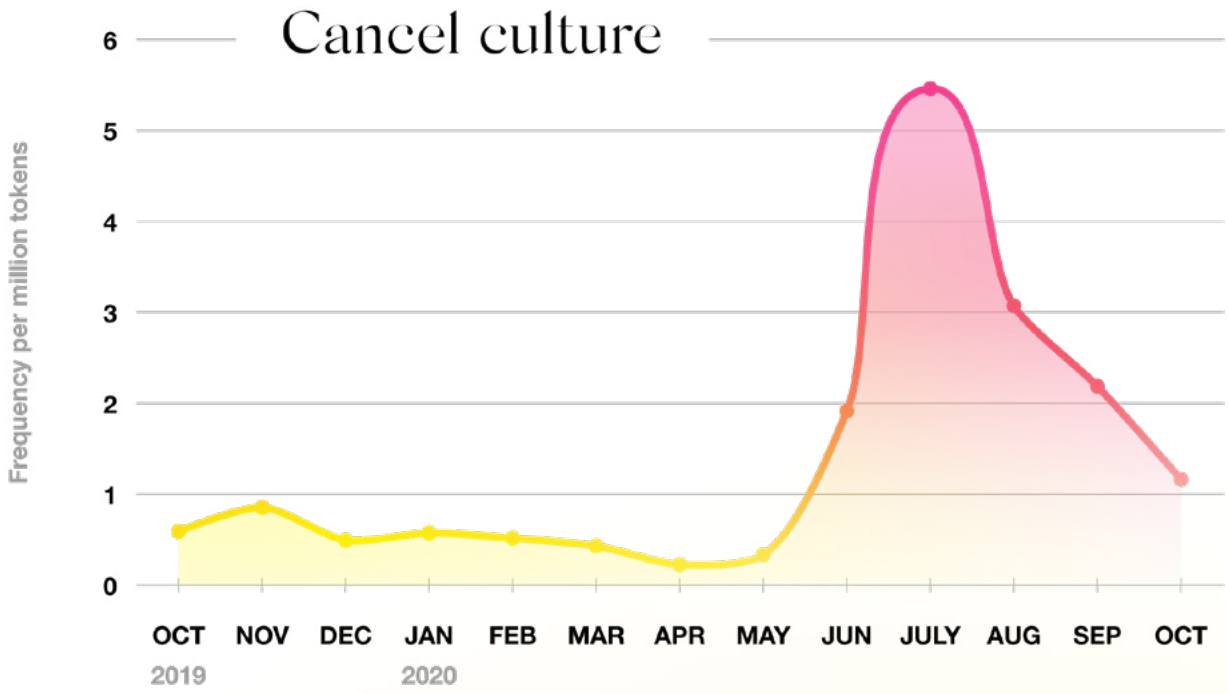
From 2019 to 2020, the frequency per million tokens for ***systemic racism*** has increased by 1,623%

Another trend identified in the corpus data relates to ongoing efforts to increase the representation and influence of racial minorities within existing institutions and organizations. For example, there has been a surge in usage of **D&I**, an abbreviation of *diversity and inclusion*, as well as **BIPOC**, an abbreviation of *black, indigenous, and other people of colour*.



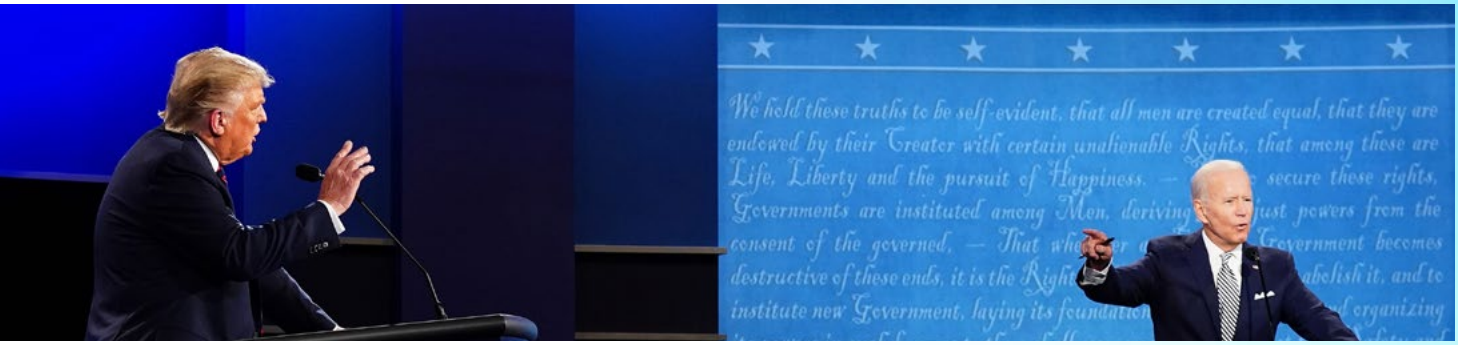
In a similar vein, the African-American holiday of **Juneteenth**, celebrating the 1865 end of slavery in the state of Texas on June 19th, was discussed in our corpus over 10 times more frequently in 2020 than it was in 2019, and nearly 13 times more frequently than it was in 2018.

While plenty of terms seem to point us toward a brighter future, certain others reflect the turmoil and division of the present. Our corpus recorded considerable spikes in the frequencies of **unrest** and **counter-protester**, reflecting the fact that not all of the summer's demonstrations were completely peaceful nor were all attendants in agreement about what kind of change is necessary. Likewise, we noted increases in the term **cancel culture**, the culture of boycotting and withdrawing support from public figures whose words and actions are considered socially unacceptable, as well as the use of **Karen** as a generic name for a white woman who behaves in a stereotypically racist or discriminatory manner.



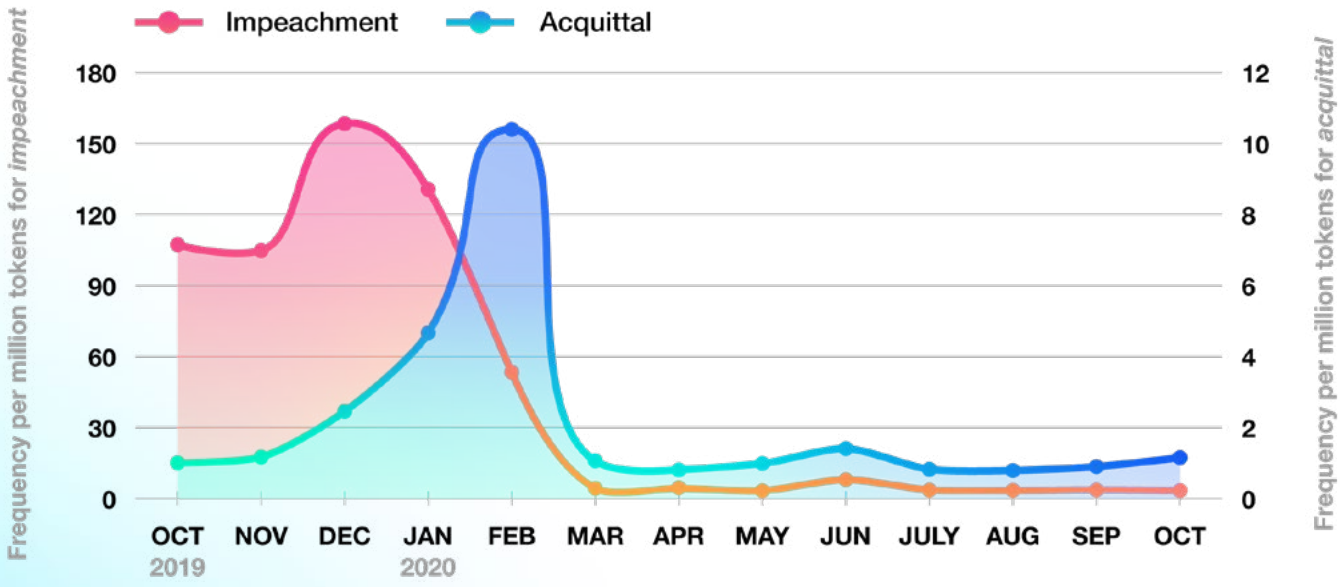
Our language monitoring activities have also noted significant growth in vocabulary pertaining to conspiracy theories, especially **QAnon**. The story of QAnon began in 2017 with an anonymous user of the message board 4chan, who signed off as Q, claiming to have a high level of security clearance called Q clearance, and posted messages originating a far-right conspiracy theory. The term **QAnon**, which refers to the conspiracy theory itself and also more generally to its group of supporters, has increased by 960% since last year in our corpus, and we are also seeing more usage of the derivative **QAnoner**. A possibly related trend of note is the slight rise in frequency of **sheeple**, a blend of 'sheep' and 'people': this word has been used since the 1940s to liken people derisively to sheep (in being docile, foolish, or impressionable), but in recent times it has been used specifically by conspiracy theorists to disparage their sceptics.

Politics and *economics*

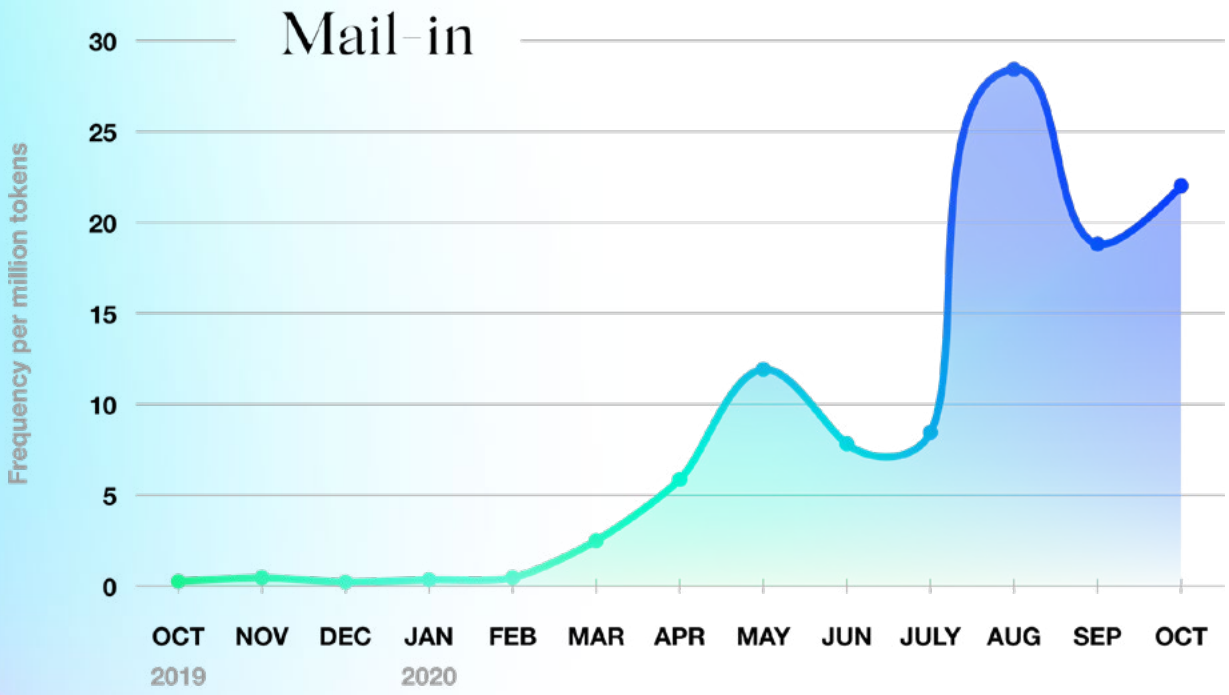


Politics and economics are typically dependable fields in which to witness ongoing language change and development. Previous Oxford Languages words of the year have included ‘squeezed middle’, ‘big society’, and ‘credit crunch’, and we only need to look at the language around Brexit to see how quickly words can be created and taken up in this sphere.

Of course, the main focus this year is the US presidential story. American news is world news, and this is seen in the impact on our corpus data of terms relating to US politics. As 2019 gave way to 2020, **impeachment** was a hot topic, and was one of the keywords in our corpus in January when the trial to impeach Donald Trump began. **Acquittal** peaked in February at the conclusion of the trial.

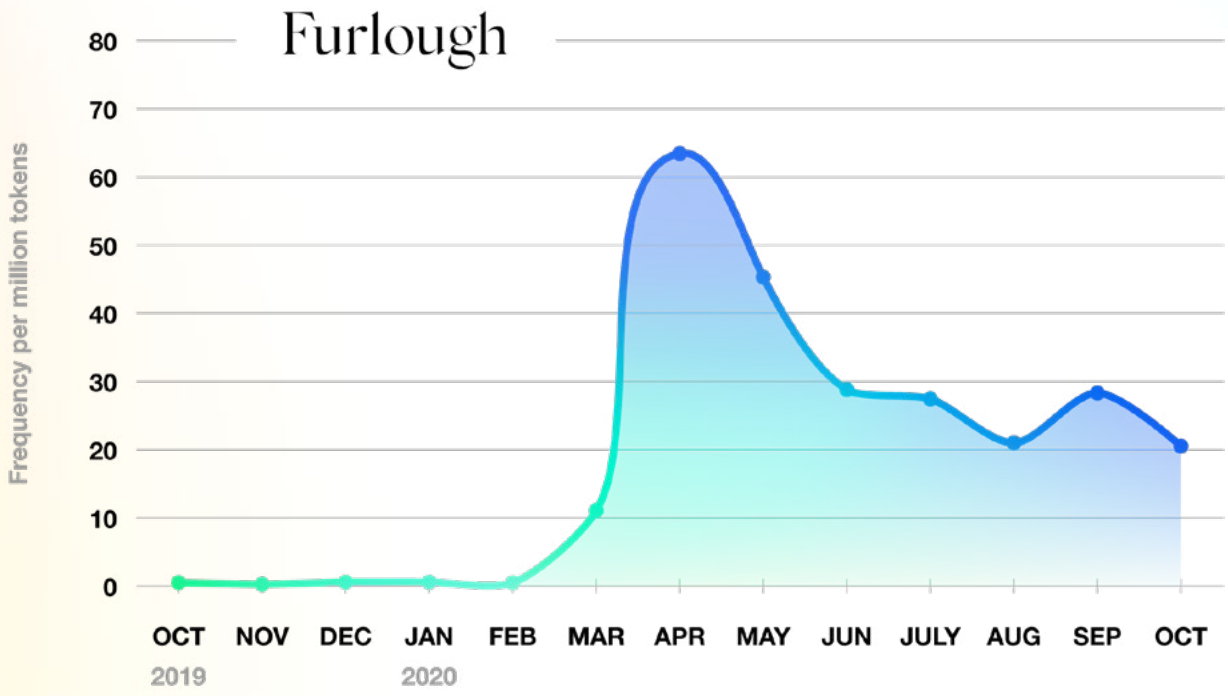


In recent months, the big political focus as far as word use increase is concerned has been the US postal service, specifically as a means of casting votes in these troubled times. **Mail-in**, **vote-by-mail**, and **absentee** (as in *absentee voter* and *absentee ballot*) have all become more frequent; *mail-in* has seen an increase in use of 3,000% compared to last year. It seems sensible to assume that these will remain significant terms for some time in American politics, considering the key part postal votes have played in the US presidential election and its aftermath.



Away from America, there was also media focus on another presidential election: the August re-election of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus. The controversy surrounding this saw the adjective **Belarusian** rise up the corpus charts rapidly as the story made the news around the world. Going in the other direction, the story of **Brexit** this year is a lesson in how soon things can change. Even as the UK and the EU head towards a relationship-defining deadline at the end of the year, use of the word dropped by 80% this year compared to last.

The politico-economic response to Covid has also brought new linguistic development. **Furlough** was originally associated with members of the armed forces going on leave, and was chiefly used in the US. In March and April 2020 though, when it started to be used in other countries as employers were given grants to pay employees who were not working, usage shot up.



Elsewhere our language use highlights the story of the shocking economic impact of the crisis. Words showing significant increase in use include **stimulus**, **unemployment**, **layoff**, and **eviction**. No wonder then that our politicians feel the need to add a positive spin in the words they use: **moonshot** had a rocket-powered ascent to significance in September as the name of a UK government programme for mass Covid testing. Alas, this appears as a rare point of light in an otherwise dark 2020 sky.

Closing statement

The Oxford Languages Words of an Unprecedented Year report looks back on the events that shaped the astounding language developments of 2020, and the role our lexicographers have played in tracking these rapid modifications to the English language. From the sobering discourse of pandemics and politics, to the light-hearted neologisms that have emerged in times of darkness, language is the common thread connecting these shared experiences across the globe.

There is no doubt the volatile events of 2020 have had an unprecedented impact on the way we live and work, specifically Covid-19, which has drastically altered our daily lives and our language. Trends identified in our corpus data revealed extraordinary spikes in usage for words, both old and new, relating to the pandemic. We saw new words emerge, and historical words resurface with new significance, as the English language developed rapidly to keep pace with the political upheaval and societal tensions that defined the year, as well as the ever-evolving spheres of technology and climate change, and the ways English across the globe has made its own mark on these developments to the lexicon.

Oxford Languages has tracked and analysed these changes over the course of the year, and our evidence-based approach to data curation and monitoring has allowed us to shed light on the remarkable breadth of language developments in this truly unprecedented year.

Definitions

allyship n. active support for the rights of a minority or marginalized group without being a member of it

anthropause n. a global slowdown of travel and other human activities

anti-masker n. a person who opposes the wearing of face masks

anti-vaxxer n. a person who is opposed to vaccination

BC. before Covid/before coronavirus

Black Lives Matter n. a movement formed to campaign against systemic racism and violence against black people

blended learning n. a style of education in which students learn via electronic and online media as well as traditional face-to-face teaching

BLM. Black Lives Matter

Blursday n. a day of the week that is indistinguishable from any other

bubble n. (during an outbreak of an infectious disease) a restricted group of people whose members are allowed to be in close proximity when maintaining a physical distance is otherwise required

cancel culture n. a culture in which there is a widespread practice of publicly rejecting or withdrawing support from people or things regarded as promoting socially unacceptable views

circuit breaker n. (a) an automatic device for stopping the flow of current in an electric circuit as a safety measure; (b) an automatic, temporary halt placed on stock trading, typically as a means of inhibiting panic selling; (c) a short period of lockdown intended to inhibit the spread of an infectious disease

community transmission n. transmission of an infectious disease or pathogen between members of a community, especially as a result of casual contact

coronavirus n. any of a group of RNA viruses that cause a variety of respiratory, gastrointestinal, and neurological diseases in humans and other animals; (specifically) a coronavirus responsible for an outbreak of serious respiratory disease in humans, especially the major pandemic beginning in 2019

Covid-19 n. an acute disease in humans caused by a coronavirus, which is characterized mainly by fever and cough and is capable of progressing to pneumonia, respiratory and renal failure, blood coagulation abnormalities, and death, especially in the elderly and people with underlying health conditions; (also) the coronavirus that causes this disease

covidiot n. (depreciative) a person who disobeys guidelines designed to prevent the spread of Covid-19

decolonize v. to free (an institution, sphere of activity, etc.) from the cultural or social effects of colonization

defund v. to cease to fund (something)

doomscrolling n. the action of compulsively scrolling through social media or news feeds which relate bad news

flatten the curve v. to take measures designed to reduce the rate at which infection spreads during an epidemic, with the aim of lowering the peak daily number of new cases and extending the period over which new cases occur

hygiene theatre n. cleaning practices which give the illusion of sanitization without reducing the risk of infection

infodemic n. a proliferation of diverse, often unsubstantiated information relating to a crisis, controversy, or event, which disseminates rapidly and uncontrollably through news, online, and social media, and is regarded as intensifying public speculation or anxiety

Juneteenth n. 19 June, celebrated as a holiday commemorating the emancipation of African-American slaves in Texas on that date in 1865.

learning modality n. a method of delivery of teaching and learning

lockdown n. a state of isolation, containment, or restricted access, usually instituted for security purposes or as a public health measure; the imposition of this state

mail-in adj. designating ballots, surveys, etc., in which results are collected by mail

moonshot n. an extremely ambitious and innovative project

net zero n. a target of completely negating the amount of greenhouse gases produced by human activity, to be achieved by reducing emissions and implementing methods of absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere

pandemic n. a disease which is epidemic over a very large area and affects a large proportion of a population; an outbreak of such a disease

personal protective equipment n. clothing and equipment designed to provide the wearer or user protection against hazardous substances or environments, or to prevent transmission of infectious diseases

plandemic n. a planned pandemic

PPE = personal protective equipment

R number n. reproduction number, the average number of cases of an infectious disease arising by transmission from a single infected individual

rona n. (informal) coronavirus; Covid-19

sanny n. (chiefly Australian) hand sanitizer

self-isolate v. to undertake self-imposed isolation for a period of time, typically in one's own home, in order to avoid catching or transmitting an infectious disease, or as one of a number of public health measures designed to inhibit its spread

social distancing n. the action or practice of maintaining a certain physical distance from, or limiting physical contact with, another person or people (especially family and friends), especially in order to avoid catching or transmitting an infectious disease, or as one of a number of public health measures designed to inhibit its spread

superspreader n. an individual infected with a (pathogenic) microorganism who transmits it to an unusually large number of other individuals

systemic racism n. discrimination or unequal treatment on the basis of membership of a particular ethnic group (typically one that is a minority or marginalized), arising from systems, structures, or expectations that have become established within society or an institution

take a knee v. to go down on one knee as a peaceful means of protesting against racism

twindemic n. the simultaneous occurrence of two pandemics

unmute v. to turn on (a microphone or the audio on an electronic device), especially after having temporarily turned it off

Veronica bucket n. a type of sanitation equipment consisting of a covered bucket with a tap fixed at the bottom and a bowl fitted below to collect wastewater

virtue-signalling n. (depreciative) the public expression of opinions or sentiments intended to demonstrate one's good character or the moral correctness of one's position on a particular issue

wet market n. (South-East Asian) a market for the sale of fresh meat, fish, and produce

wokeness n. the fact or quality of being alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice

workation n. a working vacation; a holiday during which one also works

Zoombombing n. the practice of infiltrating video conference calls on the Zoom application, and posting violent, pornographic, or offensive content

---

Oxford Languages' data powers these definitions. Our data can be found in dictionaries such as the Oxford English Dictionary, Lexico, and in many other products around the world.

Oxford**Languages**

The Oxford Languages 2020 *Words of an Unprecedented Year* report was compiled by a team of expert lexicographers from our Language Content and Data department. Their expertise in tracking and analysing linguistic development informs the evidence-based, data-driven approach Oxford Languages takes to language monitoring and data curation. Our story is one of continual innovation dedicated to the advancement of language knowledge for the benefit of everyone, everywhere.

To find out more about Oxford Languages and our data, please visit languages.oup.com or email us at Oxford.Languages@oup.com

OXFORD