Oxford Languages

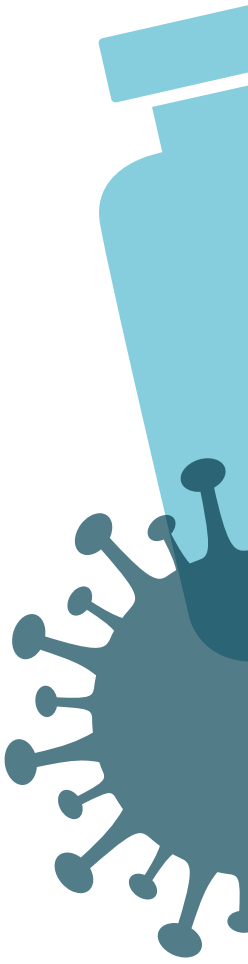
Word Of The Year 2021

Vax

A report into the language of

Vaccines

Contents



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Foreword

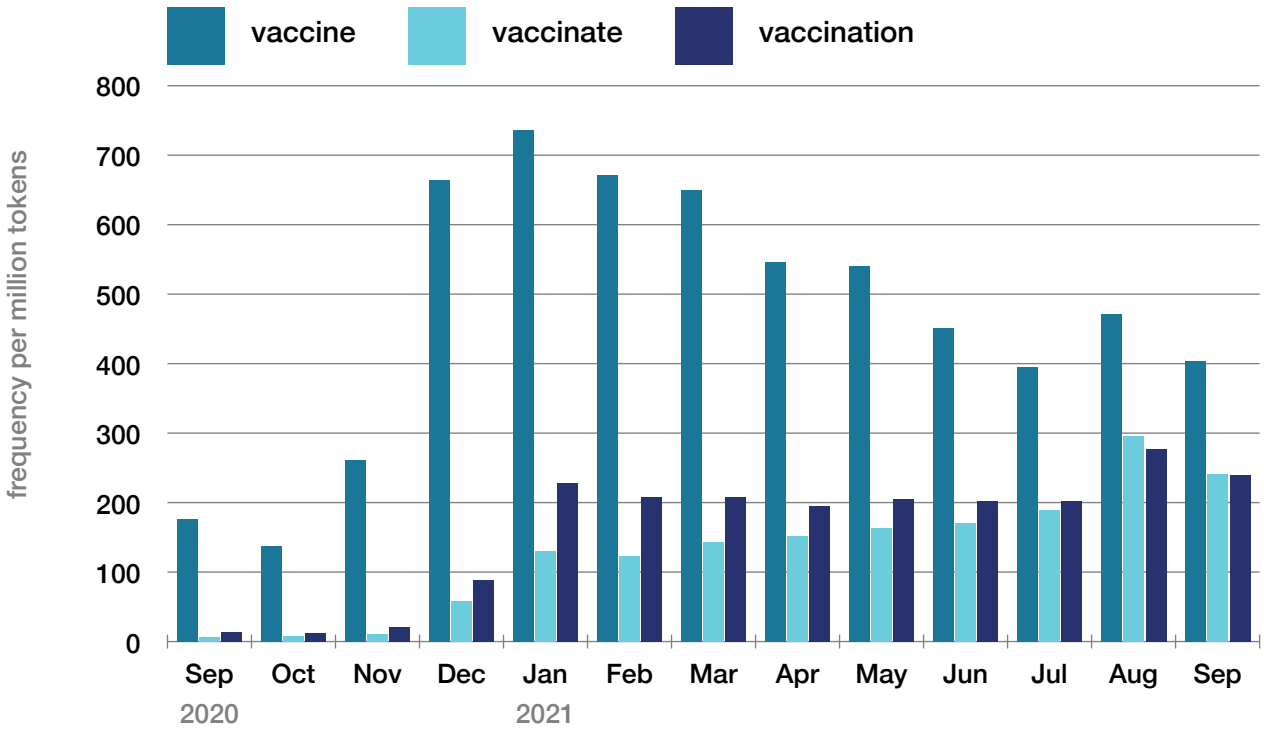
Whether you are **vaxxed**, **double-vaxxed**, or **unvaxxed**, the language relating to **vaccines** and **vaccination** permeated all of our lives in 2021. For lexicographers, it is rare to observe a single topic impact language so dramatically, and in such a short period of time become a critical part of our everyday communication. As reports of medical breakthroughs and rollouts (or **strollouts**) of vaccines emerged throughout the year, Oxford Languages' monitor corpus of English tracked a worldwide surge in vaccine-related vocabulary. The word **vax** (a colloquialism meaning either *vaccine* or *vaccination* as a noun and *vaccinate* as a verb) registered a particularly precipitous increase in frequency. However, the story of vaccines embedded in the English language is an old one which started at the end of the 1790s with the coinage of the word *vaccine*, followed soon after by words relating to opposition to vaccination, such as *anti-vaccinist*.

And the story continues to unfold today, closely tracked and recorded by the Oxford team. The tumultuous upheaval of Covid and the promise and delivery of vaccinations have spurred rapid social and technological development, typical catalysts for language change. Oxford Languages uses an evidence-based approach to track and analyse the English language as it evolves and adapts: from the light-hearted inventiveness of **vaxxie** and **Fauci ouchie** to regional variations, such as **getting one's jab**, **shot**, or **jag** (depending on where in the world you are). Our corpus gathers news content, updated daily, and currently contains over 14.5 billion words for lexicographers to search and analyse. And it is clear from our data and analysis that – as a standalone word and as an element in other words and phrases – **vax** has been fully absorbed into our language and our lives, making it our Word of the Year for 2021.

The word *vaccine* itself, already very common, more than **doubled** in frequency between September 2020 and September 2021

Vaccine, *vax*, and other vocabulary relating to vaccines

Many of the most significant increases in word frequency this year have been in vaccine-related vocabulary. The word **vaccine** itself, already very common, more than doubled in frequency between September 2020 and September 2021 in our corpus; even more pronounced was the increase in usage of **vaccinate** and **vaccination** over the same period (a 34-fold increase and an 18-fold increase respectively), as the focus moved from the development of vaccines to the process of getting vaccinated.



Frequency of vaccine, vaccinate, and vaccination in the Oxford Monitor Corpus of English

The lexical contexts in which the word *vaccine* is used have also shifted, as this table shows.

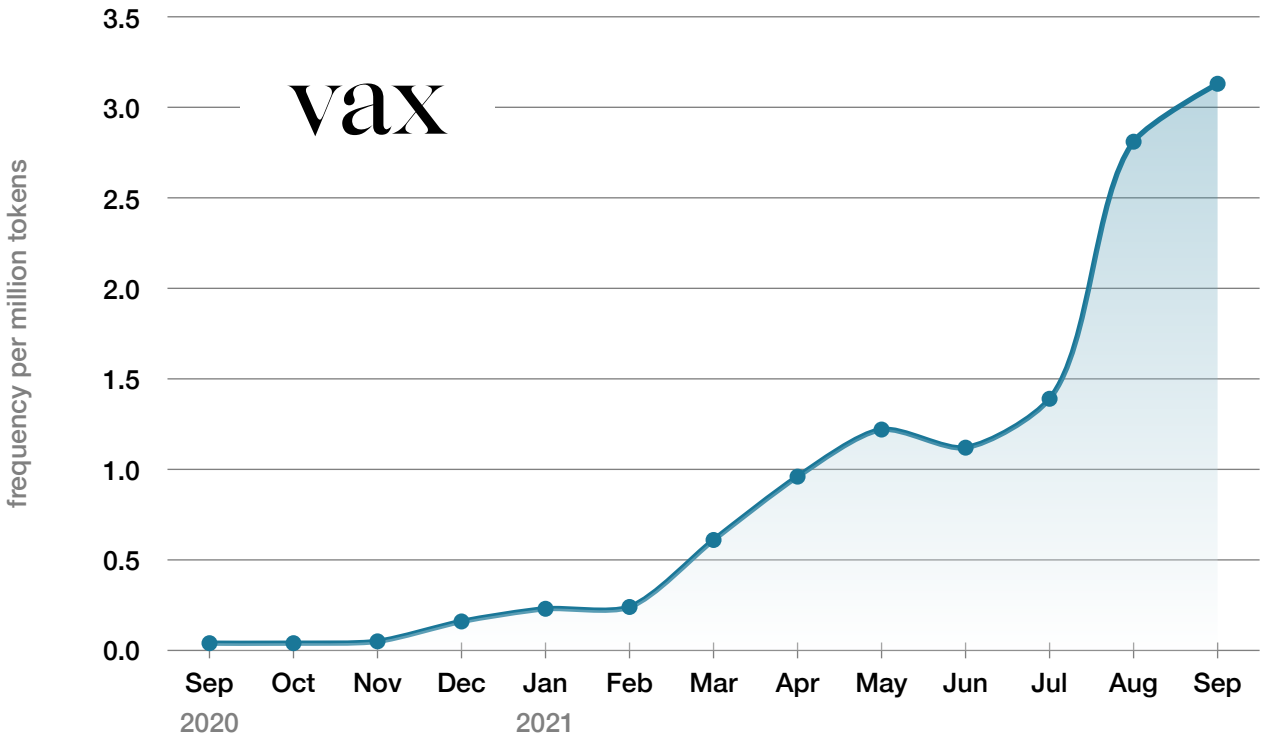
Oct–Dec 2020	Jan–Mar 2021	Apr–June 2021	July–Sept 2021
vaccine **candidate**	vaccine **rollout**	vaccine **dose**	vaccine **dose**
vaccine **trial**	vaccine **dose**	vaccine **rollout**	vaccine **mandate**
vaccine **distribution**	vaccine **distribution**	vaccine **passport**	vaccine **passport**
vaccine **development**	vaccine **supply**	vaccine **hesitancy**	vaccine **rollout**
vaccine **dose**	vaccine **appointment**	vaccine **supply**	vaccine **hesitancy**
vaccine **rollout**	vaccine **passport**	vaccine **clinic**	vaccine **requirement**
vaccine **news**	vaccine **candidate**	vaccine **appointment**	vaccine **card**
vaccine **maker**	vaccine **programme**	vaccine **production**	vaccine **clinic**
vaccine **approval**	vaccine **shot**	vaccine **distribution**	vaccine **supply**
vaccine **developer**	vaccine **hesitancy**	vaccine **manufacturer**	vaccine **booster**

Top 10 nouns most frequently modified by vaccine in the Oxford Monitor Corpus of English, October 2020 to September 2021

At the end of 2020, the nouns most frequently modified by **vaccine** included *candidate*, *trial*, *development*, *maker*, and *approval*, as Covid vaccines were developed, tested, and authorized for use. As mass vaccination programmes were launched, *vaccine rollout* became one of the most frequent collocations, along with other uses relating to the vaccination process, such as *vaccine dose* and *vaccine clinic*. Then, as 2021 progressed, there was an increase in terms relating to the much-discussed topic of requiring people to certify their vaccination status in order to travel, attend events, etc.: *vaccine passport*, *vaccine card*, *vaccine mandate*, and *vaccine requirement.*

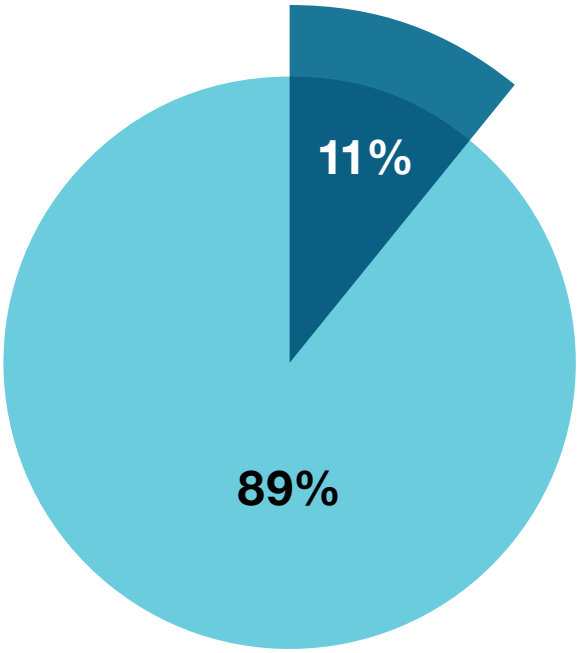
Other vaccine-related words which have significantly increased in frequency this year include **inoculate**, **booster**, **jab**, and **shot**. We have also seen a surge in terms referring to the number of doses required or received, including **single-dose**, **two-dose**, and **double-jabbed**, the latter especially in contexts relating to the associated freedoms for those who have been fully vaccinated. Terms relating to concerns about or opposition to vaccines have also risen in frequency, notably **vaccine hesitancy**, **anti-vax**, and **anti-vaxxer**.

But of all the vaccine-related words which have spiked in frequency this year, perhaps the most striking is **vax**. The word **vax** dates back to the 1980s, appearing first as a noun in the sense 'a vaccine or vaccination', and then from the early 21st century as a verb meaning 'vaccinate' (the much earlier term **anti-vax** – recorded from the early 1800s – is a shortening of **anti-vaccinist**). However, **vax** was a relatively rare word in our corpus until this year, when it shot up in frequency: by September it was over 72 times more frequent than at the same time last year. We are now seeing it in a wide range of informal contexts, from *vax sites* and *vax cards* to *getting vaxxed* and being *fully vaxxed*.



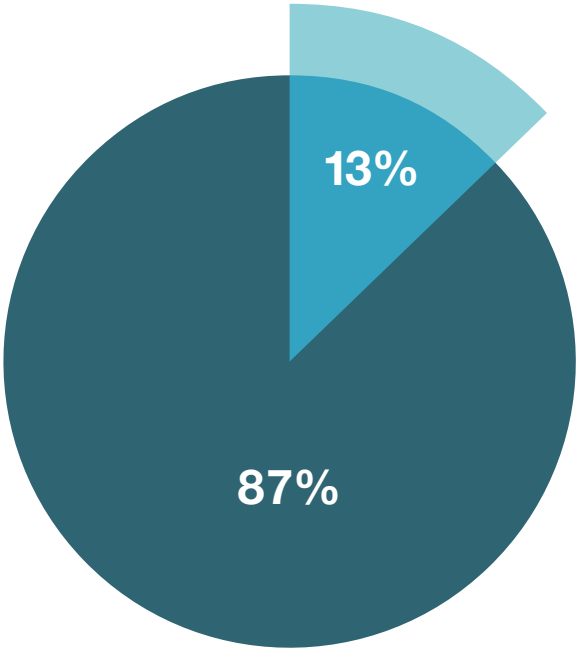
Frequency of vax (noun and verb) in the Oxford Monitor Corpus of English

There is some variation in the spelling of **vax** versus **vaxx**, but the form with one x is more common. However, inflected forms are usually written with a double x (e.g. *vaxxed* rather than *vaxed*). While the usual pattern for words ending in *x* is not to double the *x* in inflected forms and derivatives (for example, we write *boxes*, *taxed*, and *waxing*), the expressive doubling of *x* has become increasingly common in certain contexts, especially in words relating to digital communications (for example *doxxing*), and also notably in *anti-vaxxer*.



vax and *vaxx*

- vax
- vaxx



inflected forms of *vax* and *vaxx*

- vaxed/vaxes/vaxing
- vaxxed/vaxxes/vaxxing

Relative frequency of forms of vax in the Oxford Monitor Corpus of English

The word *vaccine*: a short historical note

The word **vaccine** is first recorded in English in 1799, while its derivatives **vaccinate** and **vaccination** both first appear in 1800. All of these words come ultimately from Latin *vacca* cow, in a rather complicated story that centres on the English physician and scientist Edward Jenner's pioneering work on vaccination against smallpox in the late 1790s and early 1800s.

The Latin adjective *vaccīnus*, from which *vaccine* derives, was found already in the time of the ancient Romans, for whom it meant simply 'of or derived from a cow' (*vacca*). Jenner conceived the Latin expression *variolae vaccinae* as a name for cowpox, literally meaning 'the smallpox (or pocks or pustules) of a cow'.

Building on earlier work on inoculation (which then referred specifically to the introduction of material taken from the pocks or pustules of smallpox into the skin of a person susceptible to the disease), and on the earlier observation that prior infection with cowpox protected people against smallpox, Jenner pioneered the use of material from cowpox pustules or pocks as an inoculation against the similar but much deadlier disease smallpox.

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In reports on Jenner's work, in both English and French, **vaccine** came to be used to refer to the disease cowpox itself (as in *vaccine disease*, *vaccine infection*, or *the vaccine*), and also to material from cowpox pocks used to inoculate against smallpox. The verb and noun **vaccinate** and **vaccination** were coined to describe this process of inoculation against smallpox using material from cowpox pocks.

It is only some decades later that **vaccine**, **vaccinate**, and **vaccination** came to be applied more widely to immunization against other diseases, especially reflecting the work of the French scientist Louis Pasteur. Hence, a word whose ancestor in classical Latin meant 'of or derived from a cow' now normally means 'material prepared from the causative agent of a disease, or a product of such an agent, for use in immunization'.

'The ***Anti-Vacks*** are assailing me.. with all the force they can muster in the newspapers.'

Not long after the earliest uses of *vaccine* in English came a set of words referring to opposition to, or opposers of, vaccines: **anti-vaccinist**, **anti-vaccinator**, **anti-vaccination**, and **anti-vax** are all first recorded in the early 19th century, **anti-vax** (with a different spelling) in a letter by Edward Jenner himself in 1812, in which he stated that 'The Anti-Vacks are assailing me..with all the force they can muster in the newspapers.' However, **anti-vax** was rare until the 21st century, and it was only then that it was spelled with an *x*. In a separate development, **vax** was first used as a shortened form of **vaccine** (with phonetic respelling of -cc as -x) in the late 20th century, initially as an element in various vaccine trademarks, and then, from the 1980s, as a generic term meaning 'vaccine' or 'vaccination'.

Word	Earliest recorded date	
vaccine *(adjective)*	1799	denoting cowpox
vaccine *(noun)*	1799	originally in sense ‘cowpox’; then ‘Material taken from pocks of cowpox for use in vaccination against smallpox’ (1800), then ‘More generally: material prepared from the causative agent of a disease, or a product of such an agent, for use in immunization; a preparation of this kind; a dose of such a preparation’ from 1880
vaccinate *(verb)*	1800	
vaccination *(noun)*	1800	
vaccinated	1800	
vaccinator *(noun)*	1801	sense ‘A person who performs or advocates vaccination’
anti-vaccinist *(noun and adj)*	1802	
vaccinist *(noun)*	1804	sense ‘A person who performs or advocates vaccination’
anti-vaccination *(noun and adj)*	1807	
anti-vax *(noun)*	1812	originally spelled anti-vacks, anti-vaccs; anti-vax spelling from 2000
unvaccinated *(adjective)*	1813	
vaccinationist *(noun)*	1851	sense ‘An advocate of vaccination’
anti-vaccinationist *(noun and adj)*	1869	
anti-vax *(adj)*	1898	
vax *(noun)*	1983	
anti-vaxxer *(noun)*	2001	
vax *(verb)*	2009	
vaxxer *(noun)*	2012	

New words for novel experiences: the ***inoculati***, the ***anti-faxxers***, ***vaxxies***, and the ***Fauci ouchie***

The new words (neologisms) coined during our intense interactions with vaccines and vaccinations over the past twelve months reflect a heady moment of optimism and a release of tension after months of lockdown or quarantine, and of shared experiences, envy, and conflict. Although many of these words won't see the kind of continued and widespread use that would lead to their inclusion in dictionaries, they provide a lexical snapshot of the concerns of the year.

Photographic snapshots provided an early opportunity for linguistic inventiveness, with the **vaxxie**, a selfie taken during or immediately before or after one's vaccination. The potential public health value of these was recognized from the outset: during an online event with Alan Alda and Dr Anthony Fauci, in December 2020, Alda suggested:

> If it's possible to take a selfie while you're getting your shot, and post it on… social media, the people you know, trust you, and you can spread the word that way, *so instead of taking a selfie*, take a **vaxxie**.

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(The M*A*S*H star's suggestion is one of the earliest uses of this word in relation to Covid vaccinations, although there is scattered evidence for earlier use in the context of flu vaccines from 2017 onwards.)

The power of social media (and the FOMO it tends to encourage) is on show in several other playful vaccination-related blends, as users expressed the greater social freedom and peace of mind of the ranks of the **inoculati**, whether **halfcinated** (partially vaccinated, having had one shot of two) or **fullcinated** (fully vaccinated). The term **vaxinista** has been used to refer to advocates of vaccination and those involved in delivering shots, as well as anyone who's received one, but over the course of the past year it emerged as a favourite depreciative term for a person who flaunts their vaccinated status and associated widening social and travel opportunities, including post-vaccination getaways or **vax(i)cations**, another formation which technically predates the pandemic, but which has taken off as people look forward to post-Covid holidays.

The **power** of social media (and the FOMO it tends to encourage) is on show in several other *playful* vaccination-related blends

The logistics of vaccine delivery have also given us a few coinages. **Vax-a-thon** was first used to refer to a specific mass vaccination event in Philadelphia in January this year. Since then, it's become increasingly visible in Canadian sources referring to similar local events. In mid-October, New Zealand's drive to deliver over 100,000 shots on 'Super Saturday' included a 'Vaxathon' or 'vaccination telethon' featuring appearances from celebrities and Jacinda Ardern, although the term was also used for the nationwide event itself. In Australia the term **strollout** attracted attention in May when it was used by trade unionist Sally McManus to express frustration at capacity problems and slow rollout of vaccines in the country at the time. (Despite these very specific origins, *strollout* seems one of the more likely of these new formations to see a continuing use in other contexts.)

In the US, the 'sharp scratch' of the needle provided one half of a rhyming name for the vaccination, the **Fauci ouchie**, with Dr Anthony Fauci providing the other; it started to appear on social media from early December 2020. The more geographically widespread **Covid arm**, first used in January 2021, refers to slightly longer-term localized soreness or inflammation sometimes experienced after a jab. Meanwhile, evidence for **vaxxident**, a road accident claimed to be caused by alleged side-effects of vaccination, is confined largely to vaccine-sceptical websites in the US and is not found in more mainstream news sources.

This polarization of debate is visible in two (relatively rare) derogatory terms for Covid deniers and vaccine-sceptics modelled on existing words: **anti-faxxer** and **spreadneck** (after anti-vaxxer and redneck). The desire to be able (or belief that you have the ability) to intuit or deduce whether you're talking to someone on your own side of this particular social and political divide gives us another neologism, **vaxdar** (after *gaydar* and its own model, *radar*). The evidence shows that *vax* and words formed on *vax* are not exclusive to any one faction: they represent a rare point of linguistic unity amidst the contention and division.

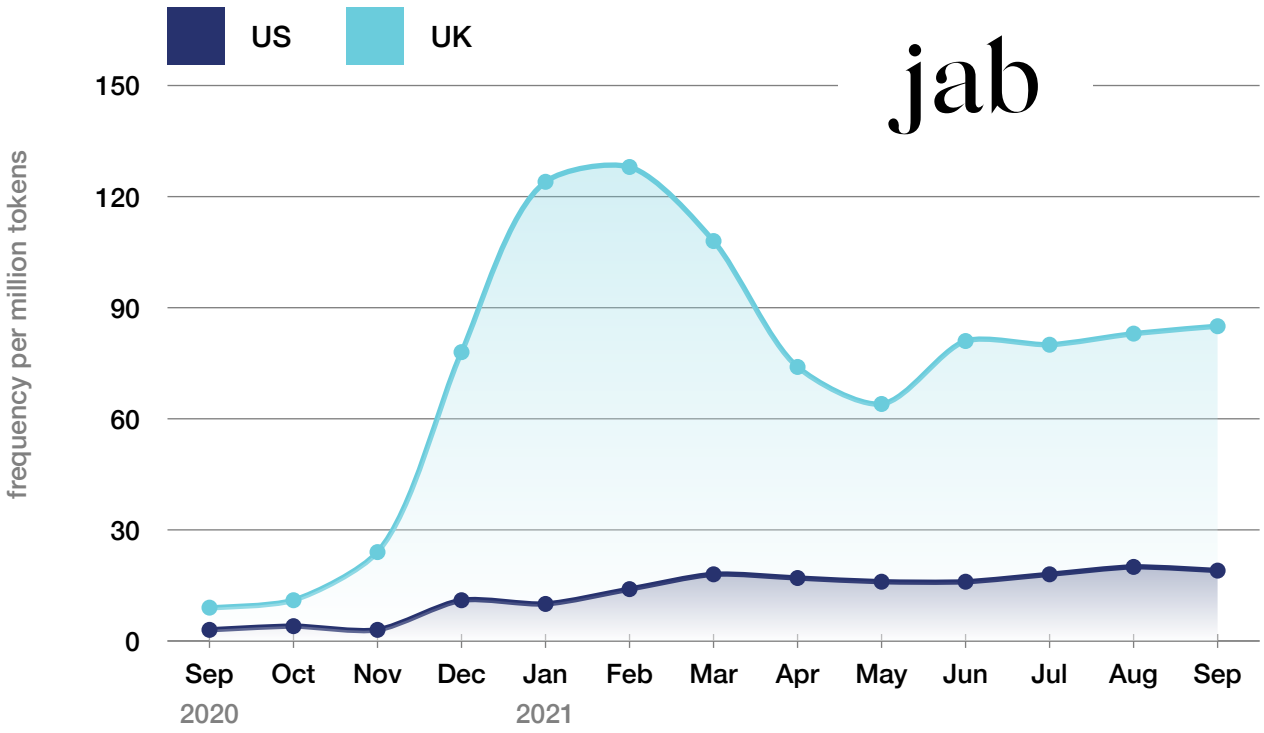
Jabs, **jags**, and **shots**: regional variation in words for *vaccination*

English is a language rich with synonyms, so it comes as no surprise that there are numerous other words (notably colloquialisms) meaning 'vaccination', 'vaccine', and 'vaccinate', with variation depending on where you are in the English-speaking world.

In British English, one of the most common colloquialisms used to refer to vaccination is **jab**, both as a noun (as in 'they were given the jab') and as a verb (as in 'encouraging people to get jabbed').

Although this sense of **jab** is thought of as definitively British, this was not always the case. According to the *OED*, **jab** meaning 'an injection with a hypodermic needle' (from which the synonym for vaccination has emerged) started out as an American colloquialism before becoming restricted to mainly British use. However, this year there has been a marked increase in usage of **jab** in US English in our corpus.

Although **jab** is a word with multiple meanings, a change in its most typical collocates in US usage indicate that the increase in frequency is due to an increase in the vaccine-related sense. In the US data from 2020 in our corpus, the words most commonly modifying the noun **jab** were *subtle* and *verbal*, reflecting a different sense (a critical comment). By contrast, in 2021 the most frequent collocates in this context show the sense 'injection with a vaccine; vaccination': *COVID-19*, *booster*, *first*, and *second*.



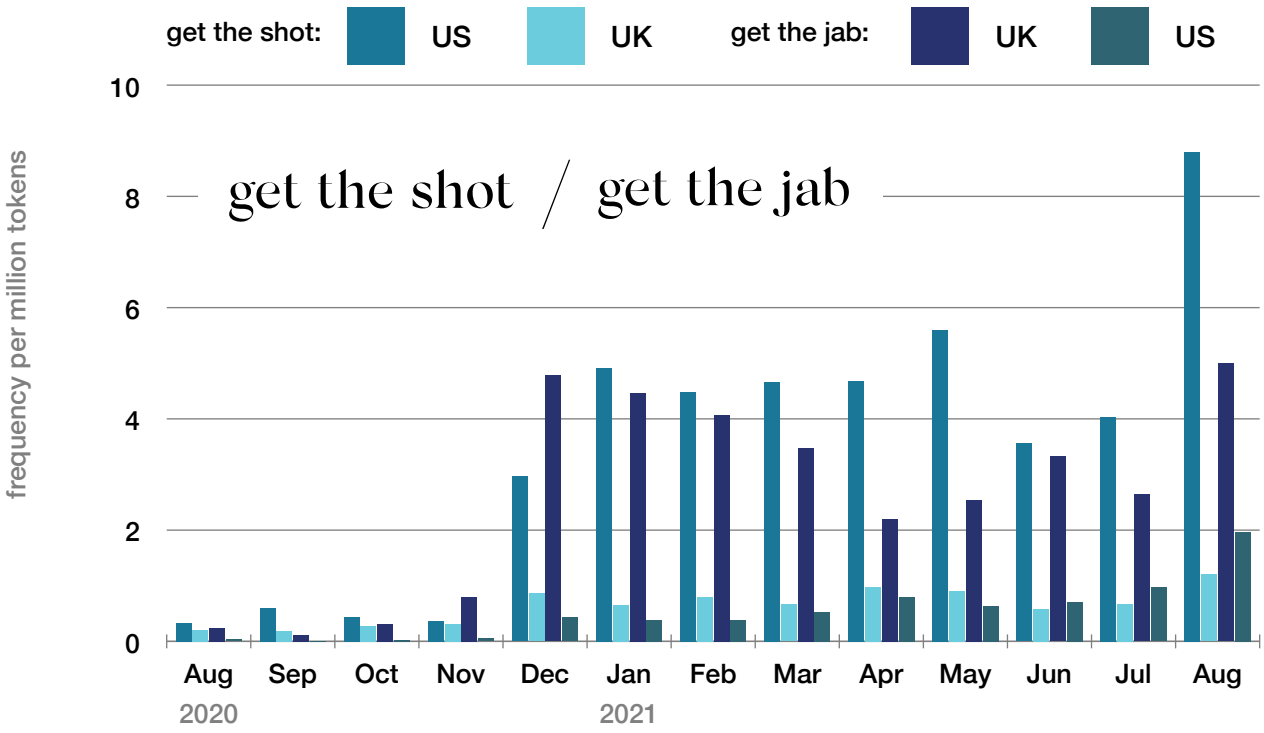
Frequency of jab (noun and verb) in US and UK in the Oxford Monitor Corpus of English

Despite this increase, **jab** is still predominantly a British term, as the comparison between the UK and US data in our corpus shows. Even within the UK, there is variation. While **jab** is in common usage throughout the UK, **jag**, with exactly the same meaning, is a long-established alternative frequently used in Scottish English, both as noun (as in 'jags will be available at the site between 11am-3pm') and verb (as in 'health service staff are best placed to jag arms with Covid vaccines'); **double-jagged** is also a common Scottish alternative to *double-jabbed* (e.g. 'double-jagged holidaymakers will no longer have to pay for PCR tests').

While ***jab*** is in common usage, ***jag***, with exactly the same meaning, is a long-established alternative frequently used in Scottish English

Jab and **jag** are both long-established words in English, commonly used in the UK to refer to any vaccination or injection. In any 'normal year' it wouldn't be surprising to see an increase in use towards the end of the year as people begin to be offered flu vaccinations. But with this pandemic, the increase in usage is much more significant. We have also seen growing evidence of **jab** being used to mean 'vaccine' (rather than injection of a vaccine), for example when people refer to receiving 'a dose of the jab'.

Shot remains the most common colloquialism meaning 'injection of a vaccine' in the US. Again, **shot** has many different meanings and appears in many more contexts – even more than **jab** – so rather than compare the frequency of this word as a whole in UK and US English, it is more meaningful to compare its use in two common phrases, 'get the shot' and 'get the jab'.

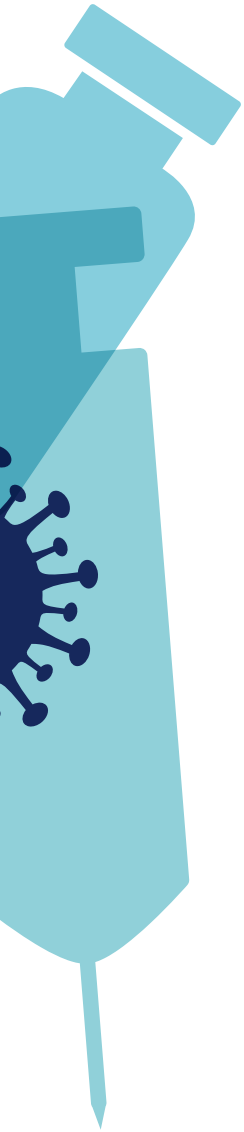


Frequency of *get the shot* and *get the jab* in US and UK in the Oxford Monitor Corpus of English

While there has been an increase in the use of both phrases in both varieties, the contrast is still marked, with **shot** being much the preferred term in US English, **jab** in the UK.

The phrase **a shot in the arm** has also seen an increase. It's well established in both its literal use (injection into the arm) and figurative use (an encouraging stimulus). What's notable this year is the prolific punning combinations of the literal and figurative, e.g. 'Super Saturday has been a shot in the arm for the final stage of our Covid-19 vaccination programme'; 'Singapore's vaccinated travel lanes may also provide a shot in the arm for the pandemic-hammered airline and tourism industries'. There isn't much evidence of **jab** being used in the same way.

And what of **vax**? Our corpus data shows that it is most common in North America, Australia, and South East Asia, although there is also growing evidence of usage in the UK and in other varieties of English. As a short pithy word, it appeals, perhaps especially to media commentators, when more formal alternatives are much more long-winded.



The *global* picture

The language of vaccines has made an impact across the globe. This year for the first time our report examines how this phase of the pandemic has influenced languages other than English, and shines a light on how swift global innovation and technological development defined the year, and made their mark on everyday communication worldwide.

Here, with the help of Oxford's specialist consultants, we take a look at the languages other than English with the greatest number of speakers overall, which linguists generally agree to be:

— (Mandarin) **Chinese**

— **Hindi**

— **Spanish**

— (Modern Standard) **Arabic**

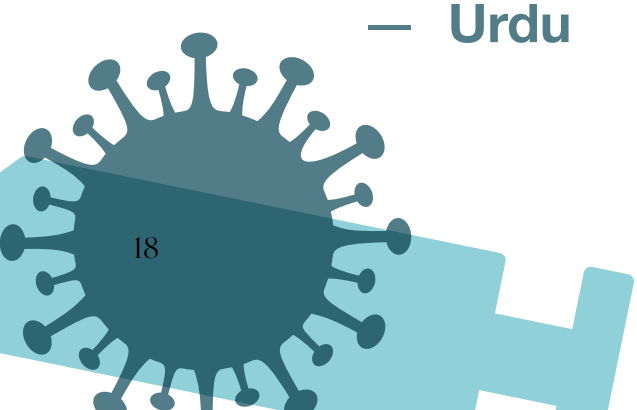
— **Bangla** (Bengali)

— **French**

— **Russian**

— **Portuguese**

— **Urdu**



(Mandarin) Chinese

The Chinese equivalent of ‘vaccine’ is 疫苗 (yì miáo or (approximately) ee myow), formed by combining two separate characters— 疫 (‘epidemic’) and 苗 (‘seedling’).

The word usually collocates with the verb 接种 (jiē zhòng or jee jong), which is also a combination of two characters: 接 means ‘to connect, to graft, or to transfer’ and 种 means ‘to grow, to plant, or to cultivate’. Thus, 接种疫苗, literally translated as ‘to graft and plant the epidemic seedling’, means ‘to vaccinate’.

In daily life, people also say 打疫苗 (dǎ yì miáo or dah ee myow). 打, as a verb, basically means ‘to strike, to hit, or to beat’, but it is also multi-functional and often used with numerous nouns to indicate different actions. Among all these collocations is the verb-noun structure 打针 (dǎ zhēn or dah jen), or ‘to give an injection’, where 打 means ‘to jab, to stab, or to prick’ and 针 means ‘needle’ or ‘injection’, including ‘vaccination’. While 接种疫苗 is a comparatively formal equivalent for ‘to vaccinate’, 打疫苗 is more widely used in spoken language.

针 is also used as the quantifier (or measure word) for injections, and 二针疫苗 (èr zhēn yì miáo or ar jen ee myow) means ‘two-dose vaccine’.

With many thanks to Patience Zhou, Jean Fang, Franky Lau, Windy Wong, *and* Hommy Zhang *of OUP China*

Hindi

The Hindi word for ‘vaccine’ is ‘teeka’ (टीका). ‘Teeka’ is also an informal word for ‘tilak’ (तिलक), the sacred mark applied on the forehead on auspicious occasions in some customs and religions as a symbol for warding off the evil eye. When a person arrives home, before a person leaves home, at festivals and at pujas (religious ceremonies), the ‘teeka’/’tilak’ is applied.

Similarly, in India, vaccines are symbolic of warding off any ills (including diseases). The Covid-19 vaccine is also called a ‘teeka’, and the vaccination programme is referred to as ‘teekakaran’ (टीकाकरण).

A vaccine developed in India has been named Covaxin, with a short ‘i’ sound. However, it is often pronounced ‘Covaccine’ by Hindi speakers, since the English word ‘vaccine’ is widely understood in the context of Covid-19 reporting.

To reduce vaccine hesitancy, one of the brands launched a campaign, #TeekaUmeedKa, (https://www.indiantelevision.com/mam/media-and-advertising/ad-campaigns/ghadi-tackles-vaccine-hesitancy-in-its-latest-ad-film-210820) which means a ‘teeka’ of ‘hope’.

Kritika Agrawal
Hindi Language Champion

Spanish

The Spanish word for 'vaccine' is 'vacuna' (ba-KOO-na), which is also the feminine form of the adjective 'vacuno', as in the Spanish term 'carne vacuna' (KAR-neh ba-KOO-na, or 'beef').

While in English the words 'jab' or 'shot' often replace the word 'vaccine' in more colloquial registers, in Spanish the word 'vacuna' cuts across registers without serious competition from any other words: it is used in medical articles and essays, as well as in casual conversation. The same goes for the transitive verb 'vacunar' (ba-koo-NAR, 'to vaccinate') and the pronominal verb 'vacunarse' (ba-koo-NAR-say, 'to get vaccinated'): '¿Cuándo te vacunas?' means both 'When are you getting vaccinated?' and 'When are you getting your jab?'

By the same token, while English speakers talk about 'first jab' and 'booster', Spanish speakers stick to the more formal 'primera dosis de la vacuna' and 'dosis de refuerzo de la vacuna' respectively, not only in governmental texts, but also in conversations with their friends.

The proliferation of academic articles telling us that 'vacuna contra la COVID-19' is far preferable to the more imprecise 'vacuna contra el coronavirus' (as there are different kinds of coronavirus) also provide a glimpse into the mechanisms involved in the evolution of the Spanish language and the important role that the Real Academia de la Lengua Española and linguistic authority in general play in it. Despite this, examples of 'vacuna covid-19', which irreverently omits the preposition 'contra' ('against') and ignores the injunction to always use the name of the illness in capitals, are to be found all over the Web. Vaccines are also referred to as 'vacunas anticovid' – and oddly enough, while COVID-19 is feminine in Spain, it is masculine in Latin America: 'el covid-19'.

A word to keep in mind is the plural nominalized adjective 'los vacunados' (loss ba-koo-NAH-doss) to refer to those who have been vaccinated. In the early days of the vaccine rollout, it was an amazing sight to see 'los vacunados', mostly men and women of advanced years, suddenly filling outdoor cafés in the bright spring sun after months of reclusion.

Victoria Romero Cerro
With additional thanks to Angela Corredor

(Modern Standard) Arabic

The words ‘liqāḥ’ لقاح (lee-KAH ‘vaccine’) and ‘talqīḥ’ تلقيح (tal-KEEH ‘vaccination’) are derived from the Classical Arabic root l-q-ḥ (ل-ق-ح), which ancient dictionaries define as “the insemination of a female by a male,” or “the pollination of trees and plants, whether by wind, insects or human.” In Modern Standard Arabic, these two dominant senses—of insemination and vaccination—are common in diverse Arabic sources. Although ‘talqīḥ’ has been frequently used in Covid-related articles, it can also be found in agricultural and environmental contexts, especially relating to bee pollination, while ‘liqāḥ’ alone often refers to the vaccine itself; when used in farming it appears in compound with ‘ḥubūb’ حبوب (huh-BOOB, ‘grains’).

Another word for ‘talqīḥ’ (more common in the Eastern part of the Arab world) is ‘taṭʿīm’ تطعيم (ta-TEEM). Its root, ṭ-ʿ-m (ط-ع-م), is related to eating and inlaying; for example, ‘ṭaʿm’ طعم is ‘taste, flavour’ and ‘maṭʿam’ مطعم is ‘restaurant.’ ‘Taṭʿīm’ can also be found in botanical contexts, where it means ‘grafting.’ The common thread between these different words is the sense of introducing something into a body with positive results (nourishment, offspring, or immunity). The word ‘ḥuqna’ حقنة (HUK-na, ‘injection’) has also become popular, especially in Egypt.

During the pandemic words such as ‘taṭʿīm’, ‘liqāḥ’, and ‘talqīḥ’ were used in new collocations such as ‘jawāz al-talqīḥ / al-taṭʿīm’ جواز التلقيح / التطعيم, (ja-WAZ al-tal-KEEH / al-ta-TEEM) or ‘vaccination passport.’

Some people in the Maghreb countries of North Africa, where French is common among educated people, might also use the French ‘vaccin’. However, others in the rest of the Arab world might use the English ‘vaccine,’ since English is dominant as a second language in many countries such as Egypt and the Gulf states.

Miled Faiza

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

(Bengali)
Bangla

The Bangla word for vaccine is ‘tika’ (TEE-ka), spelled টিকা (with a short ‘i’), or less commonly টীকা (with a slightly elongated ‘i’).

However, Bangla has also borrowed the English word ভ্যাকসিন (BHAK-seen). Something interesting has happened in the course of this borrowing: this loanword has come to almost exclusively refer to the COVID-19 vaccine, and is used primarily on digital and social media. The original Bangla ‘tika’ is usually used in rural contexts, by older or monolingual speakers, by traditional media, and for widely-used existing vaccines, like those for measles, chicken pox, etc.

Bangla, like many Indic languages, makes use of complex predicates to form verbs with great productivity. Thus ‘to vaccinate’ is translated as [টিকা দেওয়া] ‘tika deowa’ (TEE-ka DE-o-wa), a complex predicate formed of ‘tika’, which means ‘vaccine’, and ‘deowa’, which means ‘to give’. The Bengali print media and official documents have been using ‘tika’ to translate English-language expressions, for example, [টিকা সনদ] ‘tika shanad’(TEE-ka SHAW-nod) (‘vaccination certificate’) and [টিকা অভিযান] ‘tika obhijaan’ (TEE-ka O-bhee-jaan) (‘vaccination drive’).

The Bangla word for ‘injection’ — সুঁই (SHOO-een), which literally means ‘needle’— is used in certain very colloquial or rural contexts as an informal word for ‘vaccine’. This use is not very common, but can be understood as an equivalent to the English ‘shot’ or ‘jab’.

Sarada Biswas

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

French

The French for ‘vaccine’ is ‘vaccin’ (vak-san). Interestingly, in recent months, the word ‘vaccin’, when used on its own, has increasingly come to refer only to the inoculation against Covid-19, as if all other vaccines had disappeared.

‘Le vaccin’ is seen by many as an answer to getting back to a normal lifestyle and putting an end to ‘la mélancovid’ (may-lan-coh-vid, or sadness associated with the consequences of the pandemic and lockdowns). The Covid vaccination programme has been the opportunity to revamp the concept (originally coined during the H1N1 flu epidemic) of ‘le vaccinodrome’ (vak-seen-oh-drohm, from the Greek dromos – racecourse or public walk), a megacentre set up for mass inoculation. Other high-profile terms include ‘le panachage vaccinal’ (pan-a-shahj vak-seen-al, giving patients a dose of two different vaccines), ‘les bélénophobes’ (bay-lay-noh-fob, people with a phobia of needles) and ‘les primo-vaccinés’ (pree-moh vak-seen-ay, people who have received their first dose of the vaccine) who wait patiently for their second dose in order to have ‘un schéma vaccinal complet’ (shay-ma vak-seen-al com-play, full vaccination status), which entitles them to a ‘pass sanitaire’ (pass san-ee-tair, or Covid pass).

Though ‘vaccin’ was already a very common word in French, the adjective ‘vaccinal’ (vak-seen-al) has suddenly been given a new life. The race to vaccinate people of all age groups in Western countries has created a ‘fracture vaccinale’ (frak-tyoor vak-seen-al, disparity between the rate at which different areas or population groups receive vaccine doses). At the current rate, it is likely we’ll only be able to draw a definite line under the current pandemic ‘à la vaccinglinglin’ (a la vak-san-glan-glan, modelled on ‘à la Saint Glinglin’, meaning not any time soon) unless the ‘inégalité vaccinale’ (een-ay-gal-ee-tay vak-seen-al, ‘vaccine inequality’) is rapidly addressed.

Natalie Pomier

Russian

The Russian word for ‘vaccine’ is the loanword ‘вакцина’ (vak-TSEEN-a), which has long coexisted with the various derivatives of the word ‘прививка’(prih-VEE-vka) (‘inoculation’, also used for ‘grafting’ in gardening). The latter term emerged when Catherine the Great asked Thomas Dimsdale to inoculate herself, her son, and some of her largely reluctant subjects against smallpox in the 1760s. Her daughter-in-law Empress Maria corresponded with Edward Jenner and procured some smallpox vaccine in 1801; the first young boy to get it had his surname officially changed to ‘Вакцинов’ (vak-TSEEN-ov), or ‘Vaccinov’, and was given a lifelong pension.

However, words relating to the native-sounding ‘прививка’ and ‘прививание’ (prih-vih-VARN-yee, ‘inoculation’) remained prevalent well into the 20th century, when immunisation was made mandatory in the Soviet Union, while the loanwords ‘вакцинация’ (vak-see-NASS-yun, ‘vaccination’) and ‘иммунизация’ (i-moo-nee-ZASS-iya, ‘immunisation’) were mostly used in medical contexts. But since ‘прививка’ only refers to the act of inoculation itself, not the substance used, the word ‘вакцина’ has continued to be widely used alongside them.

In 2020-2021, both the Latin stem вакцин- and the Russian прививв- have produced many new words, with the former being more conducive to new loanwords and the latter being slightly more colloquial. Compare the emergence of words such as the English calque (or literal translation) ‘антиваксер’ (an-tee-VAK-ser, ‘anti-vaxxer’) and the Latin + Russian formation ‘антипрививочник’ (an-tee-prih-VEE-vach-nik, ‘anti-inoculationist’).

A great number of neologisms, nonce words, and puns have sprouted on Russian social media in the wake of the pandemic, such as ‘ширяться’ (shee-RYAT-sa, or ‘shoot up’, from drug-related slang), or шмурдяк (SHMOOR-dyak, ‘homemade surrogate wine of dubious quality’, used originally by some hesitant about taking the Covid vaccine, and later appropriated by some of its proponents.)

Maria Artamonova

Portuguese

The Portuguese word for 'vaccine' is 'vacina' (vah-SEE-nah), a word which is now over ten times more frequent in Portuguese than it was a decade ago.

Describing vaccines as 'experimental' (P: esh-pree-men-TAAL, B: ess-perry-men-TAAL) (experimental) has skyrocketed in frequency since the pandemic, but vaccines are also very often referred to as 'segura' (say-GOO-rah) (safe), 'gratuita' (gra-too-EE-tah) (free), 'eficaz' (eh-fee-KAH-iz, B: eh-fee-KASS) (effective), 'importante' (P: eem-por-TAN-tuh, B: eem-por-TAN-chee) (important) and 'obrigatória' (oh-bree-gah-TOR-ee-ah) (compulsory).

The COVID-19 jab is the latest addition to the long-established 'vaccine booklet', both in Brazil, where this is known as a 'carteira de vacinação' (kar-TAY-rah jee va-see-nah-SUHN) and in Portugal, where it is called a 'boletim de vacinas' (bull-uh-TEEM duh vah-SEE-nahs). It is customary for schools and universities to check whether vaccines are up to date upon registration. In Portugal, people who have not taken a certain vaccine according to the country's official vaccination calendar say their vaccines are late: for example, 'tenho o tétano atrasado' (literally: 'my tetanus [jab] is late').

In Brazil, many infectious diseases are transmitted by insect bites. Ironically, a 'picada' (pee-KAH-dah), or a sting, is how Brazilians refer to the prickling sensation of being injected with a vaccine. To help make vaccination less scary, a cartoon in the shape of a droplet named 'Zé Gotinha' (zeh goh-CHEEN-ya), or 'Mr Droplet', became the symbol of the Brazil's campaign against polio in the mid-eighties, as the polio vaccine was given as liquid drops via the mouth. Zé Gotinha has recently been called again to help fight COVID-19 in Brazil, where vaccination has become a political issue. Many people have taken photos of themselves getting their jab wearing t-shirts picturing crocodiles after the country's President refused to take the vaccine and expressed doubts about its side effects, saying: 'If you turn into a crocodile, then that's your problem'.

Ana Frankenberg-Garcia & Ricardo Garcia

Urdu

The Urdu language has no specific word for ‘vaccine’. The general word we use is ‘teeka’ (ٹیکہ) which refers to all types of injections. For children’s vaccination, people usually say ‘hifaazati teeka’, (حفاظتی ٹیکہ) meaning ‘preventive injection’, but it doesn’t appear to be used in the context of the coronavirus vaccine.

Originally, a ‘teeka’ was just a mark on the skin, such as a scar or a tattoo. Since in old times the vaccination left a round mark on the skin (usually on the upper arm), ‘teeka’ gradually came to denote all kinds of injections and, later on, vaccines.

Rural or less-educated speakers use another word for ‘vaccine’, ‘sui’ (سوئی), which means ‘needle’. Again, this is used for all kinds of injections and is not specific to vaccines.

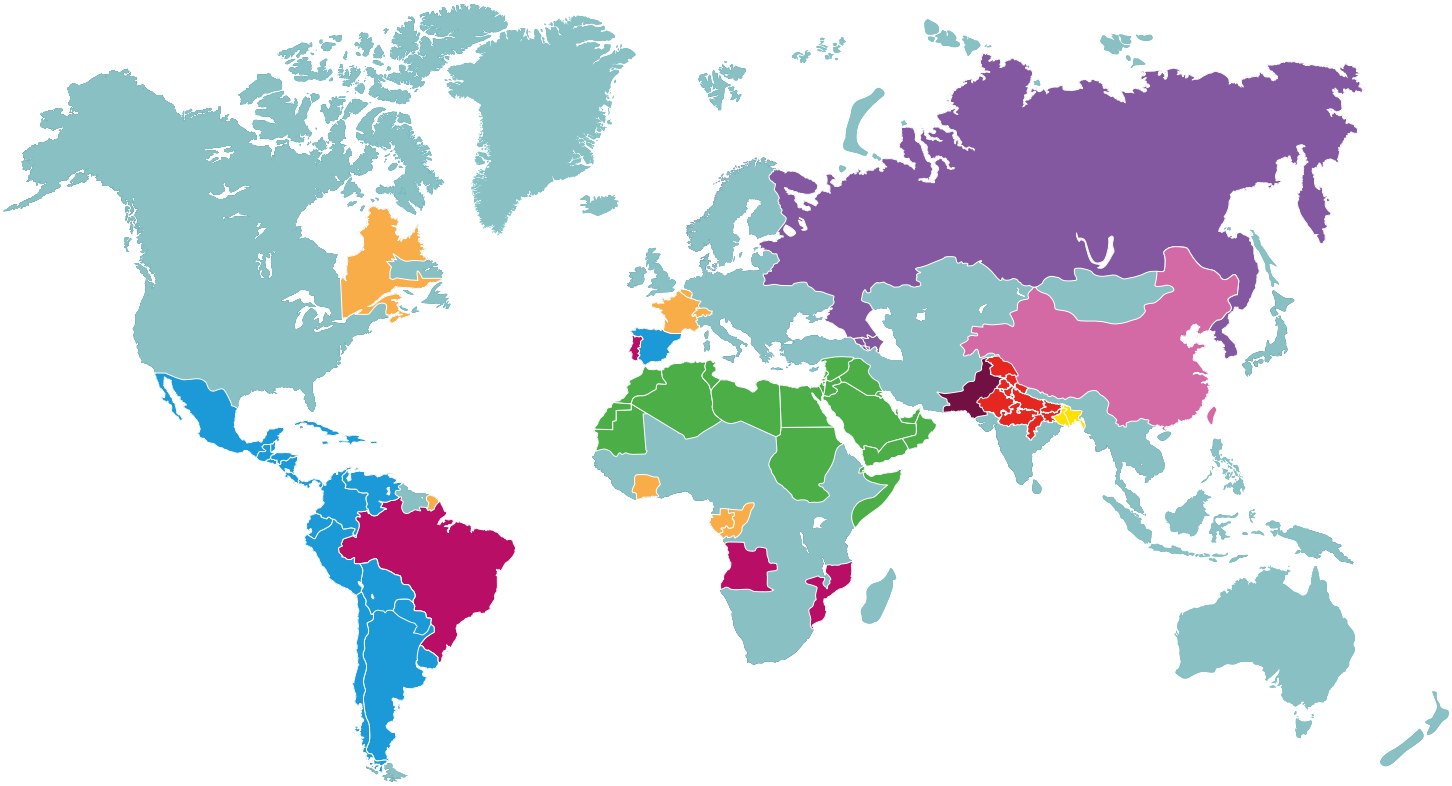
Since all educated people in Pakistan and India know at least some English, the vast majority use the English word ‘vaccine’ to refer to coronavirus vaccines, without feeling the need to translate it into Urdu or coin a new word.

Surprisingly, although Urdu is the national language of Pakistan, the government’s educational website about covid-19 (covid.gov.pk) is in English only, with no Urdu version available.

Zafar Syed
Urdu Language Champion

OxfordLanguages

This world map demonstrates where you are more likely to hear these languages spoken. However, you may of course hear these languages spoken in regions outside of those highlighted.



(Mandarin) Chinese — The Chinese equivalent of 'vaccine' is 疫苗 (yì miáo or (approximately) ee myow), formed by combining two separate characters— 疫 ('epidemic') and 苗 ('seedling').

Hindi — The Hindi word for 'vaccine' is 'teeka' (टीका).

Spanish — The Spanish word for 'vaccine' is 'vacuna' (ba-KOO-na), which is also the feminine form of the adjective 'vacuno', as in the Spanish term 'carne vacuna' (KAR-neh ba-KOO-na, or 'beef').

(Modern Standard) Arabic — The words 'liqāḥ' لقاح (lee-KAH 'vaccine') and 'talqīḥ' تلقيح (tal-KEEH 'vaccination') are derived from the Classical Arabic root l-q-ḥ (ل-ق-ح), which ancient dictionaries define as "the insemination of a female by a male," or "the pollination of trees and plants, whether by wind, insects or human."

Bangla (Bengali) — The Bangla word for vaccine is 'tika' (TEE-ka), spelled টিকা (with a short 'i'), or less commonly টীকা (with a slightly elongated 'i').

French — The French for 'vaccine' is 'vaccin' (vak-san). Interestingly, in recent months, the word 'vaccin', when used on its own, has increasingly come to refer only to the inoculation against Covid-19, as if all other vaccines had disappeared.

Russian — The Russian word for 'vaccine' is the loanword 'вакцина' (vak-TSEEN-a), which has long coexisted with the various derivatives of the word 'прививка'(prih-VEE-vka) ('inoculation', also used for 'grafting' in gardening).

Portuguese — The Portuguese word for 'vaccine' is 'vacina' (vah-SEE-nah), a word which is now over ten times more frequent in Portuguese than it was a decade ago.

Urdu — The Urdu language has no specific word for 'vaccine'. The general word used is 'ٹیکہ' (teeka) which refers to all types of injections.

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Afterword

The Oxford Languages Word of the Year 2021 report examines a topic that has permeated all our lives this past year, and has undeniably influenced the way we communicate. From *vaccine*'s historical bovine roots, to regional variations and emerging neologisms, our expert lexicographers continue to track and analyse these developments.

The frequency of the word *vax* and the many words formed on vax made it a stand out choice for our Word of the Year. Trends identified in our English language corpus data revealed exceptional spikes in usage for *vax*, emphasising the impact the Covid-19 crisis has had on society.

The Oxford Languages team constantly tracks and analyses language. Over the course of this year, our data gathering and evidence-based approach have provided unique insights into the changing language of vaccines and vaccination, reflecting developments affecting all our lives at this singular moment in history.

Definitions

anti-faxxer n. (derogatory, mainly U.S.) A person who rejects widely accepted facts, scientific findings, etc., especially in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, vaccination, mask-wearing, and social distancing.

anti-vax adj. Opposed to vaccination.

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

booster n. A dose of a vaccine that increases or renews the effect of an earlier one.

Covid arm n. Short-term soreness or inflammation of the arm in which one has received an injection of a Covid-19 vaccine.

double-jabbed adj. Having received two doses of a vaccine.

double-vaxxed adj. Having received two doses of a vaccine.

Fauci ouchie n. (U.S., humorous) A vaccination against Covid-19; any of various Covid-19 vaccines.

halfcinated adj. Partially vaccinated; having received only one dose of a two-dose vaccination programme.

inoculate v. Immunize (someone) against a disease by introducing infective material, microorganisms, or vaccine into the body.

inoculati n. (humorous) People who have been vaccinated, considered as a class or group.

jab n. (mainly British) A hypodermic injection, especially a vaccination.

jab v. (mainly British) Inject (someone) with a vaccine; vaccinate.

jag n. (mainly Scottish) A hypodermic injection, especially a vaccination.

jag v. (mainly Scottish) Inject (someone) with a vaccine; vaccinate.

shot n. An injection of a drug or vaccine.

single-dose adj. Designating or relating to vaccines requiring only one dose.

spreadneck n. (derogatory, mainly U.S.) A person who rejects public health guidelines relating to the transmission of Covid-19; one who refuses to be vaccinated, wear a mask, or observe social distancing.

strollout n. (Australian) A slow rollout, originally and especially that of vaccinations against Covid-19.

two-dose adj. Designating or relating to vaccines requiring two doses.

vaccinate v. Treat (someone) with a vaccine to produce immunity against a disease.

vaccination n. Treatment with a vaccine to produce immunity against a disease.

vaccine n. A substance used to stimulate the production of antibodies and provide immunity against one or several diseases, prepared from the causative agent of a disease, its products, or a synthetic substitute, treated to act as an antigen without inducing the disease.

vax n. A vaccine or vaccination.

vax v. Treat (someone) with a vaccine to produce immunity against a disease; vaccinate.

vax-a-thon n. (mainly Canadian and New Zealand) An event during which large numbers of vaccinations are given, especially against Covid-19.

vaxcation/vaxication n. A period spent away from home or travelling after a vaccination, especially one against Covid-19.

vaxdar n. (humorous) The supposed ability to tell whether or not someone has been vaccinated against Covid-19 by intuition or by interpreting subtle signals conveyed by appearance or behaviour.

vaxinista n. (humorous) A person who has been vaccinated against Covid-19, especially one who flaunts their vaccinated status on social media; (also occasionally) a person involved in vaccine development or the delivery and administration of vaccines.

vaxxident n. (mainly U.S.) A road accident attributed to alleged side-effects of a Covid-19 vaccination on a driver.

vaxxie n. A photograph of oneself taking during or immediately before or after a vaccination, especially one against Covid-19, and typically shared on social media; a vaccination selfie.

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 word or phrase which is new to a language.

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

collocation n. The habitual juxtaposition of a particular word with another word or words with a frequency greater than chance; (also) a pair or group of words that are juxtaposed in this way.

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

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).

inflected adj. Of a word: changed in form to express a particular grammatical function or attribute (e.g. whether a noun is singular or plural, or whether a verb is in the present or past tense).

neologism n. A word or phrase which is new to a language.

token n. In corpus linguistics: the smallest unit of a corpus, typically either a word or a punctuation mark.

calque n. An expression adopted by one language from another in more or less literally translated form.

nominalize v. Form a noun from a verb or adjective (e.g. as 'output' is formed from 'put out').

nonce word n. A word invented for use on only one specific occasion or in one specific context.

pronominal verb n. A verb that requires a reflexive pronoun (such as in French 'je me souviens', meaning 'I remember').

root n. A word or element of a word from which other words have been formed by the addition of prefixes, suffixes, or other modifications.

Note on corpus data

Data is from the Oxford Monitor Corpus of English, as of September 2021. Charts show frequencies per million tokens. Unless stated otherwise, variant spellings and inflected forms are included: for example, figures for *vaccinate* include those for *vaccinated*, *vaccinating*, etc.

Oxford Languages

Word Of The Year 2021

Vax

The Oxford Languages 2021 Word of the 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

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