# HOW Language TeachEs and Misleads:

# “Coronavirus” and “Social Distancing” as case studies

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# Abstract

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic offers a unique case study for understanding conceptual and linguistic propagation. In early 2020, scientists, politicians, journalists, and other public figures had to, with great urgency, propagate several public health-related concepts and terms to every person they could. This chapter examines the propagation of *coronavirus* and *social distancing* and develops a framework for understanding how the language used to express a notion can help or hinder propagation. I argue that anyone designing words, meanings, or concepts for propagation needs to appreciate the three-way causal relationship between language, people’s mental representations, and the extramental world. Using this framework, I explore what makes “social distancing” a bad name for social distancing and why it is unproblematic that “coronavirus” is a scientifically loose way of speaking about the virus. Through this and further study of the many historical examples of linguistic and conceptual propagation, conceptual engineers can better understand the complex challenges facing people who want to propagate words, meanings, or concepts.

# Introduction[[1]](#footnote-1)

If conceptual engineers want to learn what strategies to employ—and pitfalls to avoid—while propagating words, meanings, or concepts, they need to look no further than science communication. The spread of scientific notions to everyday people provides a rich corpus of successful and not-so-successful efforts by scientist, journalists, politicians, and other science communicators to change the vocabulary and conceptual repertoire of everyday people. To this end of learning more about conceptual and linguistic propagation from real case studies, this chapter looks at examples of propagation during the earliest stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the course of just a few weeks in early spring 2020, the public was introduced to many pandemic-related terms, including “SARS-CoV-2”, “social distancing”, “COVID-19”, “N95 masks”, “herd immunity”, “PPE”, “ventilator”, “respirator”, “intubation”, “asymptomatic”, and “flattening the curve”. These terms and the corresponding concepts, previously limited primarily to specialized scientific and medical settings, became part of people’s everyday language (Figures 1–3). Compared to other cases of propagation, however, the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak were unique in the extraordinary speed and urgency by which technical language entered everyday speech over the span of mere days in March 2020 (Figures 2 and 3).

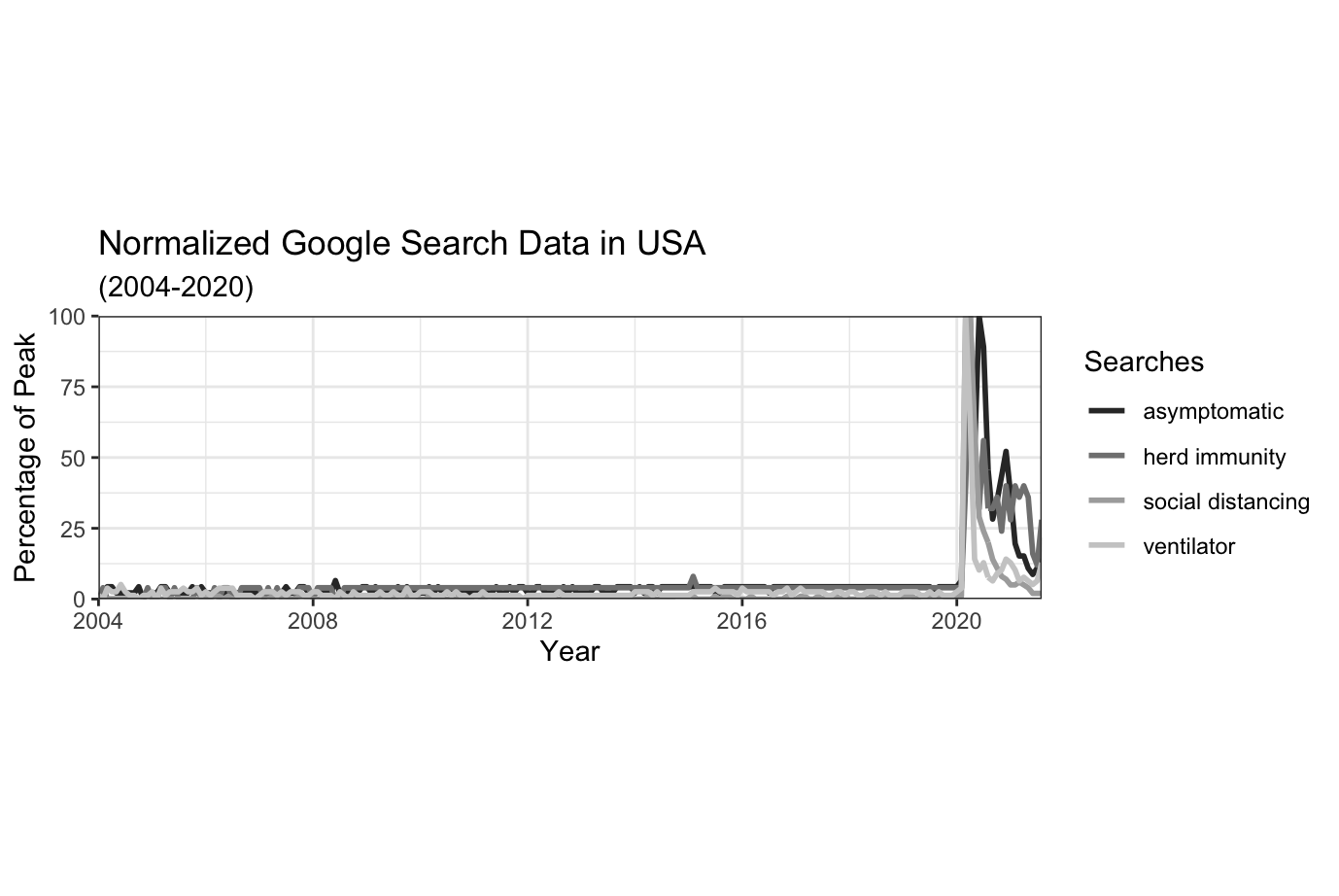


Figure 1. Google search data in USA showing normalized peaks of terms related to COVID-19 from January 2004–December 2020. Data shows a large peak in early 2020. Each search term’s percentage is normalized according to its peak popularity. Data sourced from https://trends.google.com/trends/. Graph by author in R using ggplot2 (Wickham 2016).

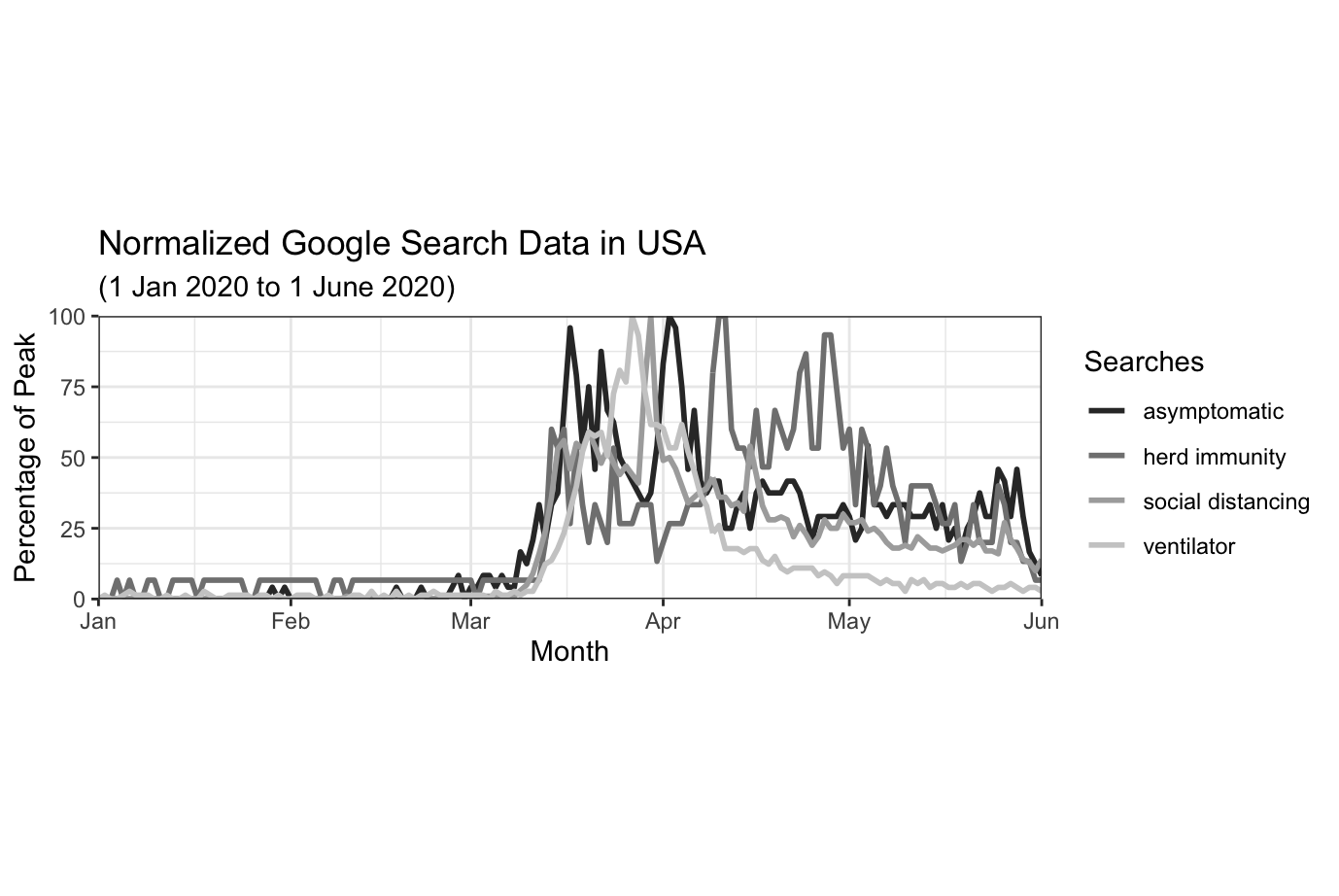


Figure 2. Google search data in USA showing normalized peaks of terms related to COVID-19 from 1 January–1 June 2020. This figure shows the peak in Figure 1 in more detail. Each search term’s percentage is normalized according to its peak popularity. Data sourced from https://trends.google.com/trends/. Graph by author in R using ggplot2 (Wickham 2016).

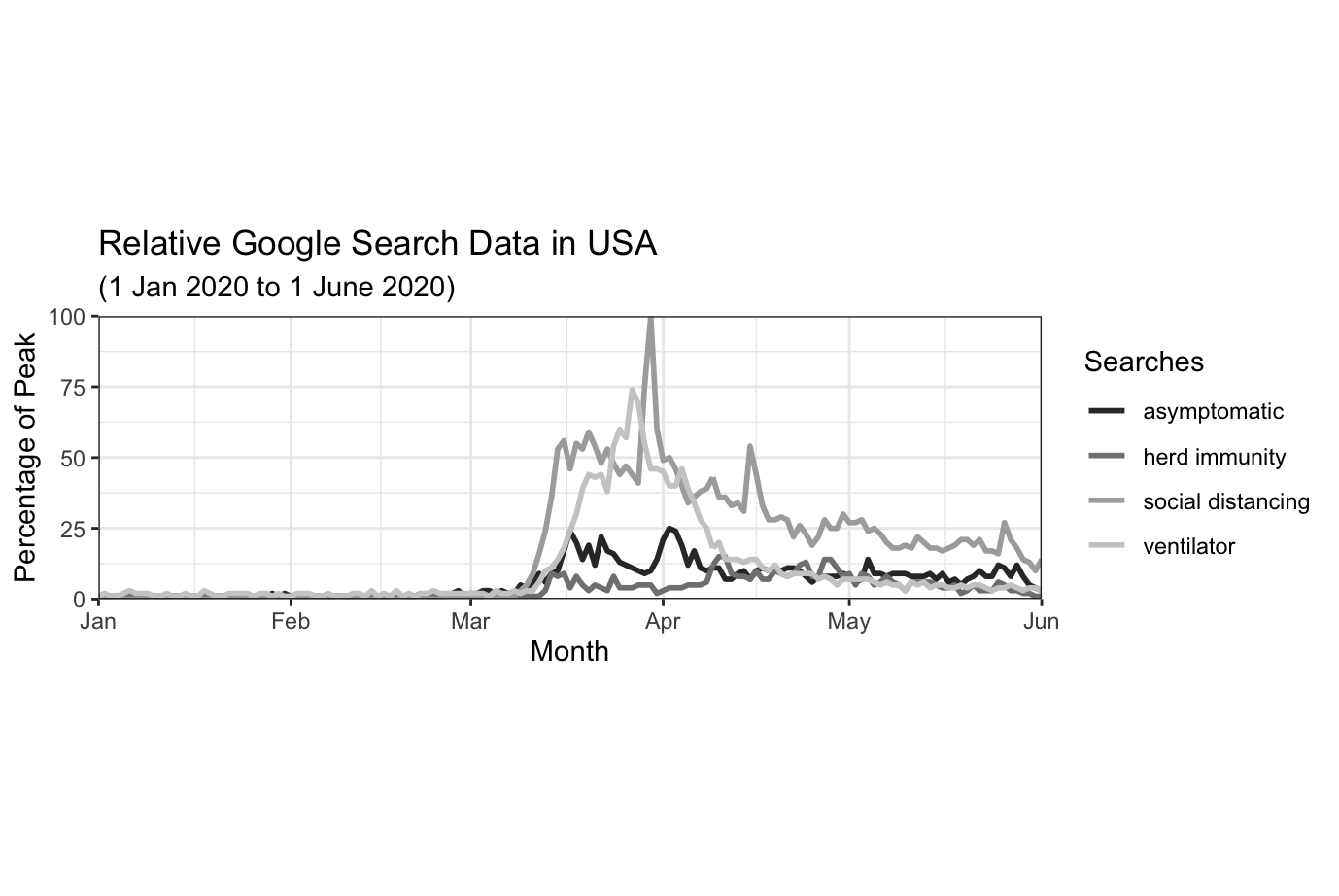


Figure 3. Google Trends data in USA showing the same data as Figure 2 without normalization. All percentages are relative to the peak of “social distancing” searches in late March. Data sourced from https://trends.google.com/trends/. Graph by author in R using ggplot2 (Wickham 2016).

The propagation of concepts and language related to COVID-19 did not go as smoothly as it could have. Not only was there considerable confusion among the public about the nature of the virus and the correct response, but inter-organizational disagreements over the language of COVID-19 spilled into the public view. For one, people in positions of authority could not agree on what to call the virus. While officially named “SARS-CoV-2” in February 2020 by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV), this name for the virus was avoided by the WHO and other organizations because of the worry that people would think SARS-CoV-2 was the same virus responsible for the 2002-2004 SARS outbreak (Enserink 2020). This worry was anticipated in the article that initially coined “SARS-CoV-2”, where the authors go to some length to defend the name while explicitly distancing it from SARS (Gorbalenya et al. 2020, pp. 537–539). The WHO was not convinced by the arguments of the ICTV and elected not to call the virus “SARS-CoV-2”. Instead, the WHO announced they would call the *virus* “COVID-19”, even though “COVID-19” was by that time the accepted name of the *disease* caused by the virus (Enserink 2020).[[2]](#footnote-2) Moreover, despite the WHO’s status as the premier global public health body as well as the preference of many news organizations to use “COVID-19”, Google Trends data indicates that for the first few months of the pandemic, “coronavirus” was a far more popular name than “SARS-CoV-2”, “COVID-19”, and “COVID”—although by the end of May 2020, “COVID” overtook and eventually almost completely replaced “coronavirus” (‘Google Trends’ 2022).[[3]](#footnote-3) Therefore, despite competing efforts of the ICTV and the WHO to control the vocabulary of the virus, everyday people adopted a different name altogether at the start of the pandemic.

“Social distancing” also stuck despite efforts by governments, NGOs, and public figures to push other language. The troubled introduction of social distancing measures, which included packed beaches and bars (Nelson 2020; Phillips and Jungreis 2020; Schnell 2020), led many to conclude that the label “social distancing” was partially to blame. This culminated around mid-March 2020, where in the span of around two weeks, the phrase was both criticized publicly and abandoned by many institutions. Critical of “social distancing”, the social psychologist Regan Gurung told the *USA Today* in an article published on 17 March 2020,

If you start practicing social distancing—*which we really need to call physical distancing so people better understand the concept*—it highlights the fact that, oh my gosh, this is a dangerous time. (Schnell 2020) [emphasis added]

That same week, psychologist Jamil Zaki was widely quoted as saying, “We should think of this time as ‘physical distancing’ to emphasize that we can remain socially connected even while being apart” and suggested people use “distant socializing” instead (De Witte 2020). Taking action on 20 March 2020, the WHO publicly adopted “physical distancing” as their official language (Azis 2020), a move that was subsequently copied by many governments and news organizations (e.g., Canada 2020; R. Davies 2020). Nonetheless, “social distancing” remained the common name for social distancing measures (Sørensen et al. 2021).

The debates that spilled into the public eye over the vocabulary of the pandemic are, at their heart, debates over whether “social distancing”, “coronavirus”, “SARS-CoV-2”, etc., are good labels for the corresponding concepts, meanings, and referents. This chapter develops a framework for understanding what makes a good label and what corresponding lessons can be learned by conceptual engineers. By taking into account the three-way causal relationship between terms, mental representations, and the non-linguistic, non-mental world, the framework can be used to develop desiderata for what language to use when propagating concepts or meanings. I argue particular focus needs to paid to the non-semantic and non-pragmatic information carried by a word or phrase itself and the *lexical effects* (Cappelen 2018, Chapter 11)such information can have on the mental representations of language users. By focusing on such lexical effects and the goals of propagation, both conceptual engineers and specialists in high-impact fields like epidemiology can better engineer their language for propagation.

Section 2 discusses how the form words or phrases take (that is, their phonology and graphology) can carry information that can lead to both linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge and develops a three-part framework for understanding this process. Section 3 discusses this framework in relationship to the goals of a public health response to a pandemic. Sections 4 and 5 apply this framework to “coronavirus” and “social distancing”, respectively. I ultimately endorse “coronavirus” as a mostly unproblematic name for SARS-CoV-2 but argue that using “social distancing” as the name for social distancing measures was a mistake almost two decades in the making.

# How Terms Teach and mislead

In this section, I develop a framework for understanding what makes a good or bad name for a meaning or concept by focusing on the information carried by a name’s appearance. Good names help listeners (or readers) develop true mental representations by teaching a listener its meaning, helping form a concept (or conceptual competence), and/or teaching the listener something about the world. Bad or maliciously chosen names will instead help cause false beliefs or propagate defective concepts.

When discussing words and phrases, philosophers of language have typically focused on their semantic and pragmatic meaning. Discussion in this context revolves around what a word or phrase means, either as a type or as a token utterance, and how it comes to have that meaning. There is nonetheless more to language than semantic content, pragmatic content, truth values, etc. Words and phrases also have non-semantic, non-pragmatic causal power, or *lexical effects* (Cappelen 2018, Chapter 11).[[4]](#footnote-4) To consider a lexical effect related to the pandemic, consider the politicized use of “Wuhan Virus”. Semantically, the name refers to SARS-CoV-2 and, depending on how we understand the semantics of capitalized descriptions (see Rabern 2015), means either *the virus from Wuhan* or *SARS-CoV-2.* Depending on the context, the name might also have pragmatic force. The choice to use “Wuhan Virus” in conversation, given the other options available to talk about the virus, may signal via Gricean mechanisms certain content about political affiliation. Semantic and pragmatic content aside, there are other things “Wuhan Virus” can accomplish, and these are its lexical effects. Most obviously, and as savvy political operators surely knew, using “Wuhan Virus” instead of more sterile language builds associations in people’s heads between China and the pandemic. Indeed, the lexical effects might even go a step further. Someone ignorant of SARS-CoV-2’s origin may, upon hearing the sentence “Nadja caught the Wuhan Virus” form *true non-linguistic beliefs* based on the name “the Wuhan Virus” that SARS-CoV-2’s origin involved Wuhan.

The idea of inferring worldly facts from names might seem at odds with the standard view that the connection between a word’s form and its semantic meaning and referent is arbitrary. In principle, any string of letters or series of sounds can have any meaning. Nonetheless, there are regularities between the appearance of words and their semantic value that language learners can and do exploit. These connections include *iconicity*—form-meaning resemblance—and *transparency*—the extent to which the meaning of a multimorphemic word is interpretable from the way its component parts combine. Words like “whoosh” or “zigzag” resemble whooshes and zigzags and are therefore iconic (Dingemanse et al. 2015; Lupyan and Winter 2018). Words like “campervan” (*camper + van*) and “flammable” (*flamm + able*) mean what their parts suggest they mean and are therefore transparent (Libben et al. 2003). These regularities are not always as obvious or apparently principled as transparency or iconicity, though. For example, English nouns are on average longer than English verbs (Cassidy and Kelly 1991, 2001), and velar plosives ([k] and [g]) are disproportionately common in English slurs (Mandelbaum and Young forthcoming).

Mature language users use information like iconicity, transparency, and other regularities to interpret semantic and non-semantic facts (Libben 1998; Mandelbaum and Young forthcoming; To et al. 2016). For example, despite not being an established word, “unflabbergastable” has a clear meaning to you as a reader because of regularities in English word construction. In order to talk about this interpretive process, I will talk about what I call a term’s *decipherability*:

The degree to which someone is apt to infer *accurate* information from a term itself, given their other mental representations.

Decipherability involves three players: *the term* that serves as a label and linguistic vehicle; a person’s *mental representations,* which affect how the term is interpreted and which are affected by the term; and *the world* external to the person’s psychological states, which is both represented by the person and affected by the person’s mental representations.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The rest of the chapter will use these categories to capture the pre-theoretic distinction between what a word or phrase looks like—*the term*—what is in the head—*the mental representations*—and what is not in the head—*the world.* These are meant to be theoretically-neutral metaphysical joints that any philosophical framework will acknowledge in one way or another: there are the visual and/or acoustic forms taken by linguistic entities, there are things “in the head” whose existence is grounded in our own cognitive states, and there are things “outside the head” whose existence is not grounded on our mental representations. Because these are meant to be pretheoretic categories, I will take pains to not take substantive commitments about what goes into each category, instead allowing the reader to fill in the categories as they wish. For example, Fregeans and other externalists about concepts will generally place concepts in the *world* category whereas internalists will generally place concepts in the *mental representation* category. Similar differences will exist between semantic internalist and externalists about meaning as well as nominalists and platonists about kinds and other purported abstracta.

The same interpretive process that allows us to understand the meaning of “unflabbergastable” without context can backfire. People can form mental representations based on a term that are inaccurate. Indeed, the names given to pathogens and diseases have a long history of these interpretive processes misfiring. During the 2009 swine flu pandemic, which was named “swine flu” because the virus crossed over to humans from pigs, pork sales dropped across the world despite cooked pork being safe to eat. After the 2009 pandemic, ABC News interviewed an American pork farmer, who said

“We were about to turn the corner and start making a profit […] And here somebody labeled H1N1 the 'swine flu,' and it just totally took a nosedive." (Selyukh 2009)

By the farmer’s telling, the name “swine flu” lead people to form false mental representations that pork was in some way unsafe or unsanitary. Similarly, the inclusion of place names in the common names of diseases or pathogens (such as the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome—MERS—or the Spanish Flu) has caused stigmatization and even attacks on people from the area. Recognizing this, WHO guidelines recommend against naming diseases after places, animals, industries, or people. Instead the WHO recommends naming diseases after things such as the bodily systems affected, the year of discovery, symptoms, and the diseases’ level of severity (World Health Organization 2015).

Because the same processes involved with decipherability can lead to inaccurate mental representations, any discussion of decipherability needs the opposing notion of what I will call *misleadingness*:

The degree to which someone is disposed to infer *inaccurate* information from the term itself, given their other mental representations.

Misleading terms lead to mental representations—whether beliefs about the world, mental imagery, concepts (understood here as token cognitive entities), or metalinguistic beliefs about the terms—that are inaccurate, whereas decipherable terms lead to accurate mental representations. As will be important for the language of COVID-19, the misleadingness or decipherability of a term is individual-specific. The exoplanet *K2-198d* or the anatomical part *antecubital fossa* have names that most readers cannot extract information from even though the terms are decipherable to astronomers and people knowledgeable of Latin, respectively. Correspondingly, a term that works well in one community may not work well in another, especially when there is a large knowledge, cultural, or conceptual gap between the two.[[6]](#footnote-6)

# What we want from epidemiological language

When an emergency necessitates the rapid propagation of ideas, beliefs, and concepts, decipherability is an essential tool in the toolbox of politicians, journalists, and academics. Where decipherable terms will help save lives by helping inform language-users, misleading terms will do the opposite. Creating a decipherable term is easier said than done however, because a term’s decipherability is limited by the tension between the amount of encoded information and the usability of a term. In this section, I examine what information should be encoded in epidemiological language so that we can evaluate “coronavirus” and “social distancing” accordingly.

As discussed above, designing decipherable language is a useful way to propagate beliefs and concepts, but decipherability is not the only consideration that determines the success of propagation. Choices need to be made about what information a term should carry because the more information a term carries, the less easy it is for language users to use. For example, if we wanted to give COVID-19 a name that maximized information, we might call it “The Disease Caused By SARS-CoV-2 That Spreads Through Air, Causes Coughs, And Sometimes Leads to Long COVID”. However, it will be hard to get language users to adopt this name. Compared to “COVID”, the name is clunky, hard to remember, and time-consuming to write or say. Therefore, when choosing the term to propagate, our goals for decipherability need to be modest and targeted.

To this end, the goal of an epidemiological response, from the earliest stages of an outbreak response to the final stages of a pandemic, is to limit the damage of the disease (World Health Organization 2018, p. 1). What steps are taken to limit the disease’s impact are different at different stages of the outbreak, but a large part of an outbreak response, and the focus of the rest of this chapter, is managing people’s behavior. While some behavior can be forced—people cannot enter a country by commercial flights if commercial flights are cancelled—other behavior needs to be taught. Healthcare communication is one such way to manage learned behavior to limit the damage of a disease. For this reason, the goals of introducing a term for non-specialist consumption in public health emergencies should prioritize true beliefs about disease mitigation over true beliefs about the disease itself.

Returning to last section’s framework of decipherability and misleadingness, this gives us a desired design outcome for decipherable pandemic-related language. In the *world*, we want to limit damage of the disease, using people’s behavior to do so. As a means for this, public health responses need to propagate *mental representations* that lead good behavioral and epidemiological outcomes. *Terms* are successfully decipherable in this instance insofar as people can infer information from the term that leads to damage reduction. Importantly, in this instance such information is both doxastic and conceptual. Not only are people learning the meaning of terms when they learn “coronavirus” and “social distance”, but they are also learning new ways of categorizing the world. Prior to 2020, many of us lacked the ability to believe things like *social distancing is a way to reduce the spread of disease* because we lacked a constituent of that belief, namely SOCIAL DISTANCING. Therefore, the decipherability or misleadingness of “coronavirus” and “social distancing” goes beyond merely the process of learning the meaning of phrases but includes conceptual propagation as well. Now that everything is in place, it is time to turn to “coronavirus” and “social distancing”.

# Case Study 1: “Coronavirus”

When examined through the framework of decipherability and misleadingness, “coronavirus” is a good term for the virus—with one notable exception. The ways in which it is good and bad are illustrative, and we can learn about the challenges facing people who want or need to propagate words or concepts. This section starts by looking at the contrast between “coronavirus” and “proper” scientific terminology. For one, “coronavirus” is a loose metonymic name for a species of the virological family by the same name. In addition, “coronavirus” was used to describe both the virus and disease despite official channels trying to introduce “SARS-CoV-2” and “COVID-19” to contrast the two. I argue that only the metonymic shift is a problem, and it is only a problem because an earlier metonymic shift of “coronavirus” made the term misleading to some people. Finally, I look at the way the meaning of “coronavirus” is partially decipherable. While it is clear the referent is a virus, it is not clear to those without microbiological knowledge how “corona” modifies virus. This is, if anything, a strength of the term, as it presents important information while remaining future-proof.

Using “coronavirus” as a catch-all term for the outbreak is not a scientifically rigorous way of speaking—it is a metonymic use of the virus species’ family name. Biologically speaking, calling SARS-CoV-2 “coronavirus” or “the coronavirus” is roughly the same as referring to house cats as “feline” or “the feline”. We might worry this metonymic looseness is itself a problem or even that using “coronavirus” as a name for SARS-CoV-2 propagates false semantic beliefs about the referent of “coronavirus”.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, as discussed in Section 3, the key desiderata of a public health response is limiting damage of a disease, so the semantic or metonymic looseness of a term is only problematic to those ends.

The metonymic shift from family to species *did,* however, hurt the pandemic response. The shift in 2020 was not the first time “coronavirus” metonymically shifted to a subset of the family. “Coronavirus” had been used prior to 2020 as a name for the coronaviruses that cause disease in humans (OED3 2022). Because of this older use, some packages of disinfectant written before spring 2020 included “coronavirus” or “human coronavirus” on the list of bacteria and viruses that the disinfectant killed. This fueled conspiracy theories that governments have known about SARS-CoV-2 for years (Chalmers 2020).[[8]](#footnote-8) In this way, “coronavirus” was a misleading label to some because they failed to recognize that “coronavirus” had multiple related uses. Nonetheless, without empirical study beyond the scope of this chapter, it is impossible to say how many people were misled by pre-COVID uses of “coronavirus”. Confusion may have been limited to a few people on social media already prone to conspiracy theorizing, or it may have had a larger effect on people’s response to the pandemic.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Another potential problem with “coronavirus” is that it runs against the ICTV’s designation of “SARS-CoV-2”, which was introduced in part to allow the distinction between the virus and the disease caused by the virus (Gorbalenya et al. 2020). There is indeed some evidence that the failure to follow naming protocols helped enable conflation of the disease and the virus. For example, consider this line from a news report from *Reuters* in March 2020:

A second member of France’s National Assembly has been taken to hospital after contracting *coronavirus* and five other lawmakers are being tested for the *illness* [emphasis added] (Rosemain 2020)

Given that “the illness” is anaphorically referring to “coronavirus”, it appears “coronavirus” is intended to refer to the disease caused by the virus, not the virus itself. There does not seem to be evidence that such conflation was problematically misleading, however. English has the tools to disambiguate the virus and the disease when needed. For one, “COVID” and “COVID-19”—which are shortened forms of COronaVIrus Disease 2019—were used early on to specifically refer to the disease (see OED Editorial Board 2020). For example, in May 2020 the following line in a different *Reuters* article uses “COVID-19” to distinguish the illness from the virus:

Bright […] said he was ousted from BARDA because he resisted efforts to push hydroxychloroquine and the related chloroquine as cures for COVID-19, *the respiratory* *illness caused by the coronavirus*. [emphasis added] (Wolfe 2020)

While many circumstances do not require disambiguating the virus from the disease (little is gained or lost if a sign reads “coronavirus testing center” compared to “COVID-19 testing center”), we have these different names when necessary. Moreover, beyond using “COVID-19”, other strategies exist to draw the distinction, such as “coronavirus illness”, “coronavirus infections”, or describing someone as “ill from coronavirus”. While perhaps this is not as clear of a distinction as those responsible for the name “SARS-CoV-2” were hoping for, English has ample expressive power to avoid confusion.

Speaking in the term’s favor, “coronavirus” is decipherable, albeit to a limited extent. “Coronavirus” is a compound noun composed of two morphemes, *corona* and *virus*. Both are well-known roots although some people may struggle to define either term when they first hear the compound noun. In addition, despite being an adjective-noun phrases, only some people with certain microbiological knowledge will be able to decipher that *corona* modifies *virus* in describing the visual appearance of the virus under a microscope. Notably, because the scientific understanding of SARS-CoV-2 evolved considerably over the course of the pandemic, it is probably for the best that public figures did not aim for something more decipherable than “coronavirus”. In early 2020 when specialists needed to introduce a term into the public’s vocabulary to discuss the virus and mitigation factors, many features of the virus were not yet understood. For example, while early research found evidence that SARS-CoV-2 could remain alive on surfaces for days at a time—spreading fear of surface-based infection—consensus was eventually reached that surface-based transmission was far less common than airborne transmission (see CDC 2021). A term that aimed to carry more information, such as one that was apt to cause mental representations that SARS-CoV-2 was transmitted primarily through surfaces rather than primarily through the air, risked turning out to be misleading rather than decipherable.

#### 4.1 Lessons from “Coronavirus”

Given the positives and negatives of “coronavirus”, it is worth pausing to think about what people in a position to propagate new vocabulary—whether conceptual engineers or public health officials—can learn from “coronavirus”. First, the unimportance of following technical naming conventions for the sake of following technical naming conventions, at least for the purposes of public health responses, means that propagators need to reflect on the goals they have for propagation (see Isaac et al. (forthcoming) for a discussion of the relevant distinction between the goals and targets of conceptual engineering). Different goals will result in different desiderata for propagation. In this case, the goal of a pandemic response is to limit the damage of a disease, so semantic accuracy or adherence to specialist norms takes a backseat to spreading safe behavior.

Second, the conspiracy theorizing enabled by competing metonymic uses of “coronavirus” suggests propagators should pay attention to whether propagating a term will cause problematic polysemy. As we saw with “coronavirus”, introducing a metonymic use of a term can bring about unwanted inferences caused by a different uses of the term.

Third, propagators should future-proof their language. As was the case with SARS-CoV-2’s method of transmission, we may have incomplete understanding of a referent at the time of propagation. A propagated term should therefore, as much as is possible, be insulated against future changes in beliefs or understanding.

# Case Study 2: “Social distancing”

“Social distancing” shares a number of features with “coronavirus”. Both are multi-morphemic nouns composed of an adjective-noun pairing that before the 2020 pandemic were used almost exclusively in technical settings. Nevertheless, the two terms draw an illustrative contrast. Whereas the framework thus discussed gives mixed results to the suitability of “coronavirus” as a label for SARS-CoV-2, “social distancing” appears to be a straightforwardly bad name for social distancing. Moreover, when we look at the historically contingent reasons that seem to be behind the propagation of “social distancing” in early 2020, we are pushed to think carefully about the way the vocabulary specialists use in communication with each other can affect efforts at conceptual and linguistic propagation.

The term “social distancing” appears to have first entered epidemiology in 2005 (Ferguson et al. 2005). While the strategy of social distancing is itself not new (Sørensen et al. 2021)—leper colonies are, after all, a form of social distancing—the explicit epidemiological strategy of “increasing social distance” owes its origin to scholarly discussion of the 2002-2004 SARS outbreak (see Bell 2004; Gostin 2004; World Health Organization 2005). From the coining of the term onward, epidemiologists used “social distancing” and “increasing social distance” as terms of art to describe strategies of “reducing contact rates in the population” (Ferguson et al. 2005, p. 209). This usually included the measures of closing schools, banning large public gatherings, keeping non-essential workers home, and voluntary self-isolation of people with symptoms (Ahmed et al. 2018; Glass et al. 2006; Herrera-Valdez et al. 2011, p. 24; e.g., World Health Organization 2005, p. 59). Research found that social distancing measures were generally effective in reducing the spread of viral diseases, and it was adopted as a strategy by epidemiologists and other public health officials. Despite this, “social distancing” did not enter everyday language because social distancing measures, while seeing limited use during the 2009 swine flu pandemic (Herrera-Valdez et al. 2011; Horney et al. 2010), were not widely used between the terms’ introduction in 2005 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Because social distancing was unknown to most people, when public health figures worldwide decided that social distancing was an appropriate response to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing had to be explained to the public. During this stage, the notion of *social distancing* appears to have been simplified slightly. Understandably, few public figures followed the epidemiological literature in defining “social distancing” in terms of contact rates. Instead, social distancing was explained as types of actions individuals can take. Nonetheless, the spirit of the term’s original definition stuck. The BBC explained social distancing as “no coming in contact with other people unless you need to” (*Social distancing* 2020). The CDC similarly said social distancing “means keeping space between yourself and other people outside of your home” (CDC 2020), and the WHO explained it as maintaining 1 meter or more distance between you and people coughing or sneezing (World Health Organization 2020).

Regardless of whether we understand “social distancing” in its original technical sense to mean *reducing contact rates in the population* or the more individual-specific *not coming into contact with other people unless you have to*, “social distancing” is misleading. The term carries inaccurate information about both the meaning of the term and what the strategy of social distancing involves. When hundreds of millions of English speakers heard of social distancing for the first time during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, they had to try to figure out what exactly “social distancing” meant. Given it is an adjective-noun pairing, the most natural interpretation is that social distancing is a process by which we distance ourselves socially (Presterudstuen 2020). Whereas distancing oneself socially covers a lot of behavior that *will* reduce transmission—physically meeting up with friends, going to a bar, attending parties—much is missed. Many spaces that were thought early in the pandemic to carry high risks of transmission are not spaces that are typically thought of as social spaces, such as grocery stores, airplanes, and hospitals. Similarly, going alone to a crowded indoor space is a way of being socially distanced without *social distancing*. On the flip side, distancing oneself socially excludes safe social distancing behaviors, such as carrying on a conversation across an empty street.

As with the earlier question of how much conspiracy theories were driven by older use of “coronavirus”, it is not the philosopher’s place to say how exactly the misleadingness of “social distancing” played out. This is best left to sociocultural linguists and others with the methods capable of examining language’s effect on behavior at the population-level. Nevertheless, bad social distancing behavior suggests that the misleadingness adversely influenced peoples’ mental representations about social distancing. At the very start of the pandemic, owners of remote parking lots in the Scottish Highlands had to chase off people in campervans planning to wait out the pandemic (Brooks 2020). While hiding in a campervan is an effective way of distancing oneself socially, because of the risk of bringing the disease to a remote area with a correspondingly low healthcare capacity, this was not effective social distancing. Making the opposite mistake, when local police in Mississippi ticketed people in cars at a drive-in church service broadcast to participants by FM radio (Williams 2020), the local government punished an effective social distancing measure where people were not distancing themselves socially. While participants were engaging in the social practice of a church service, they were keeping contact rates low by keeping space between themselves and people outside of their household. Therefore, punishing the church goers in this circumstance is justified if we understand social distancing as *distancing that is social*, but it is not justified if we understand social distancing as any of the definitions for social distancing quoted above.

A failure to recognize or address the misleading nature of “social distancing” may have exacerbated problems. Many news organizations and governments used problematic definitions like “reducing social *interactions* between people” or “limiting social *activities*” [emphasis added] (Mazziotta 2020; e.g., Nelson 2020; Welsh Government 2020). Definitions such as these do not clarify that “social distancing” is not about distancing that is social but about behavioral steps that reduce the reproductive rate of the virus by limiting physical proximity. This was a limited problem though, as many early explanations of the strategy involved both an intensional definition (e.g., avoid physical contact that might spread the disease) and extensional examples (e.g., hold meetings remotely, only go shopping for essentials) that help clear up potential confusion (e.g., BBC 2020; CDC 2020).

Despite the misleadingness, “social distancing” does have merits. Like “coronavirus”, “social distancing” provided people and public figures with vital expressive power to help communicate necessary and drastic changes to day-to-day life. Moreover, the term is suitable for people with limited English vocabulary because “social” and “distance” are among the 2000 most common English words—a threshold believed to be important for understanding among people with lower levels of literacy (Rakedzon et al. 2017). Relatedly, as it consists of five syllables across two common English words, “social distancing” is useable and easy to remember. These three features are all helpful for the purposes of the public health response. However, while “social distancing” was propagated to help instill certain behavior that slows the spread of infectious diseases, “social distancing” is not the only term that can fulfill these criteria. The widely recommended “physical distancing” is also usable and easy to remember, offers expressive power, and only uses common English words. While the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) shows that since 1991, “physical” is about a third as common in American English as “social” (M. Davies 2010), “physical” is still common enough to be suitable for low-literacy English speakers (Rakedzon et al. 2017).

How do “social distancing” and “physical distancing” *differ*? Unlike “social distancing”, “physical distancing” does not mislead people into thinking they should be distancing themselves socially. There are plausibly situations where one could social distance effectively while being in close physical proximity to other people—such as with the careful use of high-grade personal protective equipment (PPE)—but, at the start of the pandemic, such opportunities were few and far between. Nonetheless, “social distancing” is apparently better than “physical distancing” in at least one way. “Social distancing” adheres to pre-existing epidemiological vocabulary. As discussed in relationship to “coronavirus”, however, using technical language properly is less important during a pandemic than preventing people from getting sick. Therefore, since “social distancing” offers the large and unique drawback of being misleading in a way that potentially led to higher rates of infection, “physical distancing” should have been the language propagated from the start.

#### 5.1 Lessons from “Social Distancing”

While the misleadingness of “social distancing” is itself problematic, “social distancing” offers a larger cautionary tale for people in a position to propagate new terms—whether conceptual engineers, scientific experts, or public figures. “Social distancing” appears to have been the term used by public figures because that was the term epidemiologists had been using to refer to social distancing, not because “social distancing” was the best term to propagate to non-experts. For this reason, “social distancing” invites those thinking about propagating a term, or even those just using a term that might be propagated, to reflect on how the language they use might affect the population at large.

As discussed above, “social distancing” was first used by epidemiologists to discuss the strategy of closing schools, workplaces, and large venues such as concert halls during 2002-2004 SARS outbreak Southeast Asia. The choice to call it “social distancing” instead of “physical distancing” was appropriate at the time. As Skype was only founded in 2003 and the first iPhone would not be sold until 2007, this was a time and place where many social interactions had to be physical interactions, and so the physical could be conflated with the social. The period between 2004 and 2020, however saw a revolutionary shift in how much of our lives we can and do live online. In the language of Floridi (2007), technology *reontologized* our work and social lives by blurring the line between *here* vs *there* until physical collocation was no longer an intrinsic feature of many of our day-to-day activities. Compared to 2004, in 2020 it was far easier for many to edit company documents without being on a corporate local network, rent a movie without a trip to a rental store, and attend class synchronously over webcam. Therefore, as technology progressed between 2004 and 2020, “social distancing” became more misleading as it was more and more possible to lead a social life while physically removed from others.[[10]](#footnote-10)

As is common in academic writing, language was slow to change, and specialists continued using “social distancing” even as it grew more and more misleading. This was not in itself a problem until “social distancing” entered everyday language. From its coining in 2005 until early 2020, “social distancing” was largely kept to epidemiological circles. This meant that “social distancing” was learned by high-literacy people who had the time, motivation, and expertise to work past the misleadingness of the term. Potentially complicating matters, it is possible specialists did not even notice “social distancing” was misleading. Technical language is insular in nature, and it is easy to lose track of which of our concepts, words, and beliefs are due to our expertise. However, when a pandemic forced fast dissemination of knowledge, “social distancing” was the term public figures were left with for social distancing, and the term and idea behind the term had to be learned by people who did not have the same time or specialized knowledge as experts. This forced public figures to reactto the misleadingness of “social distancing” after the misleading term had already been propagated.

In fields like epidemiology, members of the discipline do not have control over when a term is propagated, so avoiding a mistake like “social distancing” requires looking inward. If epidemiologists do not know when a notion as important as social distancing will need to be propagated, then a term that is decipherable to folk needs to be used *even in communication between experts*. The language used in such communication is, after all, the language that public figures such as politicians and journalists will reach for during a crisis. Therefore, specialists in any field whose discoveries may one day be of public concern should act now to clean up their language instead of waiting until the horse has already left the barn.

Conceptual engineers in contrast have some control over when a term is propagated. Therefore, avoiding a situation like “social distancing” requires looking outward. Conceptual engineers need to test the language they use for a concept or meaning before they propagate it. We might not be able to predict with certainty the future route concepts or meanings will take (Marques 2020), but not everything is unknowable. We can make generalizations based on past patterns of concept and meaning change (Koslow 2022; Thomasson 2021), and time will tell whether conceptual engineers can develop an empirical framework for beta testing terms, meanings, and concepts for propagation.

# Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the lessons that conceptual engineers can draw from the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion focused on the way language carries epistemic information that can inform and mislead language users. Decipherable language carries information that can aid in the acquisition of accurate semantic beliefs, object-level beliefs, or even the formation of new concepts or conceptual competence whereas misleading language gives rise to inaccurate beliefs or defective concepts. “Coronavirus” is easily rememberable but misleading insofar as a previous use of “coronavirus” enabled conspiratorial beliefs about the origin of SARS-CoV-2. “Social distancing” is a misleading name for social distancing measures, and it ended up in circulation because epidemiologists had been using the term without issue for years. While this chapter has only scratched the surface of one of the many issues facing conceptual and linguistic propagation, hopefully conceptual engineers can continue to learn how to harness propagation by looking at the many examples of propagation of scientific language into everyday use.

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2. This chapter will follow the convention of distinguishing SARS-CoV-2 (the virus) from COVID-19 (the disease) due to considerations of expressive power. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. All observations of use were made up to the time of resubmission, December 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is notion is inspired by Frege’s discussion of “colouring” (Frege 1997; Sander 2019). Following Cappelen, I am understanding the semantic/pragmatic distinction as Gricean. For a discussion of similar phenomena through the lens of relevance theory instead of Gricean pragmatics, see Carston (2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This 3-part distinction, as well as discussion below of the causal relations between each part, is inspired by discussion of the semiotic triangle in Ogden and Richards (1930). Unlike Ogden and Richards, who, in current philosophical jargon, are probably best described as semantic and content internalists, discussion here is meant to capture pre-theoretic joints that can accommodate various forms of externalism as well as internalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For this reason, the conclusions drawn below about people’s reaction to “coronavirus” and “social distancing” should be seen as being limited to fluent English speakers without expertise in epidemiology, public health, or other relevant fields. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See especially classic semantic externalist and content externalist arguments about natural kind terms (Burge 1979; Kripke 1981; Putnam 1975). See (LaPorte 2003; Sawyer 2020; Sterken 2020) for contemporary discussion of these arguments and (Wikforss 2007) for an introduction to the debate. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The corresponding disputes over statements like “Coronavirus arose in 2019” are verbal disputes, although different in form from stereotypical examples (Belleri 2018; Inga 2018; see Jenkins 2014). Conspiracy theorists assert sentence P because they believe “coronavirus” has semantic value X, where public health officials assert sentence P is false because they believe “coronavirus” has semantic values X *and* Y. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “Coronavirus” was not the only name of the virus/disease that enabled conspiracy theorizing. Multiple prominent public figures inferred from “COVID-19” that the disease was the 19th COVID (Aodha 2020; Lee 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Another possibility is that “social distancing” became semantically *demotivated*, where change, whether semantic or worldly, leads to a transparent term losing its transparency – that is, it becomes *opaque* (Blank 2001). For example, American football has the same foot-based origin as rugby and soccer, but in the 19th century a series of rule changes led to the modern hand-based sport, leading to the demotivation of “football” in American English. On this picture of semantic demotivation, “social distancing” became demotivated as its meaning shifted from targeting social events to reducing contact rates more generally. However, the earliest epidemiological discussions of increasing “social distance” already include strategies like the use of facemasks (Bell 2004, p. 1902; World Health Organization 2005, p. 58) and the cancellation of public transit (Gostin 2004, p. 570). This suggests “social distancing” did not demotivate because it was partially opaque from the start. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)