



Towards a Covid-19 lexicon of conceptual off-shoots: locking sociality down in the Netherlands and Spain

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This piece reconsiders the importance and impact of pandemic's preventive discourses on existing language-scapes in society. During the COVID-19 pandemic, institutionalised anglophone paradigms of health and illness are



central to defining any form of normality and abnormality, and it is time to take the defining role of language seriously. The use of highly conceptual language across the world, and specifically within Europe, signals a lack of consideration for the linguistic relativity of different locales. Governments, businesses, and academia have constructed a full COVID-19 lexicon intended to sustain 'business as usual' and hold the public in check. But does the assumed universality and 'simplicity' of the formulation of preventive rules function more as an obstacle than as facilitator?

The carefully crafted language promoted and prescribed by national and international media, supranational organisations (such as the WHO) and governments across Europe emphasizes existing frictions in society, imperceptible only at first. Much is lost in translation; more is lost where these words are pushed onto places where diversity is already underrepresented in the macro-narratives of 'prevention'. As a Spaniard living in the Netherlands, I have observed the return of the [North-South divide](#) and how the national press in both countries has been falling under the [the fallacies of statistical information](#). As I sit at home in The Hague, it was just a matter of time until modes of inquiry from applied linguistic anthropology could be put to good use. If we are to approach the politics of everyday new jargon for a new normal, let us start by peeling the onion, let us find the institutionalised lexicon hiding in the illusion of universalism.

A lockdown with Dutch characteristics

On March 17th, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte stated that the Netherlands would not go into a full lockdown, despite criticism across Europe that viewed this Dutch approach as reactive rather than preventive. Rather, the country would instead adopt a so-called '[intelligent' lockdown](#)' – an intelligence resting in individual social responsibility. So what does this 'intelligent lockdown' signify? These are times when governments are regularly addressing 'the population' and



calling for unity, responsibility and pride (in their solidarity). But how do national cultural differences figure in the language deployed to address society, a language that (albeit formalised) is still articulated on the basis of hegemony of health, illness, healing, and [the body](#)? Where I live, in The Hague, the sociocultural body of the city is a body-multiple ([reminiscent](#) of the work of Dutch medical anthropologist Annemarie Mol).

The city as multiple does not suggest fragmentation but a continuity of experiences and daily encounters, with collective individualism practised differently by those who embody and represent constructed nativism and those who do not.

And despite its diversity, Rutte's 'intelligent lockdown' [somehow](#) fails to address the entirety of the population. Upcoming elections no doubt inspire the re-vamping of Dutch nationalism embodied in the idea of (responsible) individualism.

In his speeches, he leaves 'lockdown' untranslated; he wants to keep that concept as a foreign concept, distancing himself and the Dutch state from what had been defined as Draconian measures across so-called Southern Europe. As an untranslated foreign concept, the lockdown travels through Dutch society, the institutions, government, elites, and policy of which have re-defined themselves as 'rational and neutral' to disavow their own colonial past. And as the concept of lockdown travels around society unattended, it latches onto the population's struggles to understand how one can intelligently keep a 'frisse neus' (a fresh nose, i.e. getting some fresh air), show active compassion for each other, and at the same time keep at recommended distance. '[Others](#)' are a daily menace, so to speak, but please keep things cool and kind.

'Keeping a fresh nose' is presented as a Dutch vernacular in opposition to 'lockdown', a demonised concept for all that it represents: economic recession and the Dutch citizen as 'plague-spreader'.



Both, 'frisse neus' and 'lockdown', engage in a contradictory dialectic dance, a dance intended to be danced by those who can afford to self-isolate accordingly: those who are not space-affluent, those who rely on the proximity of safety networks to survive the systems and policy that segregate them, those have always been kept from majority's imaginary 1.5 metre away from inclusion, forced into normatives of 'assimilation' and 'adaptation' that are unintelligible in that they were never intended to include diversity.

The 1.5 metre-society in the Netherlands offers a glimpse of how the governing bodies, and its welfare policy approach, understand (and struggles with) multiculturalism and the 'integration' of 'immigrants'. The Hague, with all its diversity, segregation and social inequalities, particularly struggles to digest standardised instructions, highly conceptual vocabulary, and the [homogenising of sociality](#). Social distancing is not only (oxy-)moronic but above all relative: place, space and sociality are already differently conceptualised and practised by Haagse inhabitants of diverse backgrounds. As a result, the population's lack of response to preventive measures is often interpreted by national media and certain segments of society as disrespectful; for some, it is taken as a clear sign of a lack of integration or of education. The more privileged members of society complain about the lack of regard for (collective) health as if such disregard were an endemic feature of the identity of others, often alluding to class or ethnicity to explain such so-called antisocial behaviour. They situate themselves as the rational and prudent citizens who really embody and represent Dutchness. [Only recently](#) has the conceptual language of COVID-19 begun to be discussed in national media. The romanticising of new pandemic vocabulary, however, is yet to include a meaningful discussion about the nationalistic and neoliberal frameworks within which COVID-19's preventive lexicon has been constructed.

These foreign vernaculars foster existing social frictions when (mis-)translated into a country's hegemonic vernacular.



Spain and the fallacy of an effective lockdown

While governments, media and public across Europe buy into the nationalisation of lockdowns and homogenised preventive paradigms, Spain also grapples with the translation of COVID-19's lexicon. In Spain's case, new preventive discourses and jargon are unsuccessfully framed within the continuity of a history of internal rupture and the politicisation of care. With expert knowledge and agency constantly competing with the demagogic tendency of the country's crisis vernaculars. Here, vernaculars of crisis and healing dominated by endemic concepts such as 'acuerdo' ('agreement' as demanded by central government of regions) and 'eficacia' ('efficacy', as demanded from regions to the central government and implying a respecting of regional diversity and agency).

Dialectic dances of recognition, expertise and agency transpire through the country: from the centralised powers of the government to the decentralised arms and legs of the country.

[The return of knowledge](#), sets the country into familiar histories of internal bleeding, tinting its participation in EU's debates with certain resentment: Spain does not want to be seen as draconian and grapples with institutionalised discourses of European 'unity' as it hides the challenges of its internal maladies. Meanwhile, Europe, and much of its media, also struggles in turn to respect Spain's diversity and contemporaneity, the use of adjectives such as 'draconian'. This brings back Povinelli's liberal multiculturalism (2002): an inequality of liberal forms of (European) multiculturalism emerging not from its superficial engagement with difference, but from its strongest vision of a new (supra-) national cohesion. Spain, grapples with the lack of contextualised understanding [of its regional and local dynamics](#) by international press and attempts to counterbalance it by politicising care. In this vicious cycle of performative 'hand-washing' and 'face-keeping', Spain also detaches itself from the concept of 'lockdown': an untranslated concept implying flapping tendencies.



Indeed, ‘business as usual’.

What makes a lockdown relaxed or intensive, full or partial, intelligent or draconian? And why is Europe pursuing ‘unity’ by means of ‘assimilation’ rather than inclusion of national complexity? In all this conceptual mess and preventive competition, existing social inequalities in both Spain (long-lasting interregional tensions) and the Netherlands (its struggle with ‘biculturalism’ and ‘liberal multiculturalism’) surface with all the potential to be revisited by those in power. The dominance of institutionalised paradigms of health, the popularity of the loosely translated (anglophone) lexicons of so-called supranational organisations, the permeability of the disregard for context-specific complexity, and the instrumentalisation of othering mechanisms across Europe function as the biggest obstacle for the population to heal, not only physically, but also mentally and historically.

The individualistic approaches imposed on minoritized and othered sectors of society are part and parcel of a new old glorification of a form of ‘rational’ individualism, even at continental level, only accessible for those who can afford it.

The world is ill with disregard for its own diversity. This is an illness whose ‘hand-washing’ and ‘face-keeping’ preventive strategies have entertained us with the illusion that we can carry on asymptotically through denial of internal inequalities and disruptive histories. Every day, we digest conceptual vocabulary, we inherit new forms of exclusion with the return of universalism. Nevertheless, some of you may consider this as necessary to communicate faster and across boundaries. But is there really communication where there is no understanding?