

# The digital ecosystem during the COVID-19 Crisis: new normality and lockdown easing and lifting

## *Ecosistema digital durante la COVID-19: nueva normalidad, desescalada y desconfinamiento*



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### Resumen:

El presente trabajo centra su objeto en el estudio de la variabilidad lingüística, conceptual y normativa derivada de la emergencia sanitaria producida por la súbita aparición de la enfermedad COVID-19, y la veloz transmisión de esa variabilidad favorecida por las nuevas tecnologías de la información y comunicación que permiten incluir novedosas narrativas periodísticas y comunicativas. Así constatamos que a raíz de la emergencia sanitaria se ha multiplicado el empleo de las plataformas digitales al tiempo que se ha avanzado en la implantación de la sociedad en red. Meto-

### Abstract:

*The main aim of this paper is to examine some of the linguistic, conceptual and normative variations, resulting from the public health emergency triggered by the COVID-19 disease, and their rapid spread thanks to new information and communication technologies. Consequently, these technologies have allowed for the shaping of new journalistic and communication narratives. Indeed, as a result of the public health emergency it has been possible to confirm both the greater use of digital platforms and the consolidation of the network society. As to the study methodology, two procedures were*

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dolóricamente utilizaremos dos procedimientos, uno deductivo en el que estableceremos el marco teórico que sustenta la fluidez, permeabilidad y flexibilidad del lenguaje para adaptarse a novedosas situaciones, y otro inductivo en el que, partiendo de las categorías conceptuales emergentes, esbozaremos la implementación de un *corpus* de palabras que posiblemente muchas de ellas queden incorporadas en el campo léxico de los hablantes en virtud de su cooperación interactuante en el ecosistema digital. En paralelo, nos detendremos en el análisis descriptivo, cualitativo y etimológico de tres nuevos eufemismos (*nueva normalidad*, *desescalada* y *desconfinamiento*) que tienen un marcado carácter terminal de la crisis sanitaria y que poseen una consideración paradigmática para futuras investigaciones.

**Palabras clave:**

COVID-19; ecosistema digital; nueva normalidad; desescalada; desconfinamiento.

*employed: on the one hand, a deductive method for establishing the theoretical framework in order to analyse the fluidity, permeability and flexibility of language in this new situation; and, on the other, an inductive method, based on emerging conceptual categories, for creating a corpus of words, many of which will probably be incorporated into the lexicon of the citizenry owing to their interaction in the digital ecosystem. Specifically, the focus will be placed here on a descriptive, qualitative and etymological analysis of three new euphemisms ('new normality', 'lockdown easing' and 'lockdown lifting'), due to their strong association with the end of public health crisis and to the fact that they may well be considered as paradigmatic for future research.*

**Keywords:**

COVID-19; digital ecosystem; new normality; lockdown easing; lockdown lifting.

## 1. Introduction. Theoretical framework

Language is a living and flexible system that evolves and adapts to different social environments within a community of speakers as the result of new social developments and renewed communication environments.

The foregoing derives from the formulations of diverse classical language analysts, who could be regarded as the fathers of general linguistics and advocates of the adaptive capacity of natural language. The visible connection between that capacity for coining new concepts and their gradual implementation in light of the new reality resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic draws from this premise. Likewise, it is important not to forget the manifest dissemination of these concepts on communication platforms or the lexicalisation (namely, their diachronic incorporation into the vocabulary of our language) of specific concepts and expressions that have emerged from a new intellectual and experiential worldview.

Indeed, one of the essential characteristics that differentiate human beings from other beings inhabiting and coexisting in the world is the former's ability to communicate thanks to an articulate language (Chomsky, 1987). So much so that, because of its symbolic capacity, we interconnect simple facts for the purpose of constructing other more complex and subtle ones, resulting in the universe of meaning that we call the world and which we are familiar with and transmit employing words that all the speakers of the same language share.

Since Saussure introduced the basic dichotomy between *language* and *speech*, as a result of the advances in general linguistics, information sciences, robotics and artificial intelligence, among other disciplines and fundamental lines of research, the basic schema has undergone many modifications at a diachronic level.

For *language* only possesses meaning for specific speakers who express it through their acts, whereby speech is the use to which they put language at a particular time and place. In short, *Language* and *speech* are reciprocal to the point that *language* is such because of *speech* and vice versa, and they only make sense in that dichotomic structure.

This rather rigid schema was, according to Coseriu (1962), reworked by Hjelmslev and Lotz at what the Rumanian linguist called the ‘Semantic Conference’ held in 1951, where they introduced the system/norm/speech triad. In the words of Coseriu (1962: 11),

[...] at the conference, Professors Hjelmslev, from Copenhagen, and Lotz, from New York (‘intrinsic’ semanticists and representatives of the ‘integral management of general grammar’) summarised their position in a table illustrating the distinction between three aspects of language –*schema*, *established norm* and *parole* (speech)– instead of the two traditional ones in post-Saussurian linguistics (in which the doctrine of the Genevan expert still is not accepted): *langue* and *parole*, *lingua* and *habla* (*Sprache-Rede*, *language-speech*).<sup>1</sup>

In short, for them the point of intersection between *langue* and *speech* derived from the verbal act.

Having said that, over time these conceptions relating to *parole* were the object of many heated controversies, for which reason in more recent times –albeit bridging the gap– prominent philosophers of language like Austin (1961: 220-240) have preferred to talk about ‘performative utterances’, Searle (1969) about ‘speech acts’ and, lastly, Acero et al. (1989) about *preferencias* (utterances) in general to allude to ‘[...] any verbal act consisting in the emission (either through our speech apparatus or by some or other mechanical means) or inscription of a sign or set of signs’ (Acero et al., 1989: 33).

Either way, what is truly important is that the rules governing speakers should not be rigid or constrict communication, but favour it and allow for modifications that do not alter the essence of the comprehension of the message, as stated by Coseriu (1962: 107):

Indeed, we have seen that what is imposed on the speaker is not the system (which ‘is offered to him’), but the rules. However, the speaker is aware of the system, uses it and, on the other hand, knows or does not know the rules, obeys or disobeys them, even maintaining himself within the possibilities of the system. [...] Thus, the individual speaker appears as a baseline also of change in the system, which begins with unfamiliarity with, or non-acceptance of, the rules.

The speaker’s and, therefore, language’s creative capacity for adapting to different environments and favouring this form of communication is unlimited.

In other words, since communication is only possible in terms of comprehension, it is necessary to delve into its interpretation as a result of the so-called ‘linguistic turn’, which for authors like Gadamer (1995), Palmer (1969) and Lledó (2015) is a fundamental key for interpreting written words from a hermeneutic perspective. Certainly, these authors are interested in written discourse and not the oral kind, because

Hermeneutics is the art of understanding, and the object of this understanding is written discourse. Versus oral discourse that exhausts temporality in its flow, in its successive and ephemeral *simultaneity*, the written kind loses, in a way, immediacy, that which analytical philosophy has called the illocutionary act, to become inserted into an ambiguous system of perlocutionary acts (Lledó, 2015: 49).

At any rate, so as to understand a phenomenon or specific fact, it is important that this is linked to the meaning and not, in contrast, to the utterance, with which it may even coincide: ‘Human communication is, to start with, a continual

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1 All translations are ours, unless otherwise indicated.

succession, a constant exchange of utterances, of verbal acts that are characterised by the important quality of being significant, or possessing a meaning, a key whose knowledge guarantees its comprehension' (Acero et al., 1989: 33-34).

Therefore, the traditional difference between *use* (emission) and *mention* (using a word not to refer to it per se) poses the problem of meaning on which linguists and philosophers of language have hitherto debated at great length (Chomsky, 1987). As a matter of fact, numerous and very varied attempts have been made to clarify the complex relationships underlying meaning, ranging from Plato's (1925: 56-113) psychologism in semantics addressed in his *Seventh Letter*, and its subsequent rejection by Frege (1971), to Hempel (1966) and Quine (1980), through a long list of authors. Operatively speaking, we endorse the summary offered by Leech (1981 [1974]: 1):

The word 'meaning' and its corresponding verb 'to mean' are among the eminently discussable terms in the English language, and semanticists have often seemed to spend an immoderate amount of time puzzling out the 'meanings of *meaning*' as a supposedly necessary preliminary to the study of their subject. Perhaps the best-known book ever written on semantics, that which C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards published in 1923, has the very title *The Meaning of Meaning*, and contained, on pp. 186-7, a list of as many as twenty-two definitions of the word, taking different non-theoretical or theoretical starting points.

In particular, Leech (1981 [1974]: 1) underscores a number of definitions of the word 'meaning', which will serve a function here by helping to understand the worldview that it shapes in speakers, including the following:

- 1) an intrinsic property
- 2) the other words annexed to a word in the dictionary
- 3) the connotation of a word
- 4) the practical consequences of a thing in our future experience
- 5) that to which the interpreter of a symbol
  - a. refers
  - b. believes himself to be referring
  - c. believes the user to be referring.

### 1.1. Euphemisms

In the analysis of identifiable and recognisable vocabulary as regards the creation of euphemisms during the pandemic, the classification that Chamizo Domínguez (2004) has appropriately proposed will be employed here. In brief, Chamizo considers euphemisms and dysphemisms as particular examples of metaphors with which there is a transfer of properties from one thing to another that does not possess them, but whose mass use tends to lead to a lexical modification, whereby creating semantic fields and word families. As in the process of literary and poetic creation when in the frame of the *poiesis* the writer or poet attempts to express the indescribable by resorting to the creation of metaphors, the same occurs with euphemisms, albeit disassociated from the aesthetics of the former.

Furthermore, Chamizo (2004: 45) highlights the importance of use for perpetuating euphemisms:

Whether or not speakers understand a given word (or expression, if applicable) as being a euphemism or dysphemism does not depend on the word per se, but on the context, the use to which the word has been put or to the intentions of speakers.

In particular, Chamizo claims that a lack of cooperation can give rise to humour or varied literary formalisations deriving from an evident process of fictionalisation. Be that as it may, on the basis of such analyses the intention here is to highlight a principal characteristic of euphemisms, insofar as it is relevant to the object of study: the necessary cooperation of speakers.

On the other hand, an analysis is performed here on the triple classification proposed by Chamizo (2004: 46) so as to enquire into the origin of euphemisms: novel, semi-lexicalised and lexicalised.

The first group, called 'novel euphemisms', are those that are created 'at a given moment, without them belonging to any previous conceptual network and without them being a priori predictable, but, however, are understood by those hearers who are familiar with the context in which they have been created'.

The second group, namely, semi-lexicalised euphemisms, are those that form part of the corpus of a language and 'are habitually employed and understood as such by its speakers, but in which it is still possible to discern the literal and euphemistic meaning of a term or collocation'.

Lastly, lexicalised or 'dead' euphemisms are 'those of whose euphemistic origin speakers are no longer aware because the original literal meaning of the word in question has been lost'.

In this study, only the first two groups will be considered, leaving the analysis of lexicalised euphemisms for another moment, since the euphemisms examined here are still in the process of being shaped in the midst of the public health crisis in which the world is currently immersed.

In sum, for a euphemism to become lexicalised a historical perspective and the necessary cooperation of speakers are both required.

## 1.2. Language-games

Both the rules for forming sentences and the properties of their respective meanings are integrated or incorporated into the minds of all speakers. However that may be, extra-linguistic determinants favouring, in contrast, an execution deviating from the rule established by beliefs, by the cognitive structure of the speaker and even by memory loss, can intervene. Specifically, Chomsky (1967, 1987) draws from the premise that the normal use of language is unlimited, for which reason it can produce and form new complex arbitrary sentences.

To this should be added Wittgenstein's (1994) conception considered as a therapeutic and preponderant positivism by the Cambridge School. According to José Ferrater Mora's (1981) *Diccionario de Filosofía*, for the Austrian philosopher,

[...] language can be compared with a game; there are as many languages as there are language-games. Therefore, to understand a work in a language is not primarily to understand its meaning, but to know how it works or how it is used in one of those 'games'.

Apart from formal logic, he believes that language does not represent individuals or facts, for this is only one of its uses, but is basically a system of activities insofar as the meaning is linked to what he calls 'language-games'. And he employs the concept to refer to the different ways of employing linguistic resources linked to different communicative situations inherent to diverse forms of life. In sum, suffice it to distinguish the natural place that terms and propositions occupy to understand their meaning. In his *Conocer Wittgenstein y su obra*, moreover, Javier Sádaba (1980: 119) explains this in the following terms:

Language-games are the *locus* of meaning (49, 116, 261). What does this mean? That the relationship between propositions and states of things is now achieved through language-games. They are the state of the art.

This researcher goes on to describe language-games as undefinable, changeable, open and incalculable. Indeed, he states that there are rules, but only as an abstract construct that is necessary for communication, given that they are arbitrary and conventional, while being learnt from the reactions of people to the events that befall them. Lastly, language would be contingent on our needs and interests and its rules would involve a human practice.

### 1.3. Analogies

One of the procedures in the formation and appearance of new uses and meanings of words can be found at the root of analogies.

According to Ferrater Mora (1981), an analogy refers to

[...] the correlation between the terms of two or more systems or orders, to wit, the existence of a relationship between each one of the terms of a system and each one of the terms of another. Thus, analogy is equivalent to proportion, which can be understood quantitatively or topologically. Analogy has also been referred to as the similarity of one thing to another, of the similarity of some characters or functions to others. In this last case, analogy consists in the attribution of the same predicates to diverse objects [...].

Likewise, the most detailed, primordial and flawless analysis of the concept of analogy is to be found in Aristotle's (1938) *The Organon*, specifically in the tripartite conception of terms that are classified as follows:

- 1) Univocal terms. Those that signify a sole concept and are employed in the same sense.
- 2) Equivocal terms. Those that express completely different concepts and, therefore, are employed in diverse senses.
- 3) Derivative terms. Those that, although they express completely different concepts, are not completely different, but only to a certain extent.

As a matter of fact, Aristotle (1933: 147-149) had already employed this notion of the metaphysical 'being', which is neither univocal or equivocal, but derivative, because

The term 'being' is used in various senses, but with reference to one central idea and one definite characteristic, and not as merely a common epithet. Thus as the term 'healthy' always relates to health (either as preserving it or as producing it or as indicating it or as receptive of it), and as 'medical' relates to the art of medicine (either possessing it or as naturally adapted

for it or as being a function of medicine) –and we shall find other terms used similarly to these– so ‘being’ is used in various senses, but always with reference to one principle.

## 2. Digital ecosystem. Transmedia

The digital interaction of communication flows on social media platforms (Web 2.0, 3.0 and 4.0) play a relevant role in completing the lexicalisation process of euphemisms. In particular the Web 2.0 has intensively promoted cooperation in transmitting, recreating, implementing and even distorting novel terminology. According to Wikipedia in Spanish, the ‘social web’, as it is also known,

[...] comprises those websites that facilitate the sharing of information, interoperability, design focusing on the user and collaboration on the World Wide Web. The Web 2.0 allows users to interact with each other and to collaborate together as content creators. The social web, known as the Web 2.0, is more than a mere container or source of information; in this case, the Web becomes a platform of collaborative work. Examples of the Web 2.0 include web communities, web services, web apps, social web services, video hosting services, wikis, blogs, mashups and folksonomies.

Thus, the digital transmedia framework, whose pivotal point is the social web, has triggered an authentic communication revolution by introducing the narrative or digital ecosystem, namely, the ability to transmit information via different systems and networks. On the basis of the generalised use of the Internet, email, blogs, wikis and social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn,

[...] everyone has become their own editor, their own media outlet via their accounts on Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, Tumblr or any blog platform. As a result of this hyper-connectivity, a piece of news, whether it be fake or not, can go viral depending on its content owing to this ecosystem characteristic of the world in which we are currently living (Bandrés, Badillo and Ramos, 2018: 161).

This ecosystem and its by-products have become authentic –albeit not always virtuous– virtual environments, in which information is shared due to the fact that the components of the ‘social web’ have facilitated the fluid and dynamic transmission of information. Of course, to this should be added that connectivity has been reinforced even further by videoconferencing in different formats, specifically, the WhatsApp platform and data communication apps such as Zoom and Skype, among others, which allow for virtual meetings for different purposes, including education, and which have played a relevant role in the new communication paradigm. Moreover, the relentless development of the digital industry is moving towards the progressive widespread deployment and habituation of the Web 4.0, on which priority is given to virtual assistants like Amazon’s Alexa and Apple’s Siri, which advocate for the full implementation of natural language in robotics with the generation of oral messages with a reaction similar to that of humans.

## 3. Novel conceptualisations during the COVID-19 pandemic

The difference between *competence* and *execution* established by Chomsky (1967, 1987), together with the conception of meaning as a language-game, forms the theoretical foundations of the characterisation of language as a living system

in which the freedom of speakers permits them to broaden their language corpus by recreating or creating new words and expressions depending on their needs, creativity and social environment. In this way, novel situations in the social environment of speakers produce creative speech acts.

In this study, the vocabulary employed during the public health crisis triggered by the COVID-19 disease is analysed from two perspectives: its formative origin and the semantic-pragmatic analysis of type-tokens, while taking into account the contexts of use. Firstly, considering the formative origin of this vocabulary it is possible to identify some common characteristics, which are shown in the following table:

**Table 1. Common characteristics of the vocabulary relating to the COVID-19 disease disseminated on digital platforms**

Common characteristics of the vocabulary relating to the COVID-19 disease disseminated on digital platforms	1) The majority are analogous euphemisms or inconsistent euphemistic expressions.
	2) They are associated with a technical healthcare vocabulary.
	3) They derive from instances of mathematical variables.
	4) Due to their semic features, they allude to warlike situations.
	5) They imply immediate optimism.
	6) They are disseminated on a mass scale.
	7) They have entered into the common vocabulary, regardless of whether or not the Real Academia Española (hereinafter RAE) –the Spanish cultural institution responsible for safeguarding the correct use of the Spanish language– has recognised them or whether or not they end up being lexicalised.
	8) They display and denote an ideological bias towards an encouraging view of the pandemic's denouement.
	9) By and large, they imply improvement, progress, getting over something and freedom.
	10) Their purpose is to convey a sensation of control to alleviate or counter an unpleasant and precarious situation.

Source: own elaboration

Although it is impossible to offer a comprehensive overview of the formative processes of new terminology due to the fact that, in this case, they are still ongoing and, therefore, necessarily incomplete, the aim of classifying them here is of an unassumingly preparatory and exploratory nature. At any rate, this study focuses on the most frequent processes, namely, those involved in the creation of euphemisms, analogies and language employed in the digital context:



**Table 2. Exploratory approaches to normative linguistic variations for creating a possible language corpus pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic**

Exploratory approaches to normative linguistic variations for creating a possible language corpus pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic	1) Periphrasis: 'new normality' to refer to the future, 'peak of the pandemic' to allude to its maximum level and 'social distancing' to designate separation.
	2) Analogies with restrictions and mountaineering: 'easing' and 'peak of the pandemic'.
	3) Correlations with healthcare terminology: 'peak of the pandemic', 'super-spreaders' and 'COVID-19'.
	4) Designations akin to ethical universals such as freedom or salvation: 'lifting' and 'Noah's Arcs'.
	5) Analogical correlations with mathematical variables: 'flattening the curve' and 'exponential growth'.
	6) Social media language, slogans and hashtags: #YoMeQuedoEnCasa (I'mStayingAtHome) #EsteVirusLoParamosUnidos (UnitedWeWillStopThisVirus)
	7) Neologisms, COVID-19 and others with musical connotations, as in the composition of chords: 'cluster'.

Source: own elaboration

The selection of the concepts analysed below ('new normality', '*desescalada*' [lockdown easing] and '*desconfinamiento*' [lockdown lifting]) was based on both their conclusive nature, pointing to a possible resolution of the public health crisis, and their paradigmatic value as models for other similar euphemistic terms.

#### **4. Semantic-pragmatic analysis of paradigmatic terminal type-tokens: 'new normality', '*desescalada*' (lockdown easing) and '*desconfinamiento*' (lockdown lifting)**

As already noted in the theoretical framework section, the approach proposed by Leech (1981 [1974]) is followed here to analyse the selected terms, first by resorting to their dictionary definitions and then by determining their pragmatic component.

For the purpose of confirming whether or not the terms under analysis have undergone some or other diachronic semantic evolution, recourse is had to the definitions appearing in two primary sources: on the one hand, the 1990 *Diccionario enciclopédico universal* and the 2014 edition of the *Diccionario de la lengua Española* (hereinafter *DEL*).

##### *4.1. The expression 'new normality'*

With respect to the concepts of 'new' and 'normality' appearing in the print edition of the *Diccionario Enciclopédico Universal* (1990), the adjective 'new' is defined as follows:

1. That which is seen or heard for the first time.
2. Distinct or different from what there was before.
3. That which ensues or is added to something that existed before.

And as to 'normality', it is defined as the quality or condition of normal which, for its part, has the following definitions:

1. It pertains to that which is found in its natural state.
2. That which complies with certain pre-established rules.

Furthermore, it is also appropriate to highlight the definition of 'to normalise' in the dictionary, due to its closeness to the periphrasis 'new normality':

1. To regularise or to place in good order that which was not.

Referring to the search performed in the online version of the *DLE* (2014), 'new' is defined as:

2. adj. That which is perceived or experienced for the first time.
3. adj. Repeated or reiterated so as to renew it.
4. adj. Distinct or different from that which existed or was learned before.
5. adj. That which ensues or is added to something that existed before.

And 'normal' has the following definitions:

1. adj. Pertaining to a thing: that which is found in its natural state.
2. adj. Habitual or ordinary.
3. adj. That which serves as a norm or rule.

In light of the comparative analysis of the definitions appearing in the two consulted sources, the following can be concluded:

- 1) That 'new' diachronically maintains a meaning close to 'experienced for the first time', as opposed to 'what existed before'.
- 2) That 'normal' diachronically maintains a character of regular normativity that is related to 'the natural', 'the ordinary'.

These conclusions are useful for performing a pragmatic analysis on the periphrasis 'new normality', in which the following features stand out:

**Table 3. Pragmatic analysis of 'new normality'**

Pragmatic analysis of 'new normality'	1. The recent character of 'the normal' implies optimism, immediate variation in the sense of recuperating an order that was lost during the public health crisis, whereby it has positive connotations. This, together with the character of 'the new' as something recently made, recently incorporated, tends to lead the citizenry to believe that changeableness in the social context imposes a familiarity that society as a whole has lacked during the pandemic.
	2. The return to normal, to the natural rules that have always been in force, has the purpose of creating a sensation of regulated control so as to alleviate or counter the unpleasant and precarious situation experienced before due to the lockdown declared during the state of alert.
	3. To return to the 'new normality', the maxim pronounced by the health authorities, has and denotes an ideological bias disproportionately in favour of those allowing the citizenry to return to that state. In the cultural context, it is tacitly understood that the restoration of the balance in the ordered, habitual and daily forms of the past is the result of the management of the pandemic, in which efficient measures conducive to a promising vision for the future have been implemented.
	4. It implies improvement, progress, getting over the abnormality experienced during the previous situation and a return to the past freedom characterised by order and stability.
	5. It is disseminated via the digital ecosystem on a massive scale.

**Source: own elaboration**

According to Table 1, 'Common characteristics of the vocabulary relating to the COVID-19 disease disseminated on digital platforms', 'new normality' is an inconsistent euphemistic expression.

The contradiction inherent to this expression means that it is somewhat difficult for speakers to understand, which is one of the basic reasons why its lexicalisation in the collective vocabulary of Spanish speakers may pose problems, in view of the fact that it requires their cooperation.

In this case, the absurdness of the union of two contradictory concepts ('new' and 'normal') makes them unintelligible inasmuch as they are necessarily specious. For in order that a contradiction should be intelligible, the hearer needs to modify the language rules in a way similar, if we may say, to changing the rules of a sports competition. This breaking of the rules thus calls for an extraordinary effort, when taking into account that the human mind ends up rejecting absurd statements. In the words Leech (1981 [1974]: 7),

It seems to be an incontrovertible principle of semantics that the human mind abhors a vacuum of sense; so a speaker of English faced with absurd sentences will strain his interpretative faculty to the utmost to read them meaningfully.

Nonetheless, it is plausible from both the Chomskyan distinction between *competence* and *execution* and the Wittgensteinian notion of *language-games* described above, since such a definition allows us to distance ourselves from any rigid conception that may inexorably impose a false character on all syntactic or semantic innovation. In other words, by virtue of competence.

#### 4.2. The word *desescalada*

Moving on to the next word, owing to the fact that its English translation (lockdown easing) is very different, the Spanish term will be analysed here. *Desescalada* is formed by the lexical base *escalar* (i.e. to climb, to mount, to scale) to which is added the prefix *des-* (i.e., un-). A prefix is a lexical particle that, added to a word, influences its meaning, thus providing individuals with a specific outlook which they would not possess without the addition of that particle.

One of the classifications of prefixes refers to their Latin or Greek origin. In this respect, the *DLE* (2014) also offers an explanation for the origin of the prefix *des-*:

Confluence of the Latin prefixes *de-*, *ex*, *dis-* and sometimes *e-*. 1. pref. It denotes the negation or inversion of the meaning of the simple word in front of which it is placed. Distrust, *deshacer* [to undo]. 2. pref. It indicates privation. *Desabejar* [to remove bees from]. 3. pref. It indicates excess or boldness. *Deslenguado* [insolent, loquacious]. 4. pref. It signifies 'outside'. *Descamino* [error, going astray], *deshora* [unseasonable or inconvenient time]. 5. pref. It sometimes denotes affirmation. *Despavorido* [terrified].

The *Nueva gramática de la lengua española* (2009, hereinafter *NGLE*) also establishes that the prefix *des-* signifies, among other things, 'privation' and 'negation', as well as 'to return to a previous state'.

In this case, the prefix has been added to the verb *escalar*, which the *Diccionario Enciclopédico Universal* (1990) defines as follows:

1. To enter a place by means of a ladder.
2. To climb a steep slope or a great height.

The entries appearing in the *DLE* (2014) are similar:

1. v.t. To enter a stronghold or another place by means of a ladder.
2. tr. To climb a steep slope or a great height.

In view of the comparative analysis of the two sources, the following can be concluded:

- 1) That the concept of *escalada* diachronically maintains a gradual character of ascent.
- 2) That both sources also indicate the need to resort to equipment or tools to achieve the objective in question.

These conclusions are useful for performing a pragmatic analysis on the euphemism *desescalada* (a possible translation for which is descent), in which the following features are worth mentioning:

Table 4. Pragmatic analysis of *desescalada*

Pragmatic analysis of <i>desescalada</i>	1. It implies immediate optimism: ascent, climbing with equipment to reach a peak involves circumventing hazards. In contrast, descending from that peak, <i>desescalada</i> , implies a triumph, to wit, the reward for the effort made is the optimism with which one descends, after having managed to surmount the difficulties, and the return to a state of repose after such exertion.
	2. The term displays and denotes an ideological bias that tends to lead the citizenry to believe that lockdown easing has been possible thanks to the use of the equipment necessary to reach the peak (continuing with the Spanish mountaineering metaphor), namely, a lockdown easing that optimises results. To meet a challenge successfully fuels optimism in the face of adversity, above all if one possesses the right equipment (rope, ladders, a compass, etc.) which allow for alleviating fatigue.
	3. It implies improvement, progress, getting over something and freedom. The possibility of climbing a peak always involves a challenge insofar as the environment poses difficulties, while enduring and overcoming them implies the freedom of meeting it.
	4. Its ultimate purpose is to transmit a sensation of control in order to alleviate or counter an unpleasant and precarious situation. Thanks to the fact that the unpleasant situation resulting from the public health crisis has been kept under control with the adoption of health and social measures, it has been possible to descend the 'mountain' and return to the situation prior to the crisis, thus helping to interpret reality, the vision of the surrounding world, in a coherent and orderly fashion.
	5. It is disseminated via the digital ecosystem on a massive scale.

Source: own elaboration

According to Table 1, 'Common characteristics of the vocabulary relating to the COVID-19 disease disseminated on digital platforms', the word *desescalada*, stemming from the verb *escalar*, is an analogous euphemism.

As the noun *desescalada* and particularly the verb *escalar* have been employed during the pandemic in a way similar to the use to which they are put in mountaineering, they have taken on the same positive connotations of the analogous reality. Conceptual images of the world are elaborated by speakers in order to understand them. *Escalar* and *desescalar* are used as concepts applied to life and allow speakers to recreate reality as a great adventure in which it is essential to minimise risks and to concentrate on surmounting the adverse situation.

Lastly, as is common knowledge, the mass dissemination of positive concepts gives rise to outlooks in speakers which allow them to recreate reality in a more optimistic fashion.

#### 4.3. The concept of *desconfinamiento*

As in the case of *desescalada*, since the English translation (lockdown lifting) bears no resemblance to *desconfinamiento*, the Spanish term will be analysed here. *Desconfinamiento* stems from the noun *confinamiento* (confinement, lockdown) which, in turn, derives from the verb *confinar* (to confine) to which is added the prefix *des-*.

Although the print version of the *Diccionario Enciclopédico Universal* (1990) does not include the verb *confinar*, it does indeed list the noun *confinación* (seclusion) or *confinamiento* (confinement), which is defined as follows:

1. The action and effect of confining.
2. Formal: A punishment consisting in sending a prisoner to a safe place where he can live freely, but under the surveillance of the authorities.

There is also reference to the adjective *confinado/a* (confined) as:

1. Exiled.
2. Formal: He who is sentenced to confinement.

As to the online version of the *DLE* (2014), the verb *confinar* has the following definitions:

1. adj. Pertaining to a person: Condemned to live in an obligatory residence. Also used as a noun.
2. m. and f. Legal. A person who is sentenced to confinement.

Therefore, to free someone from confinement is the pragmatic sense linked to the semantic conception of *desconfinar*.

From the comparative analysis of the two consulted sources it is possible to arrive at the following conclusions:

- 1) That in both sources the meaning of the concept of *confinamiento* is akin to that of ‘punishment’.
- 2) That the *Diccionario Enciclopédico Universal* (1990) offers many nuances that specify the need for the authorities to supervise the punishment and includes the adjective *confinado* alluding to banishment, which does not appear in the *DEL*.

These conclusions are useful for performing a pragmatic analysis on the euphemism *desconfinamiento*, in which the following features are noteworthy:

**Table 5. Pragmatic analysis of *desconfinamiento***

Pragmatic analysis of <i>desconfinamiento</i>	1. It implies immediate optimism and refers to a liberation as regards the lifting of the state of alert, which the citizenry have experienced in a way similar to an imprisonment.
	2. It displays and denotes an ideological bias in favour of those allowing lockdown to be lifted. If to confine is synonymous of imprisonment, to intern under the surveillance of the authorities, even with the power to impose fines, <i>desconfinamiento</i> implies a liberation from that imprisonment which is unilaterally attributed to the laws in force that allow the authorities to lift lockdown, thus reversing the situation of deprivation of liberty and surveillance of those confined to their homes. All this tends to point to an auspicious denouement, since it contributes to reinforce the idea of a return to normal and of stability.
	3. It evokes improvement, progress and freedom, since it also implies having got over and left behind the sentence of confinement.
	4. Its purpose is to transmit a sensation of control in order to alleviate or counter an unpleasant and precarious situation, insofar as it suggests putting an end to an exceptional state of affairs thanks to the addition of the prefix <i>des-</i> and its genuine meaning of ‘returning to a previous situation or state’, namely, putting paid to the precariousness.
	5. It is disseminated via the digital ecosystem on a massive scale.

Source: own elaboration

According to Table 1, 'Common characteristics of the vocabulary relating to the COVID-19 disease disseminated on digital platforms', the term *desconfinamiento* is an analogous euphemism.

## 5. Use contexts

These three euphemisms coined during the COVID-19 pandemic are by and large those that have appeared most frequently on digital platforms. For instance, the verb *confinar* (to confine) is among the most searched for, according to the news section of the online version of the *DLE* (<https://www.rae.es/noticias/las-palabras-mas-buscadas-en-el-diccionario-durante-la-cuarentena>).

As will be seen below, the three euphemisms analysed here are used in different online communicative and news contexts, also with the possibility of being shared on Twitter and Facebook or via WhatsApp, for which reason the scope of their dissemination via the digital ecosystem has multiplied exponentially.

**Table 6. Online communicative contexts in which the three euphemisms are used**

Healthcare context	<a href="http://www.sjdhospitalbarcelona.org/es">www.sjdhospitalbarcelona.org/es</a> (27/05/20): 'Lockdown easing: information for the families of patients with autism spectrum disorders on "How to cope with going out during lockdown easing which, in a staggered manner, is being implemented throughout the county".' Available at: <a href="https://www.sjdhospitalbarcelona.org/es/desconfinamiento-informacion-para-las-familias-pacientes-con-un-trastorno-del-espectro-del-autismo">https://www.sjdhospitalbarcelona.org/es/desconfinamiento-informacion-para-las-familias-pacientes-con-un-trastorno-del-espectro-del-autismo</a>
Scientific-university context	Salvador, A. (21/04/20): 'A psychologist addressing lockdown easing for children: "Returning progressively to a 'normalised' situation can provide them with substantial benefits".' Available at: <a href="https://www.noticiasycl.com/t/1935441/valladolid-todo-valladolid-entrevista-psicologa-sobre-desconfinamiento-ninos-acercamiento-progresivo-situacion-normalizada-puede-aportar-beneficios-notables">https://www.noticiasycl.com/t/1935441/valladolid-todo-valladolid-entrevista-psicologa-sobre-desconfinamiento-ninos-acercamiento-progresivo-situacion-normalizada-puede-aportar-beneficios-notables</a> www.udima.es (24/06/2020): 'New normality or how COVID-19 has taken hold of our language.' Available at: <a href="https://www.udima.es/es/articulo-covid-se-apodera-del-lenguaje-por-josep-miracle.html">https://www.udima.es/es/articulo-covid-se-apodera-del-lenguaje-por-josep-miracle.html</a>
Political context	Sánchez Hidalgo, E. and Álvarez, C. (29/04/20): 'These are the four stages of lockdown easing passed by the Spanish government. Each stage will last a minimum of two weeks, whereby Pedro Sánchez envisages that the country will be able to return to normal before the end of June.' Available at: <a href="https://elpais.com/sociedad/2020-04-28/estason-las-cuatro-fases-para-volver-a-la-normalidad-aprobadas-por-el-gobierno.html">https://elpais.com/sociedad/2020-04-28/estason-las-cuatro-fases-para-volver-a-la-normalidad-aprobadas-por-el-gobierno.html</a> Innerarity, D. (01/06/20): 'Lockdown easing or risk management.' Available at: <a href="https://www.noticiasdegipuzkoa.eus/opinion/tribuna-abierta/2020/06/01/desconfinamiento-o-gestion-riesgo/1033886.html">https://www.noticiasdegipuzkoa.eus/opinion/tribuna-abierta/2020/06/01/desconfinamiento-o-gestion-riesgo/1033886.html</a>
Communicative-metalinguistic context	<i>ABC</i> (04/05/20): 'The RAE is studying the possibility of including words and expressions like lockdown easing, coronavirus and lockdown lifting in the dictionary.' Available at: <a href="https://www.abc.es/cultura/abci-estudia-incorporar-diccionario-palabras-como-desescalada-coronavirus-o-desconfinamiento-202005042157_video.html">https://www.abc.es/cultura/abci-estudia-incorporar-diccionario-palabras-como-desescalada-coronavirus-o-desconfinamiento-202005042157_video.html</a> Pérez de Tudela, A. (05/05/20): ' <i>Lockdown easing</i> .' Available at: <a href="https://www.diariojaen.es/opinion/articulas/desconfinamiento-JD7104957">https://www.diariojaen.es/opinion/articulas/desconfinamiento-JD7104957</a> Camps, M. (01/05/20): 'These are the words relating to the pandemic whose inclusion in the dictionary the RAE is considering.' Available at: <a href="https://www.lavanguardia.com/cultura/20200501/48874892519/reyes-rae-pleno-academico.html">https://www.lavanguardia.com/cultura/20200501/48874892519/reyes-rae-pleno-academico.html</a>
Sports contexts	<a href="https://www.marca.com/">https://www.marca.com/</a> (21/04/20): 'Lockdown easing: from unrecommendable to valid for the RAE in two weeks.' Available at: <a href="https://www.marca.com/tiramillas/2020/04/21/5e9eb40f46163ff3918b45b2.html">https://www.marca.com/tiramillas/2020/04/21/5e9eb40f46163ff3918b45b2.html</a>

Source: own elaboration

## 6. The RAE and the digital ecosystem

Incidentally, the RAE itself reflects the vitality of the digital ecosystem. In this connection, mention should go to the different posts on its website and the many queries about these and many other words that it answers via Twitter.

First and foremost, this is evidenced by the news item entitled, ‘The most searched for words in the dictionary during quarantine’, posted by the *DLE* on 7 April 2020, in which it mentions the many visits received in April in relation to concepts such as ‘to confine’ and ‘confined’:

*Pandemic, quarantine, to confine, resilience, epidemic, virus, triage and to care for* are some of the most searched for words in the *Diccionario de la lengua española (DLE)* during the previous month, in which they received 84 million visits (nearly 3 million a day). The terms relating to COVID-19 generating the largest number of visits to the *DLE* indicate a clear information trend: people want to know the meanings accompanying this new reality. But they also imply that there is a yearning for words of encouragement or that offer security. This is the reason why we find, together with *confined, morgue and moratorium*, words like *doctor, innocuous, to refer, solidarity, hope, altruism* and *to resist*. All of them, both those with negative connotations and those with positive ones in these times, topped the list of queries last month.

Secondly, projects like ‘May words be with you’ have been started up. The aim of this social media initiative launched by the RAE, under the hashtag #QueLasLetrasTeAcompañen, is to ‘share words that accompany us in these difficult times and which comfort us in the face of uncertainty’. In sum, the idea is to share comforting and reassuring words on social media in alphabetical order.

All in all, as has been seen, this study shares two basic aspects with the spirit of the RAE: the use of the digital ecosystem—as do the *NGLE* and the Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española (ASALE)—and the line of argument deployed here which considers that by searching for and using a novel specific terminology in the midst of the public health crisis, citizens have striven to create a security framework with which to shape a more positive life and emotional outlook.

## 7. Conclusions

The public health crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the need for renewed concepts that, even though they are already well established in technical and specialised lexicons, broaden communication standards for the purpose of meeting the challenges that it is posing. The use of unconventional concepts has become widespread precisely thanks to the network society and virtual communication, in which the digitisation of information and the apps of communication-related platforms have played a fundamental role not only as opinion leaders, but also as generators and disseminators of new model type-tokens.

Our study has also described an implementation of the theoretical, linguistic and meaning frame for generating those type-tokens, as well as their semantic and pragmatic by-products, and has assessed the possibilities of their lexicalisation particularly as a result of the convergence of a digitised society with the introduction and management of multiple communication platforms during the public health crisis.



In addition, we have shown how, by using the digital ecosystem, receivers of information become at the same time its transmitters, thus influencing the lexicalisation process of novel concepts thanks to their cooperative transmission.

We have also explored a typology of classificatory processes based on the diverse origin of keywords that speakers employ simultaneously on different digital platforms on a massive scale due to the ever-faster evolution towards a network society, which has not escaped the attentive gaze of the authorities or language institutions.

Similarly, the results of our comprehensive analysis of specific useful type-tokens as paradigmatic models and as the foundations for a particular taxonomy, also point to the implementation of a specific language corpus.

All this is especially relevant in the midst of an unprecedented global public health crisis, considering that the connection between the intellection resulting from conceptual images and the outlooks of speakers, which provides them with a coherent, systematic and optimistic explanation of the world surrounding them.

In the main, from the results of our analysis it is possible to identify a positive life and emotional outlook deriving from the use of euphemistic concepts, referring to both the essential components of reality and the laws and processes shaping them, which have appeared during the public health crisis.

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