Original Research Article

Covid 19 Neologisms in English

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore and analyse some of the English words and expressions that have emerged or come into new light with the spread of Covid-19. Most of the words and expressions analyzed come from the author's own observation of their occurrence in the media and some others are borrowed from the sources that he has read and reviewed. The article is based on the theory of neologism as discussed in Plag (2003), Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish (2010) and Yule (2017). It lists and categorizes common coronavirus related neologisms and analyses their formation processes and use. Etymology of some of the terms has been traced as far as possible.

Keyword: *Neologisms, word formation, Covid-19, Coronavirus, lockdown*

Introduction

Language, being a social phenomenon, undergoes changes when there are social upheavals. Languages are evolving as the world is constantly changing. New vocabulary items have come into existence also due to new technologies and new discoveries such as, computing, internet, cell phones and the like (UK Essays, November 2018). Liu and Liu (2014) talk about computer-mediated communication as being a major cause of the emergence of "netspeak" or internet neologisms, and citizens have become "netizens" (p.23). English being a global language (Crystal, 2003), borrows most from the events that happen in the global level as well as in English speaking countries. For instance, after the World War II, English neologisms emerged in a remarkable way. Professor Lawson (2020) writes that World War II gave us "radar" (radio detection and ranging) as well as "fubar" (fucked-up beyond all recognition), and Vietnam war gave us both "clusterfuck" (a mishandled or disorganized situation) and "fragging" (the deliberate killing of an unpopular member of one's own fighting unit, from the shortening of fragmentation grenade), all military terms. In the same

article, he further talks about some neologisms that were born more recently with the UK's departure from the EU: "Brexit", "brexiteers", "remoaners", and "regrexit", and mentions that the conversations were dominated by new concepts such as "backstops", "hard borders", and "cliff edges" (Lawson, 2020).

Not only during wars and political upheavals, new words have been coined, which have later become part of languages, during times of epidemics and pandemics. "The English language is studded with words from previous plagues and pandemics, mass social disruption, and an abundance of expressions that fulfil humanity's perennial need to describe an often-inhospitable world" (Oxford Languages, 2020, p.5). In 1738, "yellow fever" appeared and Spanish influenza spread in 1890. Poliomyelitis spread in 1878; later it shortened to Polio in 1911. After World War II epidemics broke out and most children were affected. In recent decades, it has been observed that there is a large share of linguistic coinage related to epidemics and pandemics. SARS appeared in 2003 while AIDS in 1982 (OED blogpost, 2020).

The latest 2020 coronavirus has also led to an explosion of new words and phrases, both in English and in other languages. The term "coronavirus" itself was discussed first time in the paper *Nature* in 1968 but when it appeared and spread worldwide in 2020, very few people had known it (OED blogpost, 2020). According to Lawson (2020) again, established terms such as "self-isolating", "pandemic", "quarantine", "lockdown" and "key workers" have increased in use and probably acquired new meanings, while neologisms are being coined quicker than ever. These include "covidiot" (someone ignoring public health advice), "covideo party"(online parties via Zoom or Skype), and "covexit" (the strategy for exiting lockdown). Other terms deal with the material changes in our everyday lives, from "blursday" (an unspecified day because of lockdown's disorientating effect on time), to "zoombombing" (hijacking a zoom videocall). "WFH" (working from home) and "quaranteams" (online teams created during lockdown) are helping people deal with changing work circumstances (Lawson 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Languages have a property called creativity (Linhua, 2008) or productivity (Plag, 2003), because of which new words are coined and created in languages. The process of new words being coined and entering into a language can be called neologism in linguistics. In dictionaries, neologisms are often defined as new words or new

senses or usages of existing words. Etymologically, the term neologism itself comes from Greek (*neos,* new and *logos*, word) and simply means a new word (Merriam Webster, online version). Following this definition, "neologisms as sources of lexical enrichment are intrinsic parts of dynamic language use and development, both from a synchronic and diachronic perspective" (Kerremans, 2015, p.15).

According to Plag (2003), new words are created from the existing ones by affixational, non-affixational and compounding processes. Yule (2017) has also discussed word-formation processes in detail and listed the following as the ways in which new words get added in a language: etymology, borrowing, loan-translation, compounding, blending, clipping, hypocorisms, backformation, conversion, coinage, acronyms, and derivation. He also talks about more than one of these processes being applied in creation of some of the words. For example, the word, *deli* was first created by borrowing *delicatessen* from German and then clipping that borrowed form; similarly, *snowball* (noun) is formed through compounding but when it is used as a verb in the expression *the problems with the project have snowballed,* it undergoes conversion (Yule, 2017, p. 184).

Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish (2010) describe the processes of the creation of new words as neologism and summarize the word-formation processes in a table:

Table 1 Mechanisms by which new words can enter a language

New words	Meaning change
Neologisms	Change in part of speech
Coining	Metaphorical extension
Alphabetic abbreviation	Narrowing
Clipping	Semantic drift
Blending	Reversal
Gentrification	
Appropriation of proper nouns	
Borrowing: direct	
Borrowing: indirect (calques)	
Derivational morphology	

Source: (Akmajian, Demers, Farmer, & Harnish 2010, p.34)

This article attempts to list and analyse some of the most common words and expressions that have been coined with Covid–19 or older established terms that have acquired new specific meanings in the present pandemic context.

Data and Discussion

This section of the article lists some neologisms i.e., newly coined single words, word combinations or collocations, and established words that are being used with new added meanings in the contexts of the corona pandemic communications. The analysis of the words and expressions is built around different word formation processes to which they belong. The data (i.e., the words and expressions related to Covid-19) come from the author's own exposure to mass and social media communication and reading of various blogposts and articles (including Akut, 2020; Katermina and Yatchenko, 2020; Suparsa and Mantra, 2020; Oxford Languages, 2020; OED blogpost 2020; and WHO webpage) unless cited otherwise. The number of Covid-related words discussed here is by no means exhaustive; there are other numerous terms whose frequency of use rose this year, with added meanings in many cases. The article analyses only those words that the author subjectively decided to be neologisms.

Covid-19, Covid, coronavirus, Novel Coronavirus, corona, CV, Miss Rona

The most frequently used words this year have been these names of the coronavirus disease. Oxford Languages (2020) reports that *Covid -19* is completely a new term which was first recorded on 11 February 2020 report by WHO, as an abbreviation for *coronavirus disease 2019*, and it quickly overtook *coronavirus* in frequency which was the most used word this year by March (p.2). The other less formal and less frequently used abbreviations include Covid, and *C-19.* According to Kreuz (2020), there is regional variation in capitalization of the spelling. He reports that the all caps vesrion "COVID" is dominant in the U.S., Canada and Australia, while "Covid" is more common in the U.K., Ireland, New Zealand and South Africa.

Covid appeared to be a very productive stem for word-formation this year. Some creative, and a bit jocular, blended compounds with the root 'covid' include: *covidiot* (covid+idiot), someone who disobeys the guidelines to prevent the Covid-19; *covideo,* video games which help not to be bored during the pandemics (Oxford Languages, 2020; Katermina and Yatchenko, 2020).

Similarly, Katermina and Yatchenko (2020) have also listed several compound adjectives that they collected from various issues of *The Economist* involving the stem *covid.* Some of those include: *covid-infected* (markets)*, covid-induced* (slumps)*, covid-related* (data), *covid-striken* (firms)*, covid-afflicted* (state)*, covid-battered* (places) etc. (pp. 62-63).

To refer to situations before Covid-19 and the situations after this disease is over in the future, the affixed forms like *pre-Covid,* and *post-Covid* have become common in use.

Similarly, several collocations involving *covid* have been coined. Some of the most common (also listed by Katermina and Yatchenko, 2020;) include *covid* outbreak, *covid* shock, *covid* crisis, *covid* pandemic, *covid* cases, *covid* hit, *covid* lockdown, *covid* catastrophe, c*ovid-19* calamity, *covid-19* deaths, *covid-19* restrictions, *covid-19's* obliteration of demands, *covid-19's* spread, a *covid-19* hospital, *covid* wards, *covid-19* data, *covid-19* news, *a covid-19* committee, *covid-19* patients, *covid-19* taskforce and *covid-19* hotspot.

Coronavirus itself is not entirely a new coinage. According to Merriam Webster Dictionary (mobile app version), the first known use of the word was recorded in 1968 by some virologists in a short article '*Coronaviruses*' in the magazine *Nature* (vol. 220, no. 5168, November 16, 1968, p.650). However, the words came to public notice only in 2020. Oxford Languages (2020) mentions, "by March this year it [coronavirus] was one of the most frequently used nouns in the English language, after being used to designate the SARS-CoV-2 virus" (p.2). The coronavirus spreading now around the world has been named *novel* (new) *coronavirus, because* this particular form of coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) is distinct from previous types of coronaviruses such as SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) and MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome). Because it is a novel virus, no one was exposed to it earlier and no one had chances of building immunity against it.

It appears that the word was formed through compounding process (corona +virus). But when it is shortened to *corona* only as the informal name of the disease, a kind of separation of compound seems to have taken place. *CV, corona* and very informal clipped form *rona* are some commonly used abbreviations of the term. "Queer and black communities, so often a wellspring of linguistic innovation, have given rise to 'Miss Rona' as a slang term for the virus" (Ro, 2020).

Etymologically, the word *corona* has 16th century Latin origin, meaning 'wreath or crown' (OALD online version) and simply refers to the light seen around the sun or moon during eclipse. The new virus probably looked like a crown and so the virologists named it coronavirus. So, there is an extension of meaning here.

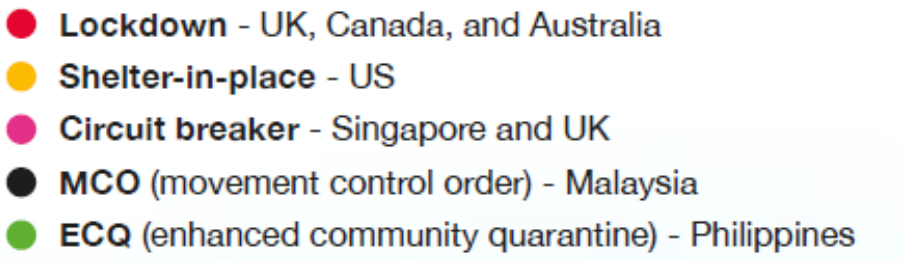
Like *covid, corona* seems to be a productive stem for new word formation. Katermina and Yachenko (2020) have listed some of the blends that they found in different issues of *The Economist.* They include *coronanomics* (a special economic system during pandemics), *cororhara* (coronavirus harassment), *coronopticon* (apps to track the contacts of users); and compounds *corona-speak* (a skill of presenting news regarding the pandemics), *corona-chief* (a leader administering the handling of coronavirus), and *coronabonds* (a bond between the struggling eurozone states) (p.62). They also mention some adjectives formed through compounding process involving the stem *coronavirus.* Some of them are *virus-fighting* (firms), *virus-imposed* (restrictions/ distance learning), *virus-related* (stoppages), *virus-control* (work), *coronavirus-fueled* (exodus), and *coronavirus-proof (*pp.62-63).

Dictionary.com (2020) also lists jocular blended terms, *coronababies* (corona+babies) and c*oronnials* (coronavirus +millennials), referring to the generation of babies conceived while people are cooped up at home during lockdown. Prefixed forms pre-*coronavirus* and *post-coronavirus have* also been used like pre-covid and post-covid, to refer to things or events happening before and after the outbreak of the virus.

Lockdown, circuit breaker, MCO, ECQ, reopening, easing of lockdown,

These are terms brought into new light by Covid-19 this year to refer to the preventive measures adopted by the government and the general public around the world to curb the spread of the virus infections. The compound term *lockdown* (lock+down) is not a new coinage as, according to Merriam Webester (online version), its first known use was made in the year 1973 in the sense of meaning "the confinement of prisoners to their cells for all or most of the day as a temporary security measure". However, after Covid-19, the term has reached the English language vocabulary of almost every country, and the dictionaries are defining it as "a temporary condition imposed by governmental authorities (as during the outbreak of an epidemic disease) in which people are required to stay in their homes and refrain from or limit activities

outside the home involving public contact (such as dining out or attending large gatherings)" (Merriam Webster), with example sentences including the covid lockdown updates. According to Oxford Languages (2020), use of the term [lockdown] rose in frequency from April 2020 onwards, as a preferred in most Anglophone countries... for government-imposed quarantine measures in response to the spread of Covid-19 whereas, at around the same time, the term *circuit breaker* (which originally referred to a safety device that stops the flow of the current in an electric circuit) is reported to have been adopted by Singaporeans as a name for their government's stay-at-home regulations. Similarly, Oxford Languages (2020) reports use of the following terms in the given regions:



Source: Oxford Languages (2020, p.17)

A few more hopeful expressions after having been seriously hit by lockdown were *reopening* of businesses, shops etc. and gradual *easing of* lockdown rising in frequency in around May 2020, although repeated lockdowns are in place even now in many European countries.

Quarantine, isolation, self-quarantine, self-isolation, quaranteens, contact tracing, social distancing, physical distancing, elbow bump

The most common terms referring to preventive measures this year were *quarantine* and *isolation.* These terms seemed closer in meaning; often one was confused for the other in the beginning, and it required health experts to distinguish them. The author had heard of *quarantine* only in the context of communication about animals, referring to the act of separating a diseased or potentially diseased animal away from others so as to prevent spread. A similar experience of the term from his respondents is reported by Khadgi (2020), a reporter in *The Kathmandu Post*. Now,

WHO defines it with specific reference to Covid-19. According to the Q&A section of WHO webpage,

> Q*uarantine* is used for anyone who is a contact of someone infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes Covid-19, whether the infected person has symptoms or not. Quarantine means that you remain separated from others because you have been exposed to the virus and you may be infected and can take place in a designated facility or at home. For Covid-19, this means staying in the facility or at home for 14 days.

On the other hand, *isolation*, which was more political and less of an epidemiological term earlier, acquired very specific meaning this year. WHO gives the following advice regarding isolation:

> *Isolation* is used for people with Covid-19 symptoms or who have tested positive for the virus. Being in isolation means being separated from other people, ideally in a medically facility where you can receive clinical care. If isolation in a medical facility is not possible and you are not in a high-risk group of developing severe disease, isolation can take place at home. If you have symptoms, you should remain in isolation for at least 10 days plus an additional 3 days without symptoms. If you are infected and do not develop symptoms, you should remain in isolation for 10 days from the time you test positive. (WHO webpage)

Likewise, the prefixed forms *self-quarantine* and *self-isolation* appear like new coinages, but Merriam Webster Dictionary (online version) reports that the former was first recorded in 1918 and the latter dates back to 1834. Self-isolate has been the preferred term in British English, whereas self-quarantine is more commonly employed in the U.S. (Kreuz, 2020). But the humorous *quaranteens,* which is a pun on *quarantine* and *teen(agers)*, seems a blended coinage, referring to babies born during quarantine who might grow up to be teenagers (Dictioinary.com).

Contact tracing is another much-heard technical collocation this year. Although the term came to our notice only this year, its first recorded use dates back to 1935-40 (Dictionary.com). Seemingly, it comes from the field of medicine and refers to "the process of identifying, assessing, and managing people who have been exposed to a disease to prevent onward transmission" (WHO, Q&A)

The collocated term *social distancing* dates to the mid-20th century (Oxford Languages, 2020) in the general sense of being remote from others, and to the early 21st century in the specific sense of maintaining distance from others in order to reduce the spread of infection, but before 2020 it was relatively rare. The alternative term *physical distancing* "has been adopted by some people and organizations, notably the WHO, as arguably more accurate: although people are being asked to maintain physical distance from each other, they can remain socially connected through social media, phone calls, and the like. However, social distancing has remained by far the more frequent of the two terms in most varieties of English" (Oxford Languages, 2020, p.10).

Epidemic, pandemic, plandemic, infodemic, twindemic, superspreader, community transmission, flatten the curve, herd immunity,

These are the terminologies that were adopted this year to refer to the spread of Covid-19 infections. Etymologically, both *epidemic* and *pandemic* come from Greek, from epi+demos 'among the people and pan+demos 'all the people' respectively. The coronavirus was first an *epidemic*, in only Wuhan community in China, but when the *outbreak* began to spread much more widely, across a whole country, multiple countries, or the whole world, i.e., by March, the WHO characterized the coronavirus as a *pandemic*. However, neither of the terms are new; their first known uses were recorded in 17th century to refer to the great plagues, as mentioned in one of the OED blogposts (Paton, 2020).

The humorous sounding blends *infodemic* (information+epidemic)*, plandemic* (planned+pandemic; for some skeptics and conspiracy theorists, Covid-19 was a planned pandemic)*,* and *twindemic* (twin+epidemic) sound entirely as new coinages, but Oxford Languages (2020) reports that the first of these was recorded in 2003, with reference to the explosion of information and misinformation associated with SARS epidemic; and the second (i.e., *plandemic*) was used in 2006 in a different sense, 'a proliferation of plans'. The third, *twindemic,* however, has been recorded under Tech & Science section as a term related to their word of the year (which is *pandemic)* by Dictionary.com to refer "to the dual threat of a severe flu outbreak on top of the Covid-19 pandemic in the fall and winter of 2020" (online version).

One affixed word *super-spreader,* first recorded in early 1970s (Dictionary.com), got revived this year and has been given special space by the dictionaries. Cambridge

Dictionary (online version) defines the term as, "someone who infects many more people with a disease than most other infected people do" and gives example sentences with Covid-19 reference. Oxford Languages (2020) also reports that the term "became significantly more frequent this year" with a particular spike in its usage in October (p.2).

Some epidemiological collocations have also become much more common this year. *Community transmission* dates to 1959 and *community spread* dates further back to 1903 (Kreuz, 2020). Both are defined under the single entry by the Cambridge Dictionary as "the process of an infectious illness spreading through a large group of people in a general way, so that the source of the infection in a particular case is not known" (online version), with example sentences that refer to Coivd-19. Similarly, *herd immunity,* which is defined by WHO as "the indirect protection from an infectious disease that happens when a population is immune either through vaccination or immunity developed through previous infection" (WHO webpage, Q&A section) also was a popular collocational phrase.

The idiom *flatten the curve,* which hit the media this year, has not entered many dictionaries as a lexical entry in itself. In Oxford Learner's Dictionary (online version), we find as an idiom under the entry *curve,* and Cambridge Dictionary has not recorded it so far. However, Dictioanry.com, which reports the first use of the term between 2005 and 2010, records it as an entry and defines it as a verb:

> to use public health measures to achieve a more gradual increase and decrease in the number of new cases, spreading the same total number of cases over a longer period of time, as depicted by a gently sloping curved line on a graph. (Dictionary.com)

Masks (surgical, medical, three-layer), face-coverings, face shields, maskless, unmasked, anti-mask, mask-shaming; hand sanitizers; gel

Some of the medical vocabulary brought to very common use this year involve the prescription of wearing *mask* to avoid the spread of infection. Mask or *face mask* was often described by collocating adjectives *surgical, medical,* or *three-layer* to make the term more specific. *Face covering* is a more general term, referring to any piece of material worn over the mouth and nose. The term *face shield*, meanwhile, usually refers to a clear plastic visor worn over the whole face. As masks and coverings have

become a part of everyday life for so many, it is no surprise that the words denoting them have increased dramatically in usage (Oxford Languages, 2020).

There has been also a proliferation of words reflecting attitudes towards the issue of mask-wearing. Some of the popular ones include the affixed forms *maskless* and *unmasked,* referring to people not wearing masks. The other affixed word involving the stem mask an*ti-mask* or *anti-masker* is defined by Dictioanry.com with very specific reference to Covid-19. The definition reads: *Anti-masker* is a disparaging term for a person who opposes wearing a face mask during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Mask-shaming,* according to Oxford Languages (2020), is a *contranym, a* term with two opposite meaning. It can be used both to refer to the act of shaming someone for wearing mask or for not wearing mask.

Some sanitation related words were also brought to new light this year by coronavirus pandemic. We, in Nepal, had hardly heard of *hand sanitizers*, although handwashing was already normal for us. However, Dictionary.com (online version) claims that the first records of the word *sanitizer* in English come from the mid-1900s. *Sanitizer* is made up of the root word *sanitize,* from the Latin root *sanit(as),* meaning "health," and the suffix *-ize*, used in creating verbs. The suffix-*er* indicates that it is a noun that performs the action of sanitizing.

E-learning, blended learning, online learning, virtual school/class, WFH, workation, Zoom-ready, zoom-friendly, zoombombing, mute, unmute

Another area of vocabulary that came to lime light consists of the burgeoning remote working and learning related terms. The Covid-19 lockdown, which severely crippled the work-life and educational activities, gave rise to the practice of working and learning from home. Most of the learning was *e-learning,* i.e., learning that takes place by means of computers and the internet (Collinsdictionary.com). Although collocations like *remote working, remote learning, blended learning* (combining traditional classrooms and lessons over internet), *online learning, virtual classes* or *schools* were widely heard, only *blended learning* was found as an entry in the dictionaries. *Virtual school* is only informally defined by Dictionary.com as "an educational program that takes place in a virtual environment—most typically on a computer screen". Similarly, *WFH* was also found in the dictionaries as an abbreviation

of 'work/working from home', and is reported to have originated in 1990-2000 with the rise of personal computers and the internet (dictionary.com). This year we also heard the compound *workcation* or *workation* (work+vacation), a working vacation, or a holiday during which one also works (Oxford Languages, 2020), but the word does not feature in the dictionary yet.

A very widely used technology for online classes in 2020 was *Zoom*. Therefore, new compounds involving the stem *zoom* have emerged. For example, the adjectives *zoom-ready* and *zoom- friendly* have been used to describe the particular preparations that are required for online appearances (tops, shirts, earrings, hairstyle, make-up etc.) (Oxford Languages, 2020). Similarly, technology terms like *mute,* and *unmute* were not new to us but this year these terms were exclusively associated with Zoom meeting technology. A particularly new coinage compound appears to be *zoombombing* (Zoom+bombing), formed in the fashion of *photobombing*. According the Oxford Languages (2020) report, it refers to "the practice of infiltrating video conference calls on Zoom application, and posting violent, pornographic or offensive content", but it has not been recorded as an entry in the dictionary.

RDT, PCR, PPE, vaccines,* and *anti-vaxxer

Among the terms brought to new focus by Coivd-19, there are test and vaccine related words. As soon as corona pandemic cases began to be recorded, there were clamors about need for the tests. In Nepal, there were reports of the validity of RDT (rapid diagnostic tests) being questioned and movements demanding increased PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests. These are entirely medical terminologies but came to the notice of general public this year. Similarly, PPE (personal protective equipment) was also heard of as an issue in the treatment of Covid-19 patients. PPE includes the kit used by nurses and doctors to prevent them becoming infected. It includes surgical masks as well as respirators knowns as FFP3 masks, visors, face shields, gloves and aprons (Lintern, 2020).

Finally, there are talks of *vaccines*, *shots,* or *jabs* with a number of them being developed and experimented with around the world. However, there have been some *anti-vaxxers* in a new sense. Earlier the affixed form *anti-vaxxer* referred to parents who did not want their children to be vaccinated; this time around the term has acquired a new meaning and specifically stands for those who are opposed to the idea of vaccinating

people or those who distrust vaccination (Cambridge dictionary), especially distrust the newly invented coronavirus vaccines being *rolled out* by governments around the world now. Overall, none of the vaccine related terms are entirely new coinages.

Conclusion

Although Covid-19 has taken a heavy toll on lives of people all around the world, it appears that it has given English language a number of new words and expressions. From the foregoing analyses, it is evident that *Covid* and *corona(virus)* have remained very productive stems for blending and compounding giving rise to numerous neologisms. However, pure neologisms seem to be just a few: *Covid-19, rona, covidiot, corohara, quaranteens, workation, zoombombing* etc. Not many of these have found entry in the dictionaries. Yet, the year brought to the notice of general public a large number of already established terms- most of them belonging to the theme of epidemiology and disease control. The use of some of the very lesser-known words like *coronavirus* rose to unprecedented frequency. The frequent repetition of the virus-safety guidelines embodied in the terms like *mask-wearing, social distancing, handwashing* and *working-from-home* have not only heavily influenced our thoughts and discourses but our ways of living too, and probably for good. It remains to be seen how many of the COVID-19 neologisms will find their permanent place in the English language because as Kerremans (2015, p. 15) remarks:

> Neologisms are like casting show winners. A minority of them become established singers, some are one-hit wonders and others almost instantaneously disappear into oblivion.

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