

How Will COVID-19 Affect the World Toponymically and Onomastically?

Joshua “Jozza” Nash

We have watched the world change linguistically these last months. Concepts like COVID clusters, COVID hot spots, tracking the virus, now is not the time (to take a holiday), stay at home, stay safe, and save lives, we’re flattening the curve, keeping to essential services, stopping the spread, social distancing, self-isolation, acquiring or contracting versus transmitting or infecting, when we get through this, on the other side of this, the new normal, and many others now occur in common parlance and have all taken on their own new and possibly improved meaning. There are the names of the cruise ships like *Diamond Princess* and *Celebrity Solstice* and the now infamous *Ruby Princess*, which is associated with the spread of the coronavirus in Australia.

This disease has been dubbed the Boomer Remover. People who are not adept at using the Zoom conferencing programme to teach online brought about because of the closure of universities and other institutions are called Baby Zoomers. A “case of corona” now could easily confuse a lover of a particular Mexican beer who has just bought 24 bottles of their well-loved poison. But how will COVID-19 and its connected discourse and physical realities affect the world in terms of placenames, placename signs, and signs in general in Australia and elsewhere?

The most obvious toponymic changes are the number of times in the recent past we have heard the following largely previously unheard of placenames: Wuhan, Hubei Province (China); Bergamo (Italy). The names New York City, Italy, and Spain have taken on new meanings through their splatterings in the media recently in terms of their number of coronavirus cases. The already iconic name Bondi Beach became a byword throughout the world for the flouting of social distancing rules, and later emerged as an infamous virus hotspot. There are COVID-19 signs on playgrounds, dog parks, and community centres telling us it is government regulation for such facilities to be closed at the moment. I wonder if just like the fact that the boy’s name Adolf more or less died after World War II that the placenames associated with the cruise ship names (read: business) of Holland America lines will also flounder: Amsterdam, Noordam, Rotterdam, Volendam, and Zuiderdam. Closed state borders in Australia have generated names. The barriers erected between the twin towns of Tweed Heads (New South Wales) and Coolangatta (Queensland) have drawn the informal name “The Great Wall of Coolangatta”.

In a time when the world’s borders are closing and Australian state premiers are urging people to “stay in suburb”, demonyms, words that identify the place a person comes from, may become more resonant. “Western Australians” in other states are urged to return home before the sealing of Western Australia’s borders. The mayor of the Gold Coast expresses his love for “Brisbane people, Logan people” (denizens of urban and suburban regions to the north) but kindly asks them not to visit his shire’s beaches. These are some of the more pleasant uses of demonyms; they have also been used in racist and xenophobic abuse around the virus.

Regarding the name COVID-19 itself, the name was announced by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 12 February 2020. “COVID” is an abbreviation for “coronavirus disease” and the 19 refers to late 2019 when it was first identified. It is not just *the* coronavirus because coronavirus is a family of viruses including ones that cause SARS, MERS, and the common cold. It does not have Wuhan in the name, because nobody wants their hometown to be known for a disease. How would you feel telling people you live along the Ebola River?

The WHO put out guidelines for naming new diseases a few years ago. While sensible, they eliminate a lot of the more obvious options like not naming diseases after places, people, or animals like “swine flu”, because those names tend to be either stigmatising or they give people the wrong impression. In the case of swine flu, people assumed you could avoid the disease by avoiding pigs.

So we have the name COVID-19, an appropriately scientific and descriptive moniker while also being pronounceable. It is both catchy at the same time as sounding a little like a name you would expect to hear in a thriller movie or as the name of a military operation. The name has already gone viral. Hopefully the virus is less rapid! And hopefully no one gets offended if we change the name of the capital of South Australia, Adelaide, to COVIDelaide.

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