

COVID-19, kovhidhi, dzihwamupengo: Language use, language change, and pandemic perceptions among Shona-speakers in Gweru, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Through an examination of the linguistic practices encountered and used by Shona language-speakers in the Zimbabwean city of Gweru, this study explores intersections between language use, language change, and perceptions of the COVID pandemic—as caused by the virus referred to by Gweru’s Shona-speakers as, variously, “COVID-19” in its English-language representation or “kovhidhi” or “dzihwamupengo” in its two most common Shona-language representations. The study is anchored in conceptions of the impacts that natural disasters and pandemics have on language and on communication needs, and in theories of semiotics and language change. The research finds that the predominant terms used by Gweru’s Shona-speakers in relation to the pandemic carry connotations that, in the Zimbabwean socio-cultural context, potentially undermine optimal responses to the pandemic. The article concludes by emphasising the importance of careful management of language as a critical resource in the fight against natural disasters and pandemics.

Keywords: language, communication, semiotics, language change, pandemics, natural disasters, COVID-19, Shona, English, Gweru, Zimbabwe