

## Coronavirus: One word, Many Pronunciations among Nigerians

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### Abstract

*Coronavirus (Covid-19) is a disease that affects the respiratory tract. Since the emergence of this disease in Wuhan province of China towards the end of 2019, it has spread to all parts of the world including a multilingual nation, Nigeria with over 500 languages. Articulation of foreign medical terms is not always easy among the basilect English speakers in Nigeria. Consequently, the interactions and discussions of Coronavirus have generated various pronunciations that this study is set to examine. A total of 50 short real-life videos and audio clips made up of 30 adult males, 17 adult females, 2 teenagers (1 male and 1 female) and 1 pupil were gathered online. The data were analyzed using the socio-phonetics method. Results show that the word Coronavirus has eighteen pronunciation types among Nigerians. Strategies employed in trying to adapt to the pronunciation of Coronavirus includes sound substitution, sound deletion, sound insertion, and other forms of neologism. This study has established various phonetic interventions in the COVID-19 discourse in Nigeria. The study concludes by advocating for official adaptation of medical terms such 'Coronavirus' and the 'likes' into local languages.*

**Keywords:** Coronavirus, Pronunciation, Sociophonetics, Neologism

### Introduction

**C**ovid-19, a disease that affects the respiratory tract, is a strain of Coronavirus that emerged in the Wuhan province of China towards the end of 2019. It is considered a 'highly transmittable and pathogenic viral infection caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (Sars-Cor-2),(Shereen et al. 2020). As of 23<sup>rd</sup> of April, 2020, the number of confirmed cases of Coronavirus (COVID 19) globally is 2544792 with a record of 175694 deaths. More cases have been confirmed while deaths have also been on the increase. The news of the Coronavirus in Nigeria broke in on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, after an Italian man that came in from Milan was diagnosed with the disease.

Since the first index case was recorded in Nigeria, several orientations have been put in place by the federal, state, local governments and non-governmental organizations to

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flatten the curve of Coronavirus. The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) advised the public to:

- i. Regularly and thoroughly wash hands with soap under clean running water, and use alcohol-based hand sanitizer..
- ii. Maintain at least 1.5 metres (5 feet) distance between oneself and anyone who is coughing or sneezing..
- iii. Stay home or keep a social distance when having a persistent cough or sneezing.
- iv. Make sure you and people around you follow good respiratory hygiene, by covering your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing, and sneezing into your sleeve at the bent elbow or into a tissue. Then dispose of the used tissue immediately..
- v. Stay home if you feel unwell with symptoms like fever, cough, difficulty in breathing, and call NCDC toll free number which is available day and night, for guidance.

These measures were followed by the declaration of lockdown by the Nigerian President in states such as Lagos, Ogun, and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja on 25<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020 and later strengthened with the ban on interstate travel on 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2020. Since then, the Federal Government of Nigeria, State governments, and some Non-Governmental Organisations have been sensitizing citizens on the best way to flatten the curve of the Coronavirus. These several interactions and conversations among Nigerians have generated several pronunciation fall-outs on the word “Coronavirus”.

Nigeria is a multilingual nation with more than 500 languages (Segunro 2012). Nigeria is also divided into six geopolitical zones of North-East, North-West, North-Central, South-East, South-West, and South-South. Most zones have dominant indigenous languages. For instance, the Hausa language is a major indigenous language in Northern Nigeria; the Yoruba language is a major indigenous language in South-West Nigeria; while the Igbo language is a major indigenous language in the South-East of Nigeria and some parts of South-South Nigeria. In a multilingual nation like Nigeria, the adaptation of foreign words into the speech of Nigerians is very common but not without mother tongue interference. Tamiru et al (2015) defines mother tongue interference as the errors caused by the influence of learner’s mother tongue in the articulation of the target language. Learner’s mother tongue is the speaker’s first language.

The word coronavirus is one of such new words that have manifested several variations, as Nigerians of different linguistic backgrounds try to adapt to its pronunciation. Variation in the pronunciation in English by Nigerians has been established by Segunro (2012). While describing several pronunciations of Coronavirus by a blog writer on [www.englishclub.com](http://www.englishclub.com) the author says that in times of crisis, knowing and understanding the terminology involved may help alleviate some of the fears and panic that such times breed. The present study is motivated by the need to expose these various pronunciations of the word “Coronavirus” in Nigeria and which might help to drive the orientation down to the rural communities.

### **Pronunciation Variation and Neologism**

Pronunciation variation deals with different ways of articulating sounds as an individual segment or in sequences of utterances (Walker 2010). Pronunciation variation falls under the socio-phonetics' study which is regarded as an applied phonetics that combines the study of pronunciation with sociolinguistics (Awonusi, 2007). It is also referred to as social-phonology. Socio-phoneticians study pronunciations that are significant in society. Socio-phonetics has been essential in unraveling the various pronunciations found in society. This aspect of study on the name of the disease in Nigeria is scarce even though many Nigerians articulate English words differently (Segunro 2012). This is why this study is very significant. However, in an attempt to pronounce a new word, sometimes new terms and expressions are coined in what is technically referred as neologism. A few works have been recorded in the study of neologism that relates with COVID-19.

Akut (2020) examines the morphological analysis of the neologisms during the COVID-19 pandemic. The author through the data sourced from internet articles discovered the morphological processes involved in the formation COVID-19 related neologisms such as blursday, coronageddon, coronapocalypse, coronnialscovid 19, covideo party, covidiot, locktail, ncov, new normal, pul,quaranteams, quaranteens, quaratini,rona, social distancing, contact tracing, covexit, doomscrolling, self-quarantine, zoombombing. The author further notes that compounding, blending, affixations, conversion, abbreviation, acronym, clipping and onomatopoeia were employed in the formation of these words.

Asif et al. (2020) on the other hand examined the neologism that emerged on the internet and various publications during the COVID-19 outbreak. Like Akut (2020), the data in Asif et al, (2020) was sourced through the internet also. Their findings show that

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borrowing, word formation and lexical deviation were employed in neologisms that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. The current study will dwell majorly on several pronunciations of the word ‘coronavirus’ which is scarce in the literature. This will contribute and enrich our knowledge on the various ways in which the word “coronavirus” is articulated in Nigeria.

### Data Collection Method

Data for this study were gathered from Facebook and WhatsApp. These data include the recordings of fifty short real-life videos and audio clips of speech broadcasts and interviews on different televisions and radio stations in Nigeria that were circulating on WhatsApp and Facebook. However the linguistic background of the speaker can only be inferred by the researcher. A total of 50 videos and audio clips made up of 30 adult males, 17 adult females and three teenagers (2 males and 1 female) were used for this study.

### Data Presentation and Analysis

The word Coronavirus is pronounced as /kəʊrənəvəɪrəs/. However, most newscasters in Nigeria pronounced the word as /korona-vairəs/. It is also referred to as /kovid-nɪɪntɪ:θ/. There are various ways that Nigerians of different linguistic backgrounds pronounce /kəʊrənəvəɪrəs/. /kəʊrənə/ is pronounced as /korona/, /kworoma/, /kwarana/, /gloria/, /ganorea/, /kolona/, /konolia/, /kodulia/, /kodelia/, /okoronna/, and /gonaria/, while /vəɪrəs/ is pronounced as /failos/, /biros/, /fairos/, /drivos/ /vasis/, /bilos/, /valeti/. Other pronunciations include /kodelia vairus/, /gloria vairəs/, /toyota vairəs/, /gonorea vairəs/, /koarana fairus/ /koloniel virus/, in another instance /kovid wen nin/ is pronounced instead of /kovid-nɪɪntɪ:θ/. Other names includes ‘hunger virus’, and ‘cough virus’.

The strategies employed in various pronunciations as recorded are classified as follows:

- i. **Sound substitution:** Sound substitution is the process where one sound is substituted with another. It is usually a consonant-for-consonant sound and vowel for-a-vowel sound. The word “Coronavirus” contains ten sounds of five syllables of /**cv**cv**cv**cv**cv**/. The sound substitutions are examined in all the ten sounds that constitute the word coronavirus. The affected sounds are written in bold letters for emphasis. The substitutions are recorded below:

- a. The first sound /**k**/ in the word /kəʊrənəvəɪrəs/ is realised as /**kw**/, /**nk**/, and /**gl**/ as seen in the pronunciation of /**kw**oromavairos/, /**kw**aranavairos/, /**nk**oroma/ and /**gl**oria vairos/ respectively
  - b. The second sound /əʊ/ in the word /kəʊrənəvəɪrəs/ is realised /a/ as seen in the pronunciation /kw**a**ramavairos/ and /g**a**noreavairos
  - c. The third consonant sound /r/ in the word /kəʊrənəvəɪrəs/ is realised as /**l**/, /**n**/, and /**d**/ as seen in the pronunciation /ko**l**onavairos/, /ko**n**oliavairos/, /g**a**noreavairos/, and /ko**d**uliavairos/ respectively.
  - d. The fourth sound /ə/ in the word /kəʊrənəvəɪrəs/ is realised as /**a**/ and /**e**/ as seen in the pronunciation /kw**a**ranavairos/ and /ko**d**eliavairos/, respectively.
  - e. The fifth sound /n/ in the word /kəʊrənəvəɪrəs/ is realised as /**m**/, /**nn**/, /**r**/ and /**l**/ as seen in the pronunciation /kw**a**ramavairos/, /o**k**oro**nn**avairos/, /go**n**ariavairos/, and /ko**d**eliavairos/, respectively.
  - f. The sixth sound /ə/ in the word /kəʊrənəvəɪrəs/ is realised as /**ia**/ as seen in the pronunciation /ko**d**uliavairos/, /g**l**oria vairos/, /go**n**oriavairos/, and /ko**l**oniavairos/.
  - g. The seventh sound /v/ in /kəʊrənəvəɪrəs/ is realised as /**d**/, /**b**/, /**f**/, and /**dr**/ as seen in the pronunciation /ko**l**oni**a**drivos/, /ko**l**oni**a**failos, /ko**l**oni**a**biros/, and /ko**l**oni**a**fairos/.
  - h. The eighth sound /əi/ in the word /kəʊrənəvəɪrəs/ is realised as /**i**/, and /**e**/ as seen in the pronunciation /ko**l**oni**a**drivos/ and /ko**l**oni**a**biros/ and /ko**r**onavasis/.
  - i. The ninth sound /r/ in /kəʊrənəvəɪrəs/ is realised as /**v**/, /**l**/, and /**s**/, as seen in the pronunciation /ko**r**ona**d**rivos/, /ko**r**onavairos/, /ko**r**onabilos/, /ko**r**onavaleti/, and /ko**r**onavasis/.
  - j. The tenth sound /ə/ in the word //kəʊrənəvəɪrəs/ is realised as /**e**/ and /**i**/ as seen in the pronunciation of /ko**r**onavaleti/ and /ko**r**onavasis/.
  - k. The eleventh sound /s/ in the word /kəʊrənəvəɪrəs/ is realised as **t**/ as in the pronunciation /ko**r**onavaleti/.
  - l. In the word /kovik/, the third sound /v/ is often realized as /k**o**fik/.
- ii. **Sound deletion:** Sound deletion occurs when a segment is lost in the pronunciation of the word. When a sound is lost, the number of sounds realised is

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fewer than the number of sounds from the input. /r/ is deleted in the word /**korona**/ which produces /koona/. /**korona**/ has six sounds, while /koona/ has five sounds.

- iii. **Sound insertion:** Sound insertion occurs when the number of sounds in the input is fewer than what is realized in pronunciation. /o/ and /nn/ were inserted in /okoronna, /n/ was inserted in /nkoroma/, the sound /i/ was inserted in /valeti/ /kw/ was inserted in /kwaranavairos/.
- v. **Associative pronunciation:** Associative pronunciation is coined to mean articulating a term with what the phenomenon is believed to be associated with. The effect of the stay-at-home order is causing massive hunger. Consequently most folks refer to Coronavirus as a '*hunger virus*'.

As shown in the data above, there are several sounds that are manipulated in order to achieve the pronunciation of the word "coronavirus". One observation from the short videos is that the less educated Nigerian English speakers shy away during a discourse on "Coronavirus" because of their inability to pronounce the word "Coronavirus" very well. Of concern is the fact that various pronunciations associated with "Coronavirus" may imply several meanings, and such may misrepresent the orientation on Coronavirus disease. Pronunciation as observed above has an indicator of sociolinguistics characteristics in Nigeria, unfortunately the linguistic background of speakers were not established. The researcher being familiar with many linguistic backgrounds in Nigeria employed deductive reasoning to infer the speaker's social and linguistic background. The inference is also facilitated through the names of the speakers and setting of speaking. In all, the characteristics of the pronunciations analysed and the reasons for pronunciation variation are as follows:

- i. Mother tongue interference is observed in the various pronunciations of the word "coronavirus". The influence of Hausa language, Igbo language, Yoruba language, and so many other Nigerian languages was noted in the pronunciation of the communicants. These were deduced by the background of the speakers. For instance, the pronunciation /kwarana birus/ is found mainly among the Hausa speakers in Nigeria. This cannot be unrelated with the lack of these sounds in Hausa English (Segunro 12). The pronunciation /koarana fairus/ is found mainly among the Yoruba speakers in South West, Nigeria. The substitution of /f/ and /v/ is due to the fact that some dialects of Yoruba language do not attest the /s/ sound and speaker's

competency in the production of /s/ sound has not developed fully. The pronunciation /kolonia viarus / is found mainly among the Igbo speakers in south East Nigeria. As explained for Yoruba speakers of English, some Igbo speakers of English also substitute the sound /l/ for /r/ (Igboanusi 2006). The pronunciation /nkrona vaiirus/ is found mainly among the Efik speakers in South South Nigeria. The pronunciation /koloniel virus/ is found mainly among the Tiv speakers in middle belt Nigeria. In sum, it is safe to say that several mother tongues affect the pronunciation of /korona vaiiros/ in Nigeria.

ii. Associative meaning and onomatopoeia.

Apart from these various pronunciations, there are other emerging neologisms from COVID-19 pandemic. These neologisms were created from symptoms association; social reality and name association. They include ‘*cough virus, hunger virus*’, ‘*kodial vaiirus*’, ‘*glories various*’, ‘*Toyota vaiirus*’, and ‘*gononaris vaiiros*’. Some of the neologisms are presented below:

- a. Symptoms association: This pronunciation ‘*cough virus*’ is associated with the incessant symptom of coughing that is associated with the coronavirus.
- b. Social reality: The name ‘*hunger virus*’ is associated with the hardship and hunger that most people are experiencing as a result of the stay-at-home order.
- c. Name Association: People associate the pronunciation of corona virus with the name /*kodelia vaiirus*/, /*gloria vaiiros*/, /*toyota vaiiros*/, /*gonorea vaiiros*/, These are names of people, a vehicle, and a disease that has similar phonetics, i.e. same number of sounds and syllables. Thus, they could substitute for each other.

With these various pronunciations recorded for the word “coronavirus”, it suffices to say that proper adaptation of pandemic related names into Nigerian languages or any other words with such a variety of pronunciation will standardise such word and facilitate easy discourse among the people. Previous study by Igboanusi, et al. (2013), on Ebola has shown that the development and adaption of Ebola terms into the Nigerian indigenous language was very effective in the fight against the Ebola disease. Some other studies such as Yussuff and Fadairo (2013) also demonstrate that reducing medical terms to Yoruba, an indigenous language in South Western Nigeria will facilitate easy interaction between Nigerian doctors and their patients in Yorubaland. These two studies show that the adaption of foreign words into Nigerian indigenous languages will smoothen and facilitate medical discourse.

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Different pronunciations, as seen above show that the people are constrained from learning the proper pronunciation as a result of mother tongue interference and other social factors. Proper articulation of “Coronavirus” will clear all doubts on what one is referring to in any situation. Take for instance, calling the word coronavirus “cough virus” may even make others equate the disease with the “normally known cough”. This will, in turn, keep people from taking the precautions listed by the government. The same is also true of other associative names. One fall-out of this pronunciation variation of Coronavirus disease is that it occurs mostly from people who are less eloquent in their Spoken English, and since the majority of Nigerians speak and cherish their mother tongues, trying to orientate them in a term they are not comfortable with, may not be easy and smooth.

Proper pronunciation of the word “Coronavirus” in mass health education can be easily and properly facilitated by linguists and communication experts who, in most cases, are not incorporated into the medical orientation team by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control. At the outbreak of the COVID-19 disease, the Nigerian government used religious leaders, traditional and community leaders to communicate with the masses which are very commendable, but there is no evidence that the religious leaders, traditional and community leaders have the communicative and linguistic skills of language professionals to effectively educate the people. Linguists such as Igboanusi et al (2013) and Yussuff and Fadairo (2013) have all shown that reducing medical terms and discourse into Nigerian indigenous language is essential for effective communication in health care delivery in Nigeria. In Nigeria, most health orientation on Coronavirus takes place in English. Even the medical experts treating coronavirus patients communicate in English because most of them were never educated in the indigenous language and consequently lack terms to discuss, orientate and instruct their patients in the Nigerian indigenous languages. The implication of various pronunciations of Coronavirus which is associated with many social realities is that instruction on coronavirus may be difficult to transmit from the educators to the masses. Worse still, the masses will keep naming or pronouncing the virus the way they want. For instance, the name “‘hunger virus’” was stemmed from the belief that the lockdown of some states in Nigeria is meant to punish the masses. No one knows other names that will spring up next. It was when some persons realized that behavioral change is only possible when the people are familiar with appropriate terminology of infectious disease on their languages that led to the terminology development of HIV AIDS, and Ebola in some African languages. This underscores the need to adapt the pronunciation of coronavirus into the Nigerian indigenous language.



## Conclusion

From the eighteen ways that the word “Coronavirus” was pronounced, it is obvious that most Nigerians in the rural community have various pronunciations, and even various names for Coronavirus. For the extensive orientation being carried against the pandemic in Nigerian rural and other multilingual countries across the world to be effective, there is need to adapt the pronunciation of “Coronavirus” and many other diseases that native speakers may not pronounce correctly into various indigenous languages using the recommendation of the UNESCO Committee on the Use of Vernacular (indigenous languages) in Education, which advises that words borrowed from source language should be adapted to the sound system of the target language.

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