ANNA BURNS (HOST)

Hello and welcome to the *Sydney Ideas podcast: To the point*; we take a short and focused look at an issue.

I'm Anna Burns, the Public Programs Manager at the University of Sydney.

Today we're talking about language and cognition and how it relates to COVID-19.

Language is how we process information and pass it on to each another. So it's important to understand how it works, particularly in this context. The way we talk about the disease and the time we're living in, can be helpful or harmful; it can be comforting or confusing.

When we say, for example, symptoms are "mild", what does that really mean? Or, by using the hashtag 'Stay At Home' on social media, what message does that send? Does anything get lost in translation?

To help us make more sense of this, is Nick Enfield. Nick is a Professor of Linguistics here at the University of Sydney and he studies language in a range of contexts.

NICK ENFIELD

When we're in a situation like this, we really want information. We want to know*, 'What is this disease? What are the risks? How might we get it? What would happen if we did get it? What's happening elsewhere in the world?*

So we're very hungry for information. And we go to very many different sources. Because of, you know, social media provides this incredible diversity of sources. It's quite hard to kind of calibrate and adjust to the different contexts.

And you mentioned the word "mild". This is an interesting example I find, because at a certain point, we've reported that most cases of COVID-19 are mild and this was in the context of people trying to reassure people or perhaps to minimise the risk and say, *Well, it's like having the flu, most cases are mild.*

And it was pointed out to me also by people online, is about experts in medical context saying, wait a second. When people say "mild", you know, everyday people who are not medical – who are not speaking technically – a mild illness is like, well probably we can still go to work and we can still give a lecture or, you know, whatever it is that we do; even though we might feel a bit off.

But in technical terms with respect to this particular case, so there's, this was reports coming out of China in the earlier phase, mild cases were essentially cases where the person was not yet in fully intensive care. So you could still be hospitalised and technically have a mild

case. So this means that people who reading that particular use of the term mild, if they're being reassured by that, then you know, that's a false re-assurance. And it's one of the examples that I think highlights the need to be mindful about the words that we're reading and particularly about our own interpretation of those words.

I think the key thing is to sort of suspend one's initial judgement, whether that judgement is to be alarmed or whether that judgement is to be relieved, and just sort of take a step back and think, *Okay, well, that's my first gut reaction. But let's get other sources of information*.

Let's calibrate that against other things we might learn and sort of build up a more nuanced understanding.

So another example would be things like so-called "extreme" measures that we might be under due to government recommendations to practice social distancing, if you like. So, my colleague Adam Kamradt-Scott suggested on Twitter, *well hang on a second, you know, let's not call these extreme measures*. They're not extreme.

"Extreme" implies, you know for example, that there's a terrible totalitarian state affecting, and I'm still seeing these kinds of comments online where people are saying this is extreme, and, it's a police state and all this kind of thing. And someone might say, *Well, no, actually, it's exactly what's called for* – for medical reasons and for practical reasons, and it's the only kind of solution so let's not call an extreme because they're appropriate.

One person might use that word in one sense and one person might use in another sense entirely, and it's very easy when it's taken out of context to get the wrong impression. So kind of, calibration and being more mindful and taking a step by step approach to understanding words in context is crucial.

ANNA BURNS

Okay, on that – thinking about how language provokes, I guess, reactions – there's something here about assigning blame. Can you talk a bit about that?

NICK ENFIELD

Well, blame I think, is also extremely interesting as a lot of discourse around that and sort of at the highest level, we see, war – what many would call conspiracy theories about the ultimate origin of the of the virus. I mean, the virus is a product of biological evolution.

Now, just because those conditions pertain in a particular place in China and now we see this huge, very politicised kind of campaign saying, this is the Chinese virus and it's been produced by China and it's a kind of state level conspiracy – those are the things you see. And correspondingly, we're seeing exactly the same thing going the other direction that there are also online campaigns to assign blame to the United States. So that's a sort of very high

level that people are out there spreading kind of claims, misinformation, disinformation, to try to get this, this whole narrative to align with particular political aims; it's a kind of high level thing.

And then at a very low level, and when I say low level, I mean the level of individual sort of social life rather than the level of state agents relating to each other. We have questions around who's to blame for the problem of the virus spreading or continuing to spread within particular communities. So, we're seeing that right now, in Australia. So when I say right now, it's the very end of March.

So at the beginning of March, the World Health Organisation tweeted some advice saying, which is really advice about appropriate language in relation to talking about coronavirus. So they tweeted, *Do talk about people acquiring or contracting COVID-19. Don't talk about people transmitting, infecting, spreading* – as it implies intentional transmission and assigns blame. So this was very interesting. Some people reacted to this as a kind of a mad example of political correctness. I'm not really quite sure what was behind the announcement in terms of what now, what its real motivation was, what its stated motivation was, but it's certainly doesn't square with how people are now treating individual behaviour within the community. And people really are quite happy and quite willing to assign blame and to imply intentional transmission when it comes to people who are, for example, going out among the community without a very good reason.

I think that potentially what people should really be reflecting on is the conclusions that are comfort. Rather than simply the language they use. But there's a connection between that, of course, so if you come to a certain conclusion, when it comes to language, one of the things we need to think about is, you know, which words do we choose? How do we frame things when we already have decided what we want to say?

But of course, there's a sort of a more basic question, which is, should I say that at all? And I think that the questions that you're raising, they're really sort of at that early stage in the thought process in a sense, which is to, *look, I've come to a conclusion about what's happening here. But before I proceed and sort of open my mouth, let me just pause for a second.* Think about well, *could there be an alternative explanation for this?*

There's a kind of two-step stage here: it's coming to the decision about what you think is the appropriate thing to say, and then thinking *Well, okay, what's the right way to frame that?*

ANNA BURNS

And on another side of this, we're talking a lot about a "new normal". What are the implications of this? Are we setting to normalise situations that are actually *not* normal?

NICK ENFIELD

Okay. So "the new normal" is an interesting phrase, and it's being used quite a lot as is the word "normalise". So that term you know, that to normalise something is often used in a context where people are saying, *Well, you know, here's this behaviour, here's this phenomenon, that is very bad, and that should be responded to.* So I don't know. For example, certain kinds of racist behaviour is bad; should not occur.

But it's certain times in history or it's certain in certain contexts we might argue, *Oh look, you know this type of behaviour is being normalised by X, Y or Z.* And what that really means it comes down to the basic concept of social norms, which is to say, when society is basically governed by rules.

And language is exactly the same; it's governed by rules, certain ways of acting, certain ways of speaking. Normal, in a specific sense that when you act in those ways, and when you speak in those ways, people are not surprised by those ways of acting and speaking and then not disposed to sanction you for those ways of acting or speaking. And when you depart from those, for example, you know, when you produce racist remarks or actions are, you know, in a certain context, then that will surprise people or people will be disposed to sanction them.

So when people talk about normalisation then they're really saying that those responses is a sort of being surprised or being disposed to sanction are suddenly starting to kind of go away. So in the context of, you know, everything around living with COVID-19 going around the world, before saying anything at all about language, we're talking often when we talk about the new normal, we're talking about all of the behaviour that we're engaging in, in everyday life. So things like wearing a mask, taking, you know, a few steps back from people walking across the road when they come near us. You know, all these kinds of behaviours, which feel really weird to us. So when we say "this is the new normal", I mean, it's definitely not yet the new normal exactly, because everyone is constantly talking about it. And this is the whole essence of norms is that you don't talk about them. They just go under the radar, in a sense, right?

So at the moment, we're all focused on the weirdness of our current behaviours. We're focussed on the fact that we don't see people face-to-face, and we do all the things I just talked about, it really will be the new normal when people stop saying, *This is the new normal.*

It really will be the new normal and people are not at all weirded out by the fact that people are standing three steps back from them instead of you know, at a normal proximity it really will be the new normal when people don't even think twice when everyone on the bus is wearing a mask. And so that's the nature of social norms. And it's exactly the same with language, the kinds of terms or terminology that now is remarkable and people are sort of

writing about on Twitter and that kind of thing. The day when we stopped writing about them and stopped remarking on them but continue using them. That's when we'll have to say that they're normal.

ANNA BURNS

So going back to where you started, with being mindful about what you're saying and the information we're consuming, do you have any strategies we can apply, to counter misinformation and check the facts?

NICK ENFIELD

Well, I'd say that fact checking is crucial.

But fact checking as a concept is very narrow. In some sense it's often associated with the media checking whether a statement somebody made at a press conference was correct. Or something that was published in an article is correct.

The thing that I think people really should be thinking about is their own reactions to what they're seeing and reading and not jumping to a conclusion not rushing to come to a decision not letting themselves immediately decide what they think is true or false, but rather to sort of hover over those words for a bit, take some distance from those words for a bit and look for other sources of information, think about, *where's this information coming from? What are the motivations of the person passing this information to me? What can I do with it? Who might benefit from what I want to do with it?*

There's a lot of questions that are important.

A term that I that I'm coming to like is it is a term that the cognitive scientist Hugo Mercier uses which is 'open vigilance' in cognition, and he basically argues that, the human capacity to consume information is a bit like our capacity to consume food.

We're omnivores, we eat all sorts of different kinds of things so we need to be open to the possibility of eating different kinds of things. But we also need to be vigilant, you know, this thing might be poisonous, this thing might harm me in some way. So people have to balance. It's just the same with information; we need to balance the fact that we are able to consume information from a very wide variety of sources and in a very wide number of different forms. We've got to balance that with the potential harms of just taking that information at face value. So getting that balance right, and practising what I like to call 'cognitive literacy' and really sort of thinking about, *how's my brain working here?* Let me just step back and think about how it's working before jumping forward and doing something with this information.

ANNA BURNS

That's an excellent way to end. Thanks Nick.

NICK ENFIELD

No problem.

ANNA BURNS

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Finally we want to acknowledge that this podcast was made in Sydney, which sits on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. It is upon their ancestral lands that the University of Sydney is built.