
Letter to the Editor

Does English have too many meanings for the word “mask”

During this crisis I have become increasingly frustrated by the inability of UK journalists, politicians and some scientists to distinguish between different sorts of “mask”. The word seems to be used interchangeably to cover face coverings and filtering face pieces. I even heard a piece on the BBC where they visited an architect making frames for protective visors but although the piece started by referring to visors they used the word “masks”.



I have sent versions of the following, in my personal capacity, to a few academics, medics and journalists, but not politicians. One leading academic and one leading doctor replied. Others did not.

“Face coverings help to prevent the spread of the disease from the wearer to the rest of the community. They do not prevent the disease affecting the wearer. Scarves, some of the improvised devices suggested by the US CDC recently and surgical masks are face coverings. They are loose fitting.

Filtering face pieces do offer some protection to the wearer provided they are fitted properly. They also offer the type of protection to the community offered by face coverings provided they do not have exhale valves. If they do have exhale valves then these should be covered.

Is there any way that we can move the conversation away from calling both types of device “masks”. If we have to use the word mask perhaps we should reserve “mask” for the sort of thing that Dick Turpin might have worn. Whatever Dick Turpin would have got from you during a robbery if he’d covered his mouth you wouldn’t have got anything from him.”

I mentioned my position with the Society to some of the people I contacted to give my comments some credence and also because I don’t think the Society has got much of a profile in the medical community in the UK. I have heard experts in the UK advocating the use of “masks” for the general public when they mean “face coverings” and I have heard other experts rejecting the use of “masks” for the general public when they mean “filtering facepieces”. It confuses the public but both are right given their use of the word “mask”. In the UK the BBC has started talking about “face coverings” when describing the sort of improvised device the CDC advocate.

For myself I have started wearing a battered FFP1 mask when in shops – it won’t protect me very much but it doesn’t have an exhale valve. I gave an FFP3 to one of my ex-colleagues who is repatriating to the USA. It has an exhale valve but might increase her safety on an 8 hour flight.

Do others have this problem in other languages? In the UK it’s driving me nuts. Perhaps I should get out more often? Oh no, I can’t, can I?

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